

HOUSE OF DREAMS

by Anne Lauppe-Dunbar

Something was changing.

We could sense it in the circling air. A loss of stillness - and we'd been still for so long. We could feel the damp earth leak into our foundations, worms sliding through the dark and ants scurrying through the softening cement; one mass brain cell intent on survival- *what is good for one is good for all*. They were building a nest inside our walls, itching, pin-pricking, squeaking to the querulous demands of their squat black queen. The birds had (at first) circled. Now they were nesting under our eaves, sticks, straw, grass and small triangles of plastic protruding in mid air. Their shrieks of panic (whenever the magpies came) woke us again into wondering when... *when* something would happen.

So many bleak days.

A long time before.

When the pale watercolour sun rose and set to winds pushing death along the pavement and a stillness that called everyone indoors.

Sometime.

Toward the mid-winter grey we saw fir trees passing us by, tossed under arm in careless joyful preparation for the 'coloured light time'.

We had had a coloured light time. Before.

Nothing fancy.

A small necklace of red/ blinking/ green/ gold - in the window.

Our moment of careless joy.

We stood tall, proud to tell the passers by that we too were a part of that living time. But for many years there had been little / less (a single card on our table, printed snowflakes with silver and blue, twinkling in the light; a reminder of happier times). Nothing.

But the cold had settled in relentless. Frozen wind with snow, until the path was icy and door too cold to move. Then we had

Available online at «<http://fictionaut.com/stories/anne-lauppe-dunbar/house-of-dreams>»

Copyright © 2010 Anne Lauppe-Dunbar. All rights reserved.

worried. Shivered in the day and froze by night — waiting through that winter.

Watching.

Bending down to warm her.

But wait. Now it was spring time and there was movement. Gate was opening, *staying* open. Two men. Big, burly-handed, tartan-shirted, speaking in gruff muted tones.

We craned to hear but door wouldn't open. He was rigid with anger, grief, and a damp so profound he had rusted through his keyhole. We had already asked him nicely. Had even thought about a threat (he was after all vulnerable under the stone arch). We *wanted* to hear, we *had* to hear what was going to change. Eventually with a low moan of sorrow he scratched out his metal tongue and withdrew Yale lock, tightening his wood under peeling blue paint, then swung himself open.

Through the door air danced.

Wonderful.

Outside air.

Air from the world of living.

We could hear the sounds of children on their way to school, gigglesqueaks of daffodil joy. The air moved, blown even further by a white van that drew up close to the garden gate. Up the stairs air drifted and we called out 'come higher, into the sealed trap, the musty carpet kingdom, the moth-eaten blanket and the scritchscratchsecretvoice of house mites'. (We heard them in the night, between the feathers, feeding on skin.)

The men came inside reluctantly (it seemed), as though they were frightened of disturbing ghosts, as if they were doing something *wrong*. They muttered, looking this way and that, then went upstairs together and opened the windows. 'Oh bliss', we sighed and gasped, hoping the scrawny blackbirds would take flight. As it was they crouched low in their filthy nests pretending they weren't really there.

Door was weeping. Leaning on his hinges, scarred and broken, having tried for so long to keep her safe, to keep her warm, to keep

her protected, he now hung open - allowing the world to see. We moaned. The men paused then straightened; sending a *look* to one another they trundled washing machine outside fast into the waiting van. We sang to door, willing him strength, telling him of a future that was possible; one we had all but forgotten.

As each room slowly emptied the men became bolder, planting their imprint on our floor and our walls. They talked about the journey between life and *the end*, the way it was better *this way*, the way it was kinder this way. But we knew the truth. We had been here all along, watching and singing in the dark night when the cold settled to ice.

We had called for help, for heat and for life; but no one came. So we worked together to keep her safe, tightening our walls against the tiny ice particles that wormed their way, corrosive and deadly, between brick and cement. We breathed in the moments of warmth, kept them stored deep within carpet and roof, letting these small pearls loose when night came.

And when she fell we held her so gently, lowering her to the floor, cocooning her against hurt. We called out louder to any passer by, singing a song of anguish so vibrant that our neighbours shivered and moaned. But no one came. And in the dusk as she tried (the last time) to catch her fingers, press the right numbers on the dial.

We fell silent.

And dark.

We wrapped her in our best love and waited until they came.
And they did.

When it was too late.

When she was leaving.

They broke door down: came in with a flashing light and shock after shock as they tried to make her come back. Big men with burly hands and yellow coats carried her out like washing machine and cooker. These men were sure and unafraid, but we could feel their anger as they spoke in hushed tones to one another. We worried then they might think we hadn't loved her, so we sent the ants

(under threat of death) to write her name on the pathway - to show that we would never forget.

Then in the stillness.

The standing.

The raised arms and held mouths - the belated tears.

She left us.

The sign outside our gate reads: For Sale.

We are warm now. Birds have nested again, and the ants are tunnelling higher in our walls. We know that if they climb much further one small section will crumble. The sky is a pale blue and as the children run to school we can see that the cherry tree is finally, briefly, in flower.

