Exile

by Jeffrey Flannery

In the summer that my mother returned from wherever she had gone after her divorce, she and I moved to a large, old farmhouse high on a hill, far from the town where I had grown up. The farmhouse was over a hundred years old and no one had lived in it for decades. The paint had peeled from the wood siding, exposing a dull, worn exterior. The grass had not been cut for years creating a shoulder height sea swimming with bumblebees and grasshoppers that you had to navigate with your mouth and nose covered in order to reach either the dilapidated chicken coop or the sagging barn. Inside the house, wall paper was falling off in strips and flaps, tin ceilings were warped and watermarked, and the linoleum floors were buckling. Winds blew down the open chimneys and scattered ash from the fireplaces all across the rooms, and the stairs sagged and cracked ominously when you climbed them.

I never asked why we were going to live in this desolate, long forgotten home, hidden in the woods off a winding quarter mile of dirt road, cast out onto so much land — I was told three hundred acres — as if we were suddenly in exile, I never wondered why. I was thirteen and something inside me sought the same solitude as my mother I guess. In fact, without instruction I immediately went to work, scything through the jungles of grass, knocking wasp nests down from the eaves, painting the sides of the house, replacing broken window panes, straightening the chicken pen and making the barn into an indoor basketball court, albeit with a floor that would never accommodate a dribbling ball. Inside the house I soaked the old wallpaper with hot soapy water and peeled away a century of history from those walls. I painted the ceilings and the trims, pulled up the old linoleum and pried squareheaded nails from the wooden floors. The ceilings when I was done remained undulating but were painted a bright white, the walls were bared and the many cracks across their plaster surfaces were fully revealed beneath new layers of pastel colored paints, the windows

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were unjammed and trimmed with a thick glossy coat, and the wooden floors remained uneven but were polished to a warm cherry shine. Every room had a fireplace and each one was painted a different color, except the one in the living room which revealed beneath its old coats of paint and paper a dark marble facade and mantle that I cleaned the best I could. In my room I covered the walls with spare boards from the barn so that I could sleep in the same dusty environment that I spent many a day shooting at a netless hoop.

During that summer, this house quickly became my house, perhaps from the very first day, and I reworked its appearance following some unknown set of directives. In fact this house and these acres were all my sovereign land and I patrolled the surrounding woods posting DO NOT HUNT signs along every road and path, not just to keep hunters from killing the deer, but to warn others not to encroach any further.

When summer ended, I walked down to the bottom of our dirt drive where I caught a bus to school, but I came right back after the last study period, desirous only to be back here by myself. We had no television and so when I wasn't working on some project, I took to watching ants building a nest, a spider lying in wait in its web, the clouds tumble across our hills. I would watch the shadows change in hue as night fell, or if it was too cold outside I'd stare at the flickering images in a fire.

So content was I, that it didn't matter that one long week during the height of winter our furnace crapped out and we had to boil water to wash and at night bury ourselves beneath a pile of blankets just to find enough warmth to sleep. It didn't matter to me that no friends from school would come this far out to visit, then again I was sure their mothers would never have allowed them anyway, as my mother and I had descended into the realm of the crazy and unpredictable people who populated these outer areas. In fact our nearest neighbors were a brother and sister more than a mile away who had had a child together and collected old appliances that weighed down their already littered porch.

I don't remember ever being frightened while living in this house, not by the storms that shattered the sky with lightning, the thunder that rattled loose windows and aching timbers, or the winds that could knock out the electricity for several hours. I was not even discouraged when I discovered that the grounds on which we lived were haunted. As I was digging a pond for our ducks, I heard a girl's scream. I stopped my excavation, waited and heard the cry again. It seemed to be coming from the barn. I ran over and stood in front of the open door, not sure whether to go inside, when I heard the scream again, fainter this time, coming from an empty patch of grass. I walked over towards that area, cautiously and slowly, and then it came again, this time rising from the ground itself. I stared at the end of a pipe, maybe four inches in width sticking up no more than a foot from the ground, nothing but darkness beyond its rusty lip, the place from where I was sure that girl's cry had emanated. I stood there and waited, staring down at that hole, but the girl's voice did not return. Not that day. On later occasions, however, I would hear those cries return, but they seemed, I decided, to be cries of someone who wanted to be alone.

No, not even this unnerving haunt, which I never revealed to anyone, was enough to quell my love for this place. For here it was just me, me and the sky, the grass, the hawks that circled overhead, the fir trees in the distance from beneath which deer would appear at dawn, breathing smoke as if they had run all night to be here and stare at me in their forced silence. There was nothing here but the top of this hill and the old buildings that squatted solid and comfortable in their own imperfection, the world was so small and so defined, yet it was infinitely vast in that I had to share it with no one.

To populate our world with beings we could tolerate, my mother and I acquired a pair of ducks, then a pair of sheep. I was beginning to build a menagerie to outfit my own ark, when a friend dropped off the St. Bernards and the other animals fled to places unknown. And not long after that, the dogs vanished too. Then one day I noticed

that my mother had left, in fact, I realized she had been gone for some time, weeks, perhaps months, I couldn't say for sure.

I was silently puzzled at all these unexplained disappearances, yet was not surprised when a short time later a man who claimed to own this land appeared and told me he had never seen the place look so good, not in at least thirty years. And he told me that he had made up his mind right then and there to move up here himself, how could he not, look how beautiful this place was, and where else could he shoot deer right off his porch. I said nothing to this man but just watched his reddened eyes swim in the swollen pond of his face as he smiled and spit brown bullets into the dirt. I was sad, but more for the animals who would have to learn now after having lived with me that this new person was waiting not to share the morning but to kill them. Within days, we were no longer living in this house and I feel like I have been on the road ever since.

Decades later, I took a drive back up this dirt road, not sure what I would see. After coming around the final turn I was stopped by a gigantic metal tank situated where the house, barn and chicken coop had been. Its size and sheer walls of metallic presence were staggering. I got out and walked part way around the perimeter but could find no doors or openings. The tank was so massive that I could not have possibly walked around the structure and been back to my car before dark. I then thought I heard a peculiar sound, a soft childlike cry, issuing from somewhere just beyond the curving wall of the metal tank. I stood still. When I didn't hear it again, I assumed it was nothing but the wind.