

Dysplasia

by Josef K. Strosche

In my mind the village of 300 souls is called Nedoweska, but I confess that that's just a dreamy nickname I had for it as a boy. For various geopolitical reasons it had since become noteworthy as a historical site, though our interest was purely personal. Returning decades after our expulsion, my brother and I rolled into town in a rental car just before ten on a Friday morning in late June. At its center, in the closest thing the unincorporated community ever had to a square, stood the carcass of the diner. I could smell grease, I thought, but soon acknowledged that it surely no longer lingered in the air. To the south we found the remnants of what was in our time the grocery. I pointed out the corner storm drain into which the butcher would let his hung deer cadavers bleed out in autumn. My brother the vegetarian changed his mind about stopping and turned left.

We covered the usual spots: the water tower that served as our bus stop, the fire station, the high school, the ball field, and the home of our grandparents. Each street had its share of attractions. We finished with the back street, stopping at two different points to argue whether it was brothers from this family or that family that occupied two of the eight houses, and made the final turn. Brother sighed and told me it must be time, if we were going to do it.

The boulder Mom and Dad had delivered sometime around my tenth year still guarded the driveway's entrance. Scars from the two front yard pines Dad removed had long since been healed by grass. They had changed the house's color from yellow to that sterile hue I can only call mud: an eye-blurring mixture of gray, brown, and green.

Our intentions were simple: take it in with our own eyes, snap a few pictures for our sister (who couldn't make the trip), and reminisce until someone became uncomfortable with our presence, at which

point we would leave town.

The flowerbed Dad and Grandpa had built lining the east side of the driveway was in disarray. I snapped a photo. Along the far side of the house was yet another bed. Mom and Dad grew poppies there, but now it was filled with rocks. I took a shot of it too. Brother asked if I remembered the time I got grounded for riding my bike as fast as I could down the street and into the garage, where my crash took out the shelves our father had built along the back wall.

That's when the old woman appeared behind the screen door. I braced myself for what would undoubtedly be her silent stares, forcing us to depart, but she shocked me by exiting and waving at us. My brother greeted her in a style that suited the region but that seemed absurd coming from his mouth. She smiled at him and then at me. She had gray hair that was cut short and donned a pair of red glasses far too urban for their provincial wearer. When I heard her invite us in for a tour I realized I hadn't caught a word of what she'd been exchanging with my little brother. I thus had no defense prepared and simply followed the two into our house.

I asserted my desire to see the rest of the outside first and convinced them. I also didn't ask if I should remove my shoes before walking across the carpet of what we always called the family room toward the sliding glass door that deposited me into my backyard.

This was the setting of earliest touchdown passes, home runs, and rifle hits. The trees Dad had planted when I was eleven—an ash for me, a red maple for my brother, and a Douglas for Sis—all remained, much to my surprise. Each was unrecognizable in its height and girth.

My brother and the occupier nattered on about something as I separated and scoped out the rear of the garage. Dad's patio was in shambles, the interlocking light and dark gray stones having twisted, settled, and cracked over the decades of neglect. On the

west side of the house, however, I found encouragement. What was once our original concrete driveway had been jack-hammered out by my father in my early youth and transferred in heavy chunks to the backyard to create a small retaining wall. Before building the patio Dad salvaged them, broke them into smaller pieces, and fabricated a cobblestone pathway that led from the back to the gate at the side of the new driveway. Neither time nor sloth, I saw, could diminish that structure. Even in the hands of false occupants, the years had in fact only lent a distinguished character to the sidewalk. It made me quite proud and even somewhat whole.

Inside I was subjected to the tour I'd had no way of knowing I'd ever experience. Only reluctantly did I follow the old woman and my brother through the rooms she and her husband had stolen from us so long before. The kitchen was unrecognizable, which was to be expected. So too the upstairs bath. The rest looked as if nothing had changed. Not even the carpet had been replaced in my parents' bedroom—in which, she just had to point out, her dear husband had ailed and succumbed to some illness just a few years before.

My brother accepted the woman's offer to sit in the family room and have a cup of coffee. I couldn't grasp his cheery attitude. They talked about all of the mundane topics one could find, ignoring the atrocity she'd either helped commit or, at the very least, profited from. No mention of the day they marched into town and barked out their orders that we lock up behind ourselves, leave the key in the door, and get as far away as we could.

I had to piss. Upstairs, safely away from the old woman, I made sure to sprinkle a little onto the floor, mark my territory and give her something to clean up. After flushing I just couldn't shake the question that had been burning my veins since our tour. I hurried my hands to my pockets to confirm that what was always there had indeed made the trip. Exhilarated, I opened the small screwdriver head from the Swiss Army knife and turned the corner into my

bedroom. The metal cover to the cold air return came off without sound, as I'd taught myself years ago. I groped inside for as long as I could afford but came up empty-handed. The baseball card collection had been my most cherished possession, and I'd hidden it so well that I forgot to retrieve it before our expulsion. Never would I have thought these idiots would find it. Perhaps a repair to the ductwork had been necessary and forced its discovery. Perhaps they'd removed the cover to paint the walls, and the bright blue book of plastic pages caught their eye. I wasn't sure, but it was gone.

I flushed again to cover my peculiar absence and returned to the family room. There I found Brother laughing with the woman, Lord knows about what. A few minutes in that chair of hers (which come to think of it might have been ours) and I couldn't take it. I slammed my coffee and told my brother, interrupting the woman, that I just remembered I'd lost what was in its day the most prized baseball card collection in town. Of course the old woman tried to look concerned. Oh really? Where did you lose it? I told her it was likely somewhere in her ductwork but that I knew she wasn't going to jump up and go find it for me so just forget it. Brother looked at me like I'd slapped her face. Oh, I'm sure it's not here, she said to me. After so many years, it would have turned up. I wouldn't even look at her.

Another twenty minutes went by. My brother must have drunk six cups of the old bitch's watery brew. I told them it had given me indigestion and went back upstairs. In what used to be the tiny bedroom where I slept as a newborn there remained an archway that led from the remodeled landing to the common area.

Inexplicable to me was the fact that the old woman and her husband had left there a strip of wallpaper that bore the progressive heights and dates of me and my siblings. I laughed at the thought of the tradition turned cliché, but I knew since the tour that the ancient scroll had since become an artifact. And it belonged to me.

My blade was dull and ill-suited for archaeological excavation, but it was pulling it off. Little crumbles of drywall and dust accumulated on the hardwood floor, I noticed, but that couldn't be helped. The problem wasn't the cutting. It was the adhesive. I'd hoped the paper would just peel off, but there I was, listening to the old woman and Brother start to ask each other what the noises were (is that a mouse in the wall or something outside?) while I raced to collect what was mine.

I peeled again. Nothing. Another pull, this one with a good deal of force, took off the majority of the five-foot section but along with it about an inch of drywall. I flipped it over, knelt down, and meticulously pried the wall from the paper, stuffing the refuse into my pocket. I heard my brother get up, his voice louder, and started tearing faster. Then came the inevitable: the old woman's announcement that she'd better go check it out. The stairs creaked. There was no time. I yanked and took it down to the baseboard. Though successful, the effort created a mess that wouldn't fit into my pants. It would have to be flushed, I knew, yet there was no time for that either. I rolled up my recovered treasure—the sacred record of our growth—and secured it in my waste band. With her heavy breaths now audible I scraped my bare arms across the floor in the frantic but futile attempt to gather up my destruction.

The good news was that my brother was the one that found me on the floor of our stolen home, the bad news being that he was outraged my the sight of me. What in the hell are you doing? How are you going to explain this? Do you even take your medication anymore? That he couldn't understand the length I was willing to go given his own cowardice was to be expected, but I'm not sure why he needed to insult me.

Naturally the woman felt it warranted to come up and see what we were doing, as if the business of brothers was any of her own.

Brother was sycophantic, pleading for her forgiveness on my behalf. I quit bothering with the cleanup, as I wasn't about to kneel before this woman. Well aware of the blood on her hands, she played the righteous one and told my brother (not me) that she could well understand the desire to have such a marker of one's youth and family. Then she did look at me. Nevertheless, she'd have to ask us to leave.

We were a few miles outside of town, returning to civilization, before I tuned in to what Brother was saying. I made out the word *divorce* and capitulated, conceding his version of history. Fine, maybe it was divorce. Let's call it a divorce that precipitated our expulsion. It didn't change right from being right. What's mine was mine. I still knew that.

