

HOMESTEADING

by Linda Simoni-Wastila

The ladder leading to the attic was pulled down—she never even realized they had an attic. Attics were for treasures, for preserving family memories. After two weeks of picking up spent syringes and pulling out rusty cans from the first two floors, Annie needed to believe a family once lived here. But the path to the third floor landing seemed miles away, the black opening from which the ladder hung impossibly far. Graffiti stretched up the stairway walls, wounds spray painted in red and black. Someone had ripped out entire steps.

At first, clearing the second floor seemed an impossible task. She wearied easily, the baby lying in her like a weight. She would rest, hands settled on her lower back, at the foot of the broken stairs, panic growing in her bigger than the gaping holes between treads, sharper than the nails protruding from the railing ripped from the wall. Every time she saw the angry words, Annie felt slapped. She considered leaving, returning to Pennsylvania and her mother, but that would be admitting defeat. Besides, she had invested in this place—this was her home. Who cared if the investment amounted to a dollar, cheaper than a cup of coffee, cheaper than a diaper? When she looked around her, at the railing posts of turned cherry, the threshold made of marble, the intricate carved moldings, she felt the tug of the house's beauty and potential under years of dirt and neglect. "Good bones," Todd had said the day they passed the papers committing them to the city's urban renewal contract. "A diamond in the rough."

But in less than two weeks, scared off by the gunshots at night and the fires flickering from the neighboring houses, Todd left, taking his Volvo, the toolbox, and clichés with him. With Todd gone Annie felt paralyzed, afraid to venture beyond the first floor of the ramshackle row-house. For a week she floated aimlessly from kitchen to sitting room to the dining room they had made up into a bedroom. When her tears exhausted her, she flopped onto the

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mattress. The baby kicked her lower ribs, hard, punishing, as if their predicament was Annie's fault. She had loved sleeping in Todd's arms at night, hearing the soft tinkle of crystal above her when cool drafts moved through the house, his hand wandering over the swell of her belly. Lying there, she imagined shifts of air were the ghosts of prior owners, watching them, encouraging them to return the foreclosed home to its former life. Now the mattress served as a cairn memorializing her aloneness. The bed, the memory of Todd, prodded her back to the restoration, first from sadness but later, as the days passed, from a thin, hard anger.

The Sunday following Todd's abandonment, Annie walked two blocks to the Ace Hardware store and bought a hammer, a saw, and a half-pound of ten penny nails. She did not pass anyone on the sidewalk, coming or going. Two blocks of houses, brick and Formstone, boarded up, windows blindfolded with do not enter signs, faced the reservoir. Weeping willows greened the edge of the water, the strange color of new leaves Annie always thought of as softer chartreuse. Seeing the green made her think of nourishment, of herself and the baby. Once she cleared her way to the second floor, she would have that view, too.

But the second floor rooms were small and dark and smelled of dirty laundry. Char and mildew streaked the peeling wall-paper. Plaster covered the two south-facing windows. Annie swallowed her dismay and looked up the back staircase to the top floor. The ladder beckoned. Annie began clearing debris, tumbling bags of trash down the stairs to the foyer. She bought paint the color of garnet. At night, bones aching, she painted over the ugly words as far as she could reach. If she stood quiet enough, she felt the cool of air rushing down, the whirl of it whistling through a cracked window.

She nailed down the curling floorboards and covered the holes with plywood salvaged from refuse heaped in the basement. When she secured the top two steps, she stood on the third-floor landing. Rose-colored paper covered the third floor walls. Two rooms, with closets smaller than the Volvo's trunk, and a full bath with a claw-foot tub. Rust stained the porcelain, and when Annie turned on the

water, the faucet hiccupped before spitting out brown water. In the farthest room, covered with cobwebs, a doll's cradle in the corner, a lavender set of drawers. Light streamed through the south-facing window and, in the distance, Annie saw the pillows of green. This will be the baby's room, Annie thought.

She returned to the landing. The ladder hung above her. For an instant she wished Todd was beside her, to share in this moment of discovery. She did not know what the attic contained, but she hoped it held secrets of a gentler kind, books and letters perhaps, or old toys and moth-balled coats, or just air. A family lived here once, she was certain, and that knowledge was enough to tether her. The baby kicked, a quiet ripple like a river flowing through her belly, and Annie pulled on the bottom rung.

