

House By The Sea

by Mark Reep

She wanted to live in a house by the sea. A warm sea, she said laughing, no more of this: cold wind off the lake, thin sugary snow hissing past. Warm is good, he said, rubbing his hands together. Not a big house, she said: A cottage on a cliff, with whitewashed walls and a red tile roof. A slate roof, he said. He'd worked with slate, liked the care you had to take, freeing the broken ones, fitting the new. Sure, she said, slate's pretty. It was that easy, their dream house. Over coffee they agreed on a division of labor: he'd repoint the chimney, the walls; she'd choose the colors, do the painting. By the time the waitress brought the check, they'd made themselves at home.

She showed me a photograph I'd seen before. He was a good man, she said. You'd have liked him.

She'd asked if I'd help her sort through some things. She didn't want to leave a mess, she said. I told her she wasn't going anywhere, but she only smiled, we wouldn't argue. She'd always been thin. But now she seemed smaller.

On a shelf she couldn't reach I found an album she'd forgotten. Most of the photos were of her, but in the last, he sat on a stone bench, squinting at the sun, a cane beside him. He'd carve those from ironwood, she said. Rub in linseed oil with waxed paper. She showed me how she'd teased him about it, made a circle of her thumb and forefingers, demonstrated rapid cane-polishing motions. But her laugh rattled, and her cough was worse.

I looked for tissues, offered a yellowed napkin fallen from the album—No, she said hoarsely, that was our dream house. I turned it over, saw the faded sketch. When she'd got her breath, she told me the story: that long-ago Sunday morning at the diner, the pen he'd borrowed to draw with while they talked. She put the napkin back in the album. We were young, she said, it was all in front of us. We should never have settled for this.

When I got home I needed to work some, and I thought I'd flesh out his sketch, make her a drawing called *House by the Sea*. It was an unrealistic notion. My best drawings show themselves to me slowly; those that don't I get bored with, seldom finish. *House By The Sea* went its own way, became another of that summer's *Abandonments*—walls cracked and flaking, window slots with rusty shutters, archaic antennae bristling from a listing cupola. Nothing like their cottage, no place she would have liked. That night I didn't like it much either, but I'd torn up too many that summer, so I put it away and went to bed.

This spring, looking for something else, I found the drawing in an unlabeled folder. There were notes from those weeks, pages torn from a notebook: *I find her at the kitchen window, a hummingbird hovering at the glass. They're going, she says, he's come to say good-bye.* The Times obituary misspelled her name. I thought of trying to finish the drawing, but to alter or add seemed dishonest, a betrayal I couldn't articulate. I found an old pencil, the kind I'd used that year, and signed my name.

