

Empty Space

by Richda McNutt

The house was empty now - silent. Each room was filled with air too thin to sustain memory. She stood, absorbing the emptiness, adding it to her own. Her footsteps were hesitant, reluctant to disturb the silence. She walked into her old bedroom - so small now. How long had the fireplace grate stood empty? She remembered lying in her bed in the dark room, seeing the comforting glow of the coal embers in the grate. She also remembered the fear that came when she turned her head to the window and saw the flickering, eerie glow from the mountain. Foxfire, she was told - just phosphorescence from a decaying stump. But she was convinced it was not of this earth. She had always heard of an Indian burial mound deep in the mountain's heart, and she had convinced herself that was where the glow had its origin. She would imagine stealthy movements deep within the woods, drawing ever closer to the house; when she had completely terrified herself, she would pull her head under the quilts and make like a box turtle.

The connecting bedroom had been her parents'. It was the only room with a closet, and she had loved exploring the shelves with their boxes of jewelry, stacks of crocheted doilies, packets of old letters and clippings. There were old hats and embroidered handkerchiefs and small, unused knickknacks. It was a magic room. After her family moved, it had been converted into a bathroom - there was no magic or wonder in a bathroom, just utility.

She continued through the rest of the house. The dining room floor sagged. The living room grate had been filled in and replaced with a large Stoke-a-Matic coal stove that dominated the room. Maybe the dining room should become the sitting room. The outside wall of windows gave it a lightness that would dispel the bulk of the brooding stove. All that was needed was a soft, pillowy couch and a chair large enough to curl up in, with a reading lamp or two.

The kitchen was last - her favorite. It was the buffer between outside and inside. Two walls of windows - a long walk-in pantry with shelves now empty. They were once filled with colorful jars of green beans, orange carrots, red tomatoes, yellow corn, purple beets. There were bins of flour and sugar and corn meal. Bags of dried beans and onions and baskets of potatoes. Her mother could walk in there with empty arms and come out with the magic of a brownstone-front cake, or peanut butter roll-ups, or the sweet comfort of pancakes and syrup. She would cook pinto beans all day and they would be soft with thick soup, and her boiled potatoes would crumble, and the greens were just tangy enough. There had been jewel-toned jars of jelly lined up on the table to cool after a day of preserving. The kitchen was the heart. It was where they ate and bathed and played rummy and talked and talked while they strung beans and shelled peas and shucked corn.

She walked through the kitchen door onto the back porch. The well was still there - such a convenience. Just pull the water up and carry the bucket into the kitchen. Some mornings there would be a rime of ice on top of the water, cause the heat from the living room stove didn't make it back that far. Oh, the misery of going out to the toilet on a cold winter night! There might be no magic or wonder in a bathroom, but utility definitely had its place.

No smokehouse in the back yard now. No garden or chicken coop. No toilet, thank you, Jesus. No buckeye tree with a swing hanging from its branch. But the woods still loomed, and there would soon be a trickle of water coming down the stream from the mountain. And it would be beautiful in the spring and fall.

Could she come back? Could she stay? Could she fill the emptiness of the old house with more than memory? Could she fill her own emptiness? It would be lonely, but there would also be an ageless peace. It would be bittersweet, looking through eyes that were many years away from a child's. Maybe - maybe. She would try.

