

III

That Smell

excerpt from *Losing Home*

by Robert Duffer

I love that feeling of getting in the car and going. One turn of the wrist, one tap of the toe, and the road opens up to anywhere. The force of acceleration, the thrill of motion, the power of the engine, it hits you inside out. The crops and utility poles flicker by, skylines pass like landscapes, and you cut through time and space to the intersections of memory, fantasy, and perception. The car becomes part of you, the four-cycle engine pumping like the four chambers of your heart, the explosions firing thousands of times per minute like so many unnoticed synapses. The real magic of the internal combustion engine is how effortless it seems, like every waking day. Doesn't really matter where you go as long as you keep going.

Stopping makes going that much more addictive.

We've got rules in the Stain, even on those days when we're going to drive off into the closing eye of the horizon. We can drive up to 300 miles but we usually top out at 200, lose the map and listen to the road, find a spot to camp or a roadside to crash.

Mabel usually tells us where to stop. She stays on the doubled-over sleeping bag on the passenger seat, her chin on the door to watch the sky roll by. I never put her window all the way down because Pudge once jumped out to attack a golden retriever but only got a snout full of cement.

When she has to pee, Mabel hops down from her perch and circles twice on the floor. I'll pull over and she'll disappear into the grass off the shoulder of the road, then we run around a bit. She likes Frisbee but it hits her teeth so hard, a dull thunk, that I don't throw it anywhere she can get it. Sometimes, drifting in and out of small towns strung along the promise of a state highway, or on a country road running next to an abandoned freight line, she'll like the smell of the place so we'll camp under the stars off the road.

She rests when I rest, eats when I eat, and sleeps while I drive. She might be the perfect road buddy.

Mabel and I followed Lewis and Clark down the Columbia River inland. We took a diversion to Mt. St. Helens, because a middle-aged guy on a trail by the Gorge said it was due to re-erupt any day now. He was talking in geological time. The mountain was stunning. It was like looking at a before/after picture. Beautiful wildflowers popped up beside dead rivers of frozen lava, the ash so dense and impenetrable even as it sprouted the first signs of life above ground. And the mountain itself was lopsided, a crater carved out of it, so you could make out the shape of it before it erupted, you could make out the snapshot of change, the sensitivity of something as immovable as a mountain.

We broke off the waterway splendor of hwy 14 to check out a part of The Oregon Trail, which was as quaint as the first generation computer game I played in elementary school. Like the game, there wasn't much to it, and we broke a wagon wheel and Ma died of dysentery so we ended up in an open house in the big small town of Baker City, OR.

It was a white A-frame with a long wooden porch that faced the downtown a few blocks down past the railroad tracks. The realtor wore a Stetson and had the hearty belly of a man who no longer works the land but still eats as if he did. He regarded us skeptically, asked where our parents were, then dismissed me for being a curiosity more than a client. Our prospective home, one of "deep roots" was a \$95,000 100-year old house with three bedrooms, 2.1 bathrooms, walking distance to downtown, and a four-car garage. The size of the garage has a direct correlation to the ruggedness of the land: the more land, the bigger the garage. These people

had worked beyond the town, still worked the land in some way because it was in their blood. I didn't get much else from the listing sheet.

I held Mabel like a football and we followed behind a couple confirming the schools, taxes, flood plains, furnaces and other stuff that real people consider when making real decisions.

I can't get over it, don't know if I ever will. It's so circumstantial where you plant your roots. I was in the same house my whole life before I left, it was permanent and everything else was passing. But it's the other way. Jobs, schools, image, price, convenience, connectivity, all of these things lead you to an area but of the thousands of houses in that area, why this split-level versus that split-level in the next subdivision? Thousands of options and one of them is permanent? Why did you pick your suburb, that subdivision, that street, that house? Why stay?

Me and Mabel checked out other places, loved other places, but this one in town satisfied most of our needs, mostly that the window over the kitchen sink was still unlocked when we came back at night.

It felt more like a home than a property. This one had a smell I couldn't pin down until we were alone. It was the soft smell of hay, of animals, like they worked with animals or had a lot of pets, like how Ginelle wore the smell of her pets. It wasn't an offensive odor like a cage or kennel; it didn't smell like fear. It was soft, like bedding. There was nothing on the walls or in the cupboards, except coffee and tea and Styrofoam cups. The stuff of showings and closings, passing through and passing on. The curtains were drawn, we didn't bother with lights, and as we walked around I knew someone had died. The house had been a casket. The outdated appliances, ornate light fixtures, colorful carpeting—but the most overwhelming sense was that smell. More than animals, it smelled

like emptiness, like what wasn't there. Someone here had seen Baker City grow from an outpost to a town, had seen time have its way with things.

Off the kitchen was a dark staircase, where the wallpaper was faded bare where hands might reach in the dark. Every person had to pass through this point to get anywhere else.

We had that hallway in our house, on the landing between the upstairs and downstairs, the front hall and the kitchen, a nexus where your voice could be heard at any place in any room. Look right and you could see out the front door past the maples to the street, look left through the bay window to the oak in the back yard. Step up and ascend to the bedrooms, step left and go down to the family room. Or avoid it like everyone did at your open house.

The home visitation was Ellie's idea. "It's what she would have wanted." She got away with that shit too because we didn't know what else to do. "They've had eight goddamn months to say goodbye," Mark said. I thought that was what the wake was for. Ellie said this was just for family. So we stood in the foyer meeting the grievors as grudgingly as we had at every other family party. Since I've left, it must've been in Colorado—no, it had to be California, I've heard people call it a foi-yay. It's foi-yur, you French ass-licker, almost like voi-yur, which is what this open house seemed like, so much so that Aunt Jo insisted that we put a black sheet over the mirror. Tradition, she said, but she didn't want to see her mascara running, her perpetual pout downcast in actual sadness. "She was the only person who loved me," she blubbered, but she kept filling up our cups of Ellie's funeral punch—a 151 concoction that was known at her local as the "blindsider." Jo demanded that we ate something, mangia, eat, you'll feel better, mangia, have a meatball, eat. She was avoiding grandma on the living room couch to our

right, crowded by Italian woman—meatballs themselves—gossiping and stuffing finger-fulls of cannoli in their whiskered mouths, a half-smile plastered on Grandma's face, as if all the attention were for her and the resurrection of her beloved Dominic, the prodigal fucktard. Forgive my ass.

It was Aunt Ginelle who nursed you till the end and kept us all sane by reminding us that we have lives, giving us money to go out to eat, go to the movies, to leave you alone for hours while she sat bedside downstairs, who at the open house, with her perm ringed with sweat, her suit jacket off to let her floral blouse bloom with sweat and the smell of her cockatoo and dogs, said, "There's no reason to stand here and greet people."

We looked at Mark, he looked at Ellie, Ginelle looked at us, head bent like we were her confused students. We no longer had to be greeters and help with coats and cars, get the names right and ask about the kids or the parents. We disbanded, Mark out to the attic in the garage with his Old Fashioneds and Ellie out in the backyard with Stock Boy and her friends.

I circled the house, through the meatballs in the living room past the picture collages in the dining room into the kitchen, where you always went, except it was crowded with women and two banquet tables piled in tiers with cold cuts, cheese and peppers, beef and sausage sandwiches from Nona's, then all the casseroles, pasta dishes, four hundred different lasagnas, and sweet treats that the mourners brought. Why does your family love the powdered crescent cookie with the chunks of almond? Even Pudge didn't eat that crumbly shit. The whole thing was wrong—not the crap cookies or that people should have such an appetite after burying someone, hell, we're still alive, what better way to celebrate than by eating—but its presentation was all wrong. It should've been served family style, like it always was, at the dining room table under the

full scrutiny of the entire family. At the end nearest the kitchen, the women would take your plate and slop out whatever they think you needed of the salads and the lasagna or the manicotti, depending on the season. That seat was usually empty because you'd be hustling something in for someone from the kitchen. On the opposite end of the table presiding over the meat would be the man of the house. It was Grandpa Marco, with Dad waiting in the wings on his right—I wish I remembered what he looked like under Grandpa—until Mark replaced both of them. Your dad doled it out dictator-style: if you did something that reflected well on the family, good grades, pretty girl, changed the oil on his car, he would bequeath unto you a slab of prime rib with plenty of fat because he liked his fat; but if you were anything like Dominic you got what he called a “delicate slice for the delicate boy.” The family style method of dining always reinforced your place in the familial heart—food is love—where every dietary request had to be passed up the line to be judged: you want more meat—don't be so selfish; you want no meat—don't be so disrespectful; you want no gravy—don't be so shy; no squash and peppers, no zucchini and onions—don't be so stubborn; no fish—what, no God, too?

That's how it should have been, filled with awkward tension where every morsel had to be earned and the fat fucks on the couch wouldn't be wiping their fingers on the cushions—aha! the real reason they put plastic over furniture, to act like a big napkin. Buffet style has no personality, it's for the outsiders, the family circle broken.

What really pissed me off was the place everyone was avoiding. Normally, the men would gather downstairs, each one fixing the TV, the bar, the fireplace to his liking unless Grandpa Marco was around, while they waited for the women working and talking in the kitchen to call them to dinner. Now the men were out back.

Three of the four-wheel marks from the hospital bed were covered in the carpeting by the love seat and end table. It looked like it always had before the Waiting, except the vacuuming lines were clear and unbroken. The only ones to go down there were Jo and Ginelle to reset all the poinsettias, bouquets, and flower arrangements from the church around the hearth and fireplace. They bought you 37 poinsettias, on top of the TV, the mantle ledge, the entire hearth covered with the crushed red velvet of the fake-looking Christmas plant—so red it looked wet with paint. It had to have been hard to find in September. What was with the poinsettias? They have no smell. Who loves a flower with no smell? It's like a lamp emitting no light.

That was the moment I knew the house no longer belonged to us. Not because of the poinsettias—it happened months prior. Our home had lost its smell, our smell.

A home without a smell is nothing more than a house, a building. A home's smell is its fingerprint born of the collective meld of its inhabitants, one unique smell for each and every home in the whole wide world. One that girlfriends smell on your clothes and dogs know as sharp as your voice, a smell that lingers so deep in the memory of your nose that when you smell a trace of it years later—not the full on smell but a derivative because that smell can only be captured fully in that house—you stop whatever you're doing and are flooded with melancholy, that bereft feeling somewhere between sorrow and nostalgia, for a place in time that exists only in your mind. And you never know you have a smell until that smell is gone.

It's the smell of normal. Other peoples' houses smell strange or funny or different but your home smells normal, so normal you don't even smell it. Visitors may disagree but this is your truth, your perfume. When it stinks you want to get it back to your

normal, whatever that is. It comes from time and the shedding of skin and the resonance of stories, from winter boots and summer sandals forgotten in backs of closets, from lemon-scented cleaners and garlic-filled tomato gravy simmering eternally on Sunday. It's Pudge's water dish and the rank smell of her paws on humid summer days. It's the smell of the glue used to put up the wallpaper a decade ago, or the masonry dust from the new fireplace when you could barely walk. It's the smell of her nightgown confronting you well after curfew. Of broken skin and Bactine-sprayed knees, Bambi sheets and Empire Strikes Back comforters, the smell of Pepto-Bismol cotton-swabbed on chicken pox, of piles of wet leaves or chicken stock with carrots and celery boiling over the pot. Rose-shaped hand soap. Burnt-out light bulbs. Grandpa's leather jacket rich with cigarette smoke. Sleeper sofa foldouts and water-damaged tile in the laundry room. Slobbered dog toys; mints from a purse stuck to pennies spilled out onto a closet floor; sawdust and tape where paint shouldn't go; the sticky cabinet above the fridge with the aged bottles of watered-down booze. Mark's cache of Sports Illustrated swimsuit issues in a crate in his closet moldy from taking them to the bathroom as the shower steams and so does he. Of towels stuffed under Ellie's door as she leans out the window and blows her hit of weed through a paper towel roll stuffed with fabric softener. First kisses and surreptitious fucks, perfumes and medications, the hot fume of anger and the hot glow of love, the smell of nighttime quiet when everyone's asleep, of a faded yellow sweat-shirt passed down from Mark to Ellie to you. Of time and bodies and blood and emotion, the smell of love and laughter and loss, of skin, layers and layers of dead skin.

The smell died before you did. It left before the arrival of Anka the polish hospice nurse, who walked as if she carried a goat on one hip and a litter of kids on the other, who filled the down-

stairs with the antiseptic of sickness. The smell got cleaned, desensitized, disinfected and sterilized, as if in death you could finally tidy up the messiness of life.

Mabel and I made a bed out of our sleeping bag and pillow in the upstairs bedroom with the gabled ceiling and the fan. We left it off, cracked the windows to breeze out the dust and must and death of things in the thin blue carpeting. The street was dark, dead quiet. We took the mirror off the closet door and put it in the closet, door closed. The occasional headlight shuffled bars of light across the ceiling. Where would they put the for sale sign? Over the old pitchers' mound in the center of the yard? No, you planted a lilac bush there. Between there and the sidewalk? With Dad's help, Mark could take care of the listing stuff, but would he ever be able to rid it of that dying feeling? Is it the place or is it inside of us? This was the first house I'd slept in since I left home.