

## Wilderness House Literary Review 20/1

*Mick Leigh*

### **Abandoned House**

SITUATED ALONG A LONELY ROAD far out in the country, the abandoned house had been empty for nearly a decade. I didn't know why it was deserted. All I cared about was photographing it, so one clear evening in April I stopped by.

The house was about seventy years old and had been added onto several times with seemingly no concern for practicality or aesthetics, as though the design had been worked out by a hyperactive child with crayons. Surrounding the house were a barn, a stable and an equipment shed, all dilapidated and nearly swallowed up by vines and thorn bushes. A rusty mechanical roof vent atop the stable revolved slowly in the light breeze, emitting a high-pitched whine that served as a kind of creepy soundtrack for the isolated setting. Beyond the house and the barnyard lay scrubby, untended fields that angled toward a wooded river valley.

I parked my car and climbed out with my camera, ignoring the shotgun-blasted "No Trespassing" sign posted on a big pine next to the drive. Some photographers aren't shy about entering private property, but I'm not entirely comfortable with doing that. I'm always expecting someone to show up and demand to know what I'm doing

My wife calls photography my "hobby." I've never liked the word. To me it implies you're not really serious and I am. I believe photographs can be like stories. If they're really good, they can say even more than a story because they can tell you things that can't be expressed with words. My aim is to capture images that evoke emotion and express mood and atmosphere. I'm not interested in anything cute or scenic. There's a sad beauty in discarded objects and forgotten places. I've photographed junk yards, vacant city lots and shuttered factories. Some of my best pictures were taken at a crumbling drive-in movie theater. My wife has pointed out that my photos rarely have people in them, or if they do, it's the shadows or outlines of people, as if they're not fully present. I hadn't really noticed until she commented on it. You shoot what draws you. Only later do you see patterns and themes emerging, and it tells you something about yourself.

By the time I'd finished photographing the exterior of the abandoned house, it was close to six o'clock. The westering sun produced a hard, angled light that cast the scene in a golden hue interspersed with dramatic shadows. After a while, I lowered the camera, knowing I should go inside. The front door had been boarded up. Some vandal had spray-painted "Enter if you dare!" on it. I stood there, mulling it over with my camera dangling from the neck strap, my hands shoved into the pockets of my photographer's vest. This close to sundown, every minute I waited I was losing precious light. Hell with it, I thought.

I went around to the back, where I'd seen a door that had been jimmyed. I pushed it open and stepped into a small mudroom with a simple bench and a row of hooks for coats and jackets. Stairs led into a darkened cellar from which arose an earthy smell, remindful of a freshly dug grave. Adjacent to the mudroom was the kitchen. From there, a gloomy hallway led into a living room with hardwood flooring, warped in places, and a

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brick fireplace blackened with soot. Scattered throughout the space were liquor bottles and beer cans, melted candles, used condoms, a wadded pair of panties and a soiled blanket. Graffiti was scrawled on the walls. Most of it was the typical, unimaginative fare: primitive drawings of dicks and copulating stick figures, a couple of swastikas, and crudities like "Fuck you," "Suck my cock" and "Pussy Ranch!" Covering most of one wall, in red paint with letters about three feet tall, was the word MURDER. Now, *that* was a different. I took a few photos. On the wall opposite, was a massive pentagram, painted in black and in a careful manner suggesting the painter had done his or her best to achieve some exactitude. I shot that as well.

Adjacent to the living room was a generously sized foyer and off of that, a study with built-in bookcases. Most of the shelves had been ripped out, probably for firewood. Holes had been punched in the plaster. A threadbare oriental rug littered with animal droppings lay on the floor. Atop it was a pile of moldering books.

Pausing in the foyer, I chimed the camera's LCD to review what I was getting and was pleased. This was one of the best spaces I'd photographed for a long time and the light was perfect, though there was only about twenty more minutes of it left. I was trying to decide what to shoot next when a red ball came bouncing down the staircase and rolled to a stop at my feet.

From the top of the stairs, I heard laughter. It was from a boy about three or four years old. "Ball!" he declared.

Mystified by his appearance, I managed a friendly nod. "Yeah, ball," I said wonderingly. I picked it up, and he clapped delightedly and gestured for me to toss it back. Given that he was standing on the edge of the landing, I feared that, in trying to catch it, he'd fall. When I started up the steps to give it to him instead, he became shy and frightened. I smiled and spoke softly to him. I had just reached the landing and handed him the ball when a young woman emerged from the upstairs hallway.

"Caleb!" she cried, rushing over and embracing the boy protectively as she gaped in alarm at me.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

"Nothing," I said defensively. "I'm just taking pictures." I pointed to the camera, as if it wasn't obvious. "I didn't mean to scare you."

The woman calmed slightly, though she still held herself in a wary posture with a hand resting protectively on Caleb's shoulder. I regarded them more fully. The boy's hair was brown and curly and sprung from his head, uncombed. There was a smear of dirt on his cherubic face. The woman was thin and pale, yet she projected a feral strength. She was wearing dirty white sneakers and a sleeveless, printed dress about ten years out of style, a hand-me-down or something she'd picked up at Good Will. She and the boy must be squatting here, I thought. I told her my name although she didn't volunteer hers. She kept staring, trying to figure me out as she absently coiled a lock of Caleb's hair in her fingers. I offered something apologetic about how I wouldn't have entered the house if I'd known they were there.

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"People come," she said darkly. "They do all kinds of wicked things from the sound of it. We hide until they go. We didn't hear *you*," she added, fixing me with an accusatory look, as if I'd tried to sneak up on them. She gazed down at Caleb, and in a scolding, though tender, voice said, "We're supposed to stay close to mommy, aren't we? We're not supposed to go wandering off."

Caleb lifted his small face toward his mother. "Ball."

"Um-hmm," she returned, shaking her head at him. To me, she said, "We made us a secret spot up here. Them that come stay downstairs, mostly. You're the first person who's seen us."

"Have you been here long?" I asked.

She bit her lower lip. "A while. We were at my sister's but had to leave. You're aren't gonna tell anybody, are you? We're only staying until she can pull some money together for us."

Having said all of this, she knitted her brow, as if berating herself for disclosing too much. I sensed she was desperate to talk to another adult. I couldn't imagine spending day after day in a deserted house with no electricity, no heat and no running water, never knowing who was going to show up. I assured her I wouldn't say anything, though I knew I'd tell my wife, but that wasn't what she meant. We heard a vehicle passing on the dirt road in front of the house. The woman's eyes widened and assumed a hunted aspect. She canted her head and listened intently until the sound faded. The light was draining and we were standing in heavy shadow. I scratched the back of my head and felt as though I was intruding.

"I suppose I'd better be going," I said.

A look of relief crossed the woman's face. I wanted to say something more, but the situation spoke its own sad language. The best I could muster was to wish them luck. Caleb waved and I waved back. His mother muttered a stiff good-bye. My showing up had really rattled her.

When I came outside, the spring peepers were chorusing. The sun was a fiery glint poking through a screen of trees on the horizon. All you could see of the outbuildings were looming black shapes. The spring air had cooled considerably. Though the days had been warm lately, it was still dropping into the low forties at night. I wondered how the two of them kept from getting cold. As I drove off I began remonstrating myself. I should've offered to help. I pictured a scenario where I had invited them to stay with my wife and I. My wife would have been fine with it. She has a good heart. We have plenty of room. The house is much too big since our own children, now adults, left years ago. That would be a little much for me, though, having two strangers in the house.

A low hill lay ahead. Beyond it glowed the lights of an approaching vehicle. Moments later it crested the rise. It was a pickup with oversized tires and a lifted suspension. The vehicle was festooned with running lights in amber, blue and green. It glowed like a flying saucer. The driver didn't bother to dim his high-beams. I squinted and shielded my eyes. Practically blinded, I pulled over and stopped to give the rig plenty of room on the narrow road. As the truck rumbled by, emitting stinky exhaust fumes, I

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glimpsed the face of its male driver, faintly illuminated by the dashboard. He was scowling down at me.

I didn't see another vehicle until I reached the state highway. Before long I came to a town. On the outskirts was a small grocery store. Seized with inspiration, I stopped and went in and began loading groceries into a cart.

It seemed to take forever to drive back. I parked in the same spot as I had earlier. Before exiting the car, I shoved a flashlight into my pocket. Entering the house with my arms full of groceries, I called out loudly, saying who I was so as not to alarm them. My voice echoed through the empty rooms. There was no answer back. It was awkward trying to navigate through the house with the flashlight and hang on to the groceries at the same time. At the foot of the stairs, I announced myself again before I went up. When I reached the landing, one of the bags slipped in my arms and I nearly dropped it. I placed the entire load on the floor. A can of tuna tumbled out. I'd smashed the bread a little.

Again I said hello and still no response. All I could detect was that peculiar kind of silence where you suspect someone unseen is listening. I felt a pang of disappointment. I had anticipated the woman greeting me and being thankful for what I'd done. Caleb would want one of the cookies I'd bought. Surely she knew it was me. Were they hiding anyway? If so, that meant she was frightened and I was making it worse by poking around.

I knew I should go but was unable to bring myself to do so. I stayed where I was and allowed the stillness of the house to reach out and envelop me. A breath of cold air brushed my face. My eyes were drawn to the unlit corridor off the landing. Were the two of them within the gloom staring back at me? I considered shining my light into the darkness but decided against it. If they were there it would just make matters worse. And if they weren't, I didn't want to know.