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A Dukedom Large Enough

The tip of Ray's drafting pencil snapped the moment it touched the sketchpad. He swore as he watched the graphite tip careen off the sharply angled desk. There was a muffled shout from a room upstairs, followed by what sounded like a frying pan clattering against a wall. He'd learned to tune the noises out. Without taking his eyes off the sketchpad, he fished another pencil out of the limp backpack dangling off the back of his chair. He flexed the cramps out of his fingers before settling the pencil into the shallow grooves worn into his digits. Taking a deep breath, he began to sketch a series of short, precise lines.

He didn't look up until the rain started spattering the window over the sink. Decades of grime had rendered the window nearly opaque, but he could hear the droplets pelting the glass. He'd lost track of time. The microwave clock blinked 12:00 AM just as it had for the entirety of his childhood. The sun hadn't quite set yet, and the rich smell of pipe tobacco drifted up through the floorboards as it almost always did in the late afternoon. Ray pulled a mug from one of the cupboards but abandoned it upon finding a cobweb coating the inside. Reaching under the sink, his hands closed around a bottle of scotch. His father had routinely secreted one or two bottles down there among the pipes. Ray took the bottle back to the desk.

He admired the broad porch he'd drawn. It would have to have thick mesh screens for New England's notorious summer mosquitos. Using the edge of his pencil, he shaded-in the neat square shutters he'd envisioned for the second-floor windows. With a ruler, he added a few more cubic shingles to the roof. Smiling now, he ran a finger along the rigid lines he'd just drawn. Four months and the design was barely halfway complete. Crumpled drafts filled the trashcan in the corner along with empty wine bottles and stained coffee filters. The entire right wing of the house hovered like a shadow next to the portion he'd already drafted, visible only by the light pencil marks he'd made for reference. Still smiling, he took a long pull

from the bottle and grimaced at its burn. It would be perfect, he thought. A perfect house.

A crack of thunder shook the house. Loose shingles fluttered down past the window. A sweet, musty smell like old books filled the kitchen as the house's rotting beams swelled with rain. Another peal of thunder started the baby crying upstairs. At least the storm had drowned out the couple's unending argument. He picked up his pencil. The baby's wails intensified. The scotch didn't burn so much the second time. He sketched a portion of the widow's walk but furiously erased it. The dimensions had been imprecise.

At some point the baby's cries dulled to a soft whimper. The bottle of scotch sat nearly empty on the desk and the kitchen had become dim. He could barely make out the faint lines he'd sketched. He went into the living room to fetch one of the house's few working lamps. There he saw the puzzle again. It sprawled across the coffee table next to the sagging loveseat where his mother had smoked cigarettes and read magazines while he'd sat on the floor, watching cartoons inches from the television screen.

But the puzzle they'd worked on together. She would yip with delight each time she'd fit two pieces. Even his father would pause on the way out the door to one of his midnight poker games to push together a few pieces. He'd offer some advice between sips of the old fashioned that he'd splash onto the carpet with each emphatic jab of his finger, which he'd wield like a scimitar when he spoke.

"You always want to start with the outside edges, then work your way inside. That's how you do it."

It was an image of the solar system, though they'd never finished it. And whether out of laziness or stubborn pride, they'd never bothered to sweep the pieces off the table and back into the flimsy cardboard box. For years it had been the room's sole decoration save for a taxidermy sparrow on the mantle over the fireplace. Saturn, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Uranus, and Mercury rested intact, but Earth and Neptune remained incomplete. The elusive pieces were scattered throughout the piles that textured the table's otherwise smooth surface. Some pieces lay submerged in the plush carpeting that covered the floor. He made a mental note to take up the carpet to check for wooden floorboards. Once he finished the exterior design he'd begin blueprinting the interior, but not before.

Ray had been putting off the interior, unsure where to begin. Before they'd died, his parents had done all kinds of extensive remodeling to divide the house up into rentable units. They'd built additions, crafted maze-like hallways, installed impossibly small stovetops and washer-dryers in closets, and rerouted the pipes so many times that the plumber swore he'd never set foot in the house again. At one point they'd had over a dozen renters squirreled away in every nook of the house.

As his parents gambled and drank away their trust funds, renting out the oceanside manor (which Ray's great-grandfather had built with railroad money) had been their only way to stave off the bankers and accountants who would come by with their sleek leather briefcases. His parents could've worked, of course, but they never had and saw no reason to start so late in life. As they filled the house with a rotating coterie of strangers, their own space became increasingly cramped. By the time he was twelve, Ray, his sister, and his parents had occupied just three rooms: the living room; a bedroom with two canopied, four-poster beds; a single bathroom; and the kitchen. Though his parents rarely cooked anything more complicated than toast, they'd all spent most of their time in the kitchen, lounging around the sturdy oak table laughing and talking for hours. They'd managed to keep the house in the family, anyway. A handful of renters still lingered, though Ray wasn't sure how many were still in residence. Supposedly his sister came around once a month to collect rent, but he hadn't seen her once in the four months since he'd returned to plan the renovation. He'd never seen the other tenants either, for that matter.

Setting the lamp on the carpet, Ray collapsed onto the loveseat. A plume of dust erupted out of the cushions. He bent over the puzzle. Within a few minutes, he managed to connect a few of the dust-coated pieces. None of the Earth pieces seemed to want to fit together. Another rumble of thunder shook the house. A moment later he heard a loud crack followed by a thud that vibrated up through the sagging floorboards and into his chest.

He leapt to his feet and bounded the short distance across the living room to the front door. With both hands he yanked it open by its heavy brass knob. Wind whipped into the house. Ray watched his sketchpad flutter like a broken-winged bird as the wind hurled it to the kitchen floor. Rhode Island was usually spared storms like this until later in the summer. Straining his eyes against the fierce wind, he discovered the source of the

cracking sound he'd heard. The enormous beech tree that had stood sentinel over the house for generations now lay collapsed in jagged, splintered chunks, blocking the road. It had taken down several power lines in its descent. Blue sparks shot up out of the ends of the frayed black cords. His wife had left in the station wagon they'd driven up from New York. Now the only car in the driveway was the dilapidated 1969 Corvette Stingray his father had won in a game of Texas Hold'em. Despite the occasional effort his father would muster with a wrench and a bottle of Jack Daniels, he'd never managed to tinker the car back to life. The car sat low on its rusted struts, red paint chips gathered like dandruff all around it and crabgrass creeping up over its aquiline frame. Ray briefly wondered where the other residents kept their cars. Swearing, he slammed the door closed behind him as he stepped back inside.

Before calling the fire department to clear the tree from the road, he picked his sketchpad up off the ground. He set it back on the desk and gently smoothed out the pages with his palm. The thick paper felt sturdy and pleasant under his fingers. The pencil, too, had been thrown off the table, and picking it up he saw that the tip had once again snapped. Ray admired the pencil before setting it down on the desk. It had been a gift from his wife, part of a set she'd given him upon being made partner at Ramsey-Cliff Designs, the architecture firm where he'd worked for nearly ten years. He wondered if she'd come back but pushed the thought away. He concentrated on the house. It was the house she couldn't stand. If he could just fix the house, he thought, she'd come back.

The phone droned in his ear when he picked it up and dialed the three numbers. Of course; the tree had taken out the electricity. He slammed the phone into the receiver and started rifling through the kitchen drawers. The yelling upstairs had gotten louder.

"I don't want to hear it! Shut up! I don't want to hear it anymore!"

"Oh, that's just like you, isn't it? Never wanting to hear it!"

He shook their voices out of his head. Finally, he found a few candles. He'd almost given up searching for matches when he thought to check the living room. Nestled between the cushions of the loveseat he found one of his mother's old lighters. They'd slip loose from the pockets of the silk robes she always wore, and she'd always drive to the closest gas station to buy a cheap new one rather than hunt down the missing lighter.

“Life’s too short for that nonsense,” she’d always say.

He lit the candles and sat back down at the drafting desk he’d placed atop the kitchen table. With a sharpened pencil, he added a few touches to the porch. It would have enough room for Adirondack chairs and a table where they could sip cocktails on summer evenings, watching the waves lap at the rocky shoreline while the cicadas symphony droned from the trees. Jen would love that. In New York she had always loved drinking lemon drops on the roof of their apartment building, staring out at Brooklyn across the East River. Even in the winter she’d beg him to throw on a scarf and follow her up the stairs.

A door slammed somewhere upstairs, and he heard running footsteps. His pencil froze on the page. The steps hurried down one set of stairs, and then another. He couldn’t tell where they were coming from. Since returning, he hadn’t once ventured beyond the three cramped rooms his family had called home. He didn’t even want to see the mess of the house’s interior until he’d fully plotted the exterior. The footsteps continued, traversing the intricate staircases and hallways that connected the many rooms housed in the expansive three-story estate. The steps moved deftly, hurried but certain. They were getting closer, each step louder than the last. He stared at the door that connected the kitchen to the main foyer. He’d double-locked it but as the footsteps got closer, he eyed the locks nervously. The footsteps came to a stop and he heard light breathing just outside the door. Then there came a pounding knock.

“Mister! Mister your car!”

It was a boy’s voice, and he sounded young. Still glued to the chair, Ray realized he’d been holding his breath. Swallowing hard, he called out to the voice beyond the door:

“Yes—what? What is it?”

“Your car! Look—”

The sound of crunching glass drowned out the boy’s frantic voice. Ray turned in the direction of the sound and leapt to his feet, knocking over the candles. Rushing to the kitchen window, he heaved it open against its rusted hinges. He couldn’t remember the window ever being open. Not even when his mother would boil the lobsters his dad would bring home as a peace offering after some bad streak at the blackjack table or the racetrack.

The whole kitchen would fill with the steam from the pot and the sweet, pungent smell of cooking shellfish.

Rain plastered Ray's hair to his forehead and streamed down his cheeks as soon as he stuck his head out the window. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the thick sheets of rain. The clouds were as bulbous and steely gray as zeppelin shells. Then he heard another grisly metallic crunch and turning, he watched as the wind again lifted the Corvette off the ground and rolled it like a log down the street. Mirrors, glass, and sharp pieces of faded red metal flew off in its wake. With each turn on the pavement another crater would impact the car's sleek body, pounding it to a contorted wreck. As it crossed the railroad tracks it caught sharply, sending a showering burst of orange sparks up into the sky. It came to a crumpled halt at the shoreline. Its dented metal steamed in the pouring rain before a towering wave snatched it off the shore and it disappeared into the obscure depths of the bay.

Even straining against the ancient hinges with all his strength, he couldn't get the window to close. Rain and sweat stained his shirt, and finally he left it open. Water pooled in the sink and splattered the floor. Rubbing the moisture from his eyes, he sensed that the room looked brighter than it had before. The sound of feet pattering back up the stairs grew quieter, and then silent. He wondered how long the boy had been standing at the door. Turning from the window, he let out a horrified yell. The candles he'd knocked over had lit his sketchpad on fire and now a small blaze engulfed his desk. Grasping about for kitchen rags, he managed to smother the fire. The remains of his designs smoldered in his hands. He did not attempt to stop the orange embers from consuming the scraps of paper. The front door (a stained cherrywood piece as he'd envisioned it) was the last image to fizzle into a hazy smudge of blurred lines. He crumpled the ashes into his palm, too empty to scream or cry. Unclenching his fist, he allowed the relentless wind to whip the blackened flakes out of his hand and scatter them about the kitchen.

For a while all he could do was stand by the sink, letting the rain and wind course over his body. He picked up the scotch bottle and briefly considered hurling it against the wall, smashing it to pieces as the storm had done to the Corvette. Ray settled on tossing it into the trash can, where it rested on the dune of scrapped drafts. When he groped through the dark

and opened up the cupboard under the sink to look for more booze, he froze at the sound of the violin. It was a soft, mellow sound, slightly off pitch. Slowly, he closed the cupboard door and the music was silenced. Opening it back up, the reedy sound of vibrating, tensile strings poured back into the kitchen. It was as though the sound was echoing through the pipes or seeping through the walls. It was a haunting melody, almost an aggrieved wail. But it was also somehow comforting, and he strained his ears towards its source. He wanted to taste the sound, ingest it, become it, envelop himself within its gentle, unhurried strum. In a frenzy he scurried about the kitchen, flinging open all the cupboards and drawers. The sound filled the room, drowning out the storm.

Through the open window Ray could see water sluicing down the street, past the abrupt ending of the asphalt and into the ocean. It moved like a great fluid snake in the darkness. By now the water level had climbed halfway up the rusted sign warning drivers of the trains that no longer traversed the abandoned railroad tracks. He watched as the rushing water carried the collapsed beech tree in great rolling chunks down into the sea where they floated like ice cubes.

Hesitating, he placed his hand on the knob of the kitchen door. Only moments ago, the boy had called out from the other side. The violin's baleful, inviting melody intensified. Ray felt a compulsion to follow it, find its source. Before he could stop himself, he unclasped the locks and yanked open the door. As his eyes adjusted to the dimness of the foyer, he could discern a winding staircase leading upward from directly behind the door. The boy must have been standing on this first step, as there was barely a foot of floor space between the bottom step and the door. A sharp burst of lightning lit the foyer then and he saw several more staircases, doors, and hallways, all shooting off in different directions. Following the sound and groping with his hands along the bannister, he started up the winding staircase. He heard feet pattering above and behind him, but he could see nothing. The baby was crying again. The smell of pipe tobacco lingered in the musty air.

"I've had it with you!"

"You've gone too far this time!"

The couple raged at one another and he heard a crash of glass and doors being slammed. All the while the music grew louder, the violin's

melancholy solo building to a crescendo before dissipating back into subdued, mournful notes. The staircase wound upward in circles. Another flash of lightning briefly illuminated a window up ahead and he moved towards the burst of light. But just as he did so there was a deafening crash of thunder followed by a wrenching groan. The staircase shuddered and he tumbled backwards down a few steps before catching himself on the bannister.

Ray kept trudging up the stairs. Finally, he reached some sort of landing and he paused to catch his breath, leaning against the small square window. Sweat poured into his eyes. It wasn't until he stopped moving that he felt a sudden consciousness of his own inertia. He looked down at his feet to be sure they weren't moving. They were firmly planted, and yet he was aware of movement. Another lamenting groan echoed up from the earth, followed by a violent lurch that threw him to the floor. His head glanced off the bannister and he rolled to his knees.

Holding a hand against the throbbing pain in his skull, he pulled himself up to the window and peered out into the darkness. The lightning was nearly constant, an unbroken charge casting the swollen clouds in an unnatural iridescence. In the spectral half-light he could see that the porch was completely submerged, water surging around the house on all sides. Clutching the windowsill, he braced against another violent lurch and watched as the rushing water tore the house from its foundation. Another burst of thunder boomed out from the starless night sky and the flood shoved the house unceremoniously into the street. He felt the floor swaying unsteadily beneath his feet. The violin had never stopped.

Ray pressed on through a semi-circular hallway and ducked into a low-ceilinged passage that had been carved through a fireplace into an adjoining room. He followed the sound up two more flights of stairs and through several more curving hallways. He emerged into a small bedroom packed tight with bunk beds. A tall ladder in the corner of the room led up to a trapdoor in the ceiling. The violin was deafening now, as though it were being played directly into his ear. Without pausing he climbed the ladder and pushed against the trapdoor.

He hauled himself up onto the roof, using one hand to shield his face from the furious wind and rain. There was nowhere else to go. He dragged himself to the edge and peered down. The house had picked up

speed, propelled down the street by the racing current. It had too much momentum to stop. Plowing through the railroad sign as though it were a toothpick, the house was thrust into the ocean. Ray's stomach churned with each wave that lifted the house to the precipice before plummeting back downward. The waves, dark as ink, crashed against the windows three stories down and rain drenched his clothes.

At some point he'd passed out, succumbing to the unyielding headache. When he awoke his clothes felt damp against his skin. Touching a hand tenderly to his scalp, he felt a lump the size of a lemon at the back of his head. He tried to stand up but settled for an ungraceful squat when his vision went red. After a moment he realized it wasn't raining anymore. The soft, pink light of dawn warmed his face. He crawled back to the edge of the roof and looked down. Sure enough, the waves still lapped at the house's shingled walls, but it had somehow stayed afloat. Turning his head in a slow circle, he saw only the ocean on all sides, no land in sight. The tranquil waves caught the pink light at their brief peaks and rippled briefly before returning to a deep indigo. Ray stared at the waves for a long time.

The sound of the violin broke his trance. He snapped his head in the direction of the sound. Peering down to the other end of the roof, he saw people. Squinting, he could make out a couple with their arms around each other, swaying slowly. He inched closer, crawling along the roof. A woman rocked with a sleeping infant in her arms, her eyes closed, and her lips formed into a tired smile. An older man with a thick white mustache lay off to the side on his back with his hands clasped behind his head, one foot tapping to the rhythm. A knobbed pipe jutted out from under his mustache and every few seconds a small plume of smoke would drift up out of his mouth. They were listening, clustered around the crumbling brick chimney. On top of the chimney, a young boy played the violin. His nimble fingers worked the taut strings and the sound resonated off the bow he held tenderly in the other hand. There was something regal in the boy's countenance, a patrician grace in the way he captured the attention of the audience with his eyes closed and his mouth set in a focused frown. The sound followed no traceable pattern or melody, but simply poured off the instrument and into the air.

Standing, Ray took a moment to accustom himself to the gentle roll of the house as it bobbed with the rise and fall of the waves. He walked across

the roof and sat down between the mother and the old man. The swaying couple nodded at him and smiled but said nothing. Closing his eyes, he listened to the violin and yielded himself to the gentle, undulating rhythm of the house as it floated along.