

## Lighthouse

Your grandmother stole the Kinkade print from the Kroger bathroom. You didn't find out until the two of you were in the car rattling home. Like always, you drove slowly so she could admire the dogwood blooms. You assumed she'd snuck it in the cart while your back was turned. The road stretched before you like the pink fingers of a baby animal, full of its mother's milk and sleep-ready. Your grandmother ran her fingertips over the frame and grew sheepish. She leaned in.

"I just needed something pretty," she told you.

You were sixteen. You lived with your mother and your grandmother. When your mother asked about the Kinkade, you said you'd had money left over after paying your cell phone bill, so you got your grandmother a gift. Your mother raised her eyebrows and nodded but didn't protest when the two of you nailed it up that night.

Your grandmother died a month ago. You were somewhat prepared. The disease had taken many things, including its time. In the four years after the Kinkade, she became a gallery of strange behaviors.

After the funeral, you and your mother tossed most of her belongings. Although your mother wasn't a sentimental person, she saved a few items: the best china, a pair of reading glasses, a housecoat.

Now, you scrub the dishes, fold your laundry, monitor your mother's habits more and more carefully as she inches up in age, while the Kinkade lies color-up in a landfill. The lighthouse that serves as the focal point washes to a yellow whisper. Stains dot the glass. Raised patches wrinkle the laminate, revealing the wood to be plastic.

Cracks burrow through the glass of the frame, but the pieces remain together. The structure rests against the wall of an overturned kiddie pool, and in the hollow lives a family of rats. A mother and eight babies. They have nested among the bits of furniture and to-go cups. They are warm, and there is plenty of Styrofoam for teething. The mother rat stands sentry against cats and wolves, although she's never seen either.

When you miss the Kinkade, you think of scouring the landfill for it, but landfill excursions are for kindergarten field trips or environmentalists trying to prove a point to their families. You tell yourself you have inherited your mother's practicality.

When your grandmother died, that was that. You remind yourself of this every morning when you wake hours before your alarm. You remind yourself of this on nights when the lighthouse flashes across your eyelids.

On these nights when you slug out from under your blankets toward the kitchen, the rats huddle close. Sometimes it's storming, and you almost believe it's the thunder that woke you. You curl your toes between the couch cushions and click through the channels. You are waiting for something.

On these nights, the mother nurses her kits. Their earnest suckling drowns out the downpour until they sleep. The Kinkade shelters the family, and their ribs are warmed by each other's fur. Their mother listens, wearily, for nearby life.