

The Window

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Ned hopped out of the pickup truck and slammed the door shut so hard that the old mirror on the side of the door rattled. He walked around to the back of the trailer where the lawn equipment was hauled, a lawn mower and weed eater that Ned only used to cut the grass here at this house. Ned was just about to release the latch on the trailer gate when he caught something that looked off about the old house out of the corner of his eye. The upstairs window was broken, a starburst in the glass where something, probably a rock, had been thrown through.

Ned sighed and ran his hand through his sandy blonde hair. From down on the ground, Ned couldn't see much, but he knew he would have to check it out before he left today. He glanced at the For Sale sign that had been haphazardly stuck in the yard just a few days ago. A broken window wouldn't be good for sales, not that he had had many inquiries about this place anyway. Ned had no idea why his dad had kept this house, other than for the fact that it had been in their family for several generations. From what Ned understood, his great-great grandparents had built the house, but no one had lived in the house since Ned had been a small child. Now, at thirty-eight years old, Ned had been suddenly taxed with the general upkeep of the vacant house, in addition to the upkeep on his own condo, a newer building on the other side of the growing small town. Ned, who made his living as a practical, analytical accountant, saw no reason to hold onto a century-old, outdated, uninhabitable house.

The house was in need of some major TLC, none of which Ned really had time for. The house was barely visible from the main road and mostly hidden by overgrown shrubs in the front and vines on the sides. The house loomed in front of Ned the way only old houses can, the white clapboard siding faded and the shutters all missing at least two slats. The bottom step leading up

to the front porch was rotting, and Ned could only imagine what the interior of the house looked like.

Ned looked up to the sky. Clouds were building in the distance, but he thought if he hurried, he could get the grass cut and at least cover the window with something to stave off animals or the rain until he could come back, or better yet pay someone else, to fix the window permanently. Thunder rumbled off in the distance, but Ned decided since he was here now that he may as well just make a quick sweep with the lawn mower and be done. Ned worked the rusty gate of the trailer open and lowered the ramp. He had been using this same truck and trailer combo since he first started cutting the yard here with his dad. He wondered now if when he sold the house, he could just pawn off the truck and lawn equipment to the new owners.

Ned unloaded the lawn mower from the trailer and began to make quick sweeps of the yard, glancing up at the window every time he passed by. It was a relatively small hole, almost the size of a fist, and Ned wasn't sure he would have even noticed it if it weren't for the curtains fluttering in the window ever so slightly when he first drove up, which is what had caught his eye in the first place. Ned glanced up at the sky again and shifted into a higher gear, trying to speed up the grass cutting process before the rain hit. Ned hastily loaded the riding lawn mower back on the trailer and fished in the center console for the house key. Ned hadn't been in this house since he was six years old, and his father had never gone inside, at least not any of the times Ned had been here with him. Ned had no idea why his family insisted on cutting the yard for a house they never went inside of, not to mention why they insisted on keeping it and letting it get into a rundown state, but his family wasn't always known for their sound decisions.

Ned raked his hand through his hair again and sighed, finally finding the key amidst the coins and receipts and insurance cards that he never removed once they expired and a new card

was sent. He walked up the three steps of the front porch gingerly, his faith in the stairs slightly shaken due to the state of the first step. Satisfied, he finagled the key in the lock and pushed the front door open.

Ned hadn't realized he had been holding his breath until the door swung open easily, leading him right into the entry foyer and not into the path of any squatters, or possibly worse yet, rodents taking up residence. Ned exhaled and closed the front door behind him, the only light now coming in from the windows. He stood in place, transfixed by what he saw. The house was just as he remembered it from childhood, but not only that, it was just as he remembered it from the last time he was here on Christmas Eve. The day of the terrible accident. To the left of the foyer, in the living room, the artificial tree was still in the corner by the fireplace, the tinsel hanging from its branches. The majority of the tinsel was on the lower half of the tree because Ned had insisted on helping his grandmother decorate the tree that year. He had been six years old. Perched on an end table was an empty green glass, depression era glass or something like that. Ned couldn't remember what his grandmother used to call it exactly.

To the right of the foyer, in the dining room, the table was still set for dinner, the dinner that the family never sat down to eat that holiday. Ned shuddered at the idea of the Christmas ham still sitting in the oven. His grandmother's apron was still slung over the back of the chair where she had ripped it off in a frenzy, crying on the phone with the hospital after waiting for two hours for Ned's grandfather to return home from the store. He had only gone out to get more butter, the butter Ned's grandmother had admonished him for forgetting the first time he made the trip to the store. Ned's grandfather never did return home from the store the second time and instead had been hit by a drunk driver. In the days before cell phones, his grandmother had been worried sick, pacing back and forth between the dining room and the living room, growing more

frantic with each passing minute. A trip to the store should have taken twenty minutes, tops. Ned remembered his father trying to calm her down, coming up with every excuse in the world for why Ned's grandfather could be taking so long. He could have run into someone he knew, he could have had a flat tire. It was only after the wail of the sirens in the distance that Ned's dad had stopped making up reasons and just sat silently with Ned's grandma on the couch, sipping bourbon and trying to distract Ned with toys, while Ned's mother attempted to make small talk with his grandma, asking advice about laundry detergent, or something that had seemed equally mundane to six-year-old Ned.

Ned's stomach turned at the memory, the whole scenario seeming much more horrific as an adult. The house stood frozen in time, a museum that only Ned's family knew about and a potential buyer wouldn't want to see. Ned's grandmother had gone to live with Ned's aunt in Florida after that fateful holiday. After inheriting the house himself, Ned had listed it almost immediately, trusting his real estate agent when she had suggested he sell it "as is," which Ned assumed was her way of hinting that the house would be bulldozed down, or at the very least gutted and revamped.

Straight ahead of the foyer was the flight of stairs leading to the second floor where the bedrooms were. Ned placed his hand on the wide mahogany railing and gingerly tested the bottom step with his foot. He did this with the first three or four steps, his faith in the craftsmanship growing with each ascent, until he safely reached the top of the stairs and was standing on the upstairs landing. It was darker up here on the second level, and Ned pulled his phone out of his pocket to use the flashlight app to light his way to the bedroom with the broken window. Ned knew exactly which room it was-the same room he slept in when he spent the night with his grandparents, the same room his own father had slept in as a boy. Ned felt along the

wall, still using his phone for light in the quickly darkening hallway. He would have to find something to use as a makeshift cover for the window quickly until he could get the window replaced, if that even mattered since he was selling it in this condition anyway.

Ned entered the bedroom, then stopped short for the second time that evening. Lying on the floor in front of the window was a baseball. But not just any baseball. An older baseball, one that looked to be the same age and condition as the one he used to play with in this very back yard. But that was impossible. When was the last time anyone had played baseball in this yard? Certainly not the last time he had been here, that cold and snowy Christmas Eve. Ned crossed the room and picked up the ball, feeling the weight in his hand. He tossed it from one hand to the next, looking out the window as he did so. Where had this come from? The odds of someone driving up to the house and throwing a baseball in to break just one window didn't seem very likely. Nothing else on the house seemed to be damaged or broken, at least not any more than was from normal weathering.

Ned set the ball down gently on the small twin bed and looked around the room. Everything was still intact in this room too, right down to the baseball bat leaning against the far wall and the navy-blue bedspread covering the twin-sized bed. Ned looked around for something to patch the window with, at least until he could get back tomorrow to board it up. He opened the closet door slowly and shined the phone's light in, unsure of what he would find, alive or dead behind the door.

Ned settled on a box and scooted it out to dump its contents on the floor. It was heavier than he thought it would be. Ned opened the flaps of the box and stepped back, waiting for something to crawl out. When nothing did, he peered in and saw that the box had stacks upon stacks of pictures. Ned sat down on the floor next to the box, temporarily forgetting all about the

window and began sorting through the pictures. Some were of him as a small child, some were of his father, and some were not labeled, but looked to be as old as the house was, or older. Ned found birthday pictures from the first six years of his life and pictures of his father as a child and as a teenager with what had to have been his first car. In one of the pictures, Ned's dad stood proudly in a letter jacket on the football field, arm in arm with a young girl in a long gown. Ned had completely forgotten about his dad's glory days on the football field. Ned found pictures of his parents' wedding and shortly after, in the same little stack, pictures of Ned as a newborn and then toddling around this house. There were pictures of Ned and his father and grandfather playing baseball in the back yard of this house, and pictures of Ned's grandmother and his own mother snapping peas on the back porch. It was only when Ned's phone battery got low and the battery icon turned from white to red on his screen that he realized how long he had been sitting there.

Shoving the box back into the closet, he vowed to come back the very next day with the proper tools and at least a piece of plywood to cover the window. Ned made his way downstairs and out to the truck, deep in thought all the way home.

Ned tossed and turned all night, the abandoned Christmas tree in the corner and the images of the pictures in the box flooding his mind. Finally, after waking up once again, this time just thirty minutes before his alarm was set to go off to get up for work, Ned got out of bed. He knew what he had to do. He dressed quietly and lightly kissed his sleeping, pregnant wife on her forehead, then tiptoed out the door so as not to wake her. Waving to his neighbor who was also coming out the front door of his own condominium, most likely also in a mad dash for work, Ned speed walked across the parking lot and launched himself into his car. If he drove quickly, he could make it across town and back before he had to be in the office.

Ned raced zipped through the narrow streets and turned onto the side road that would lead him to what he had always thought of as his grandparents' house, but was now his house. Once in the driveway he threw his car in park and jogged over to the For Sale sign in the yard. Yanking the sign out of the yard, he jogged back to his car and tossed the sign in the trunk of his car. As he drove down the driveway, he took one last glance in his rearview mirror. The curtain upstairs fluttered at the window.