

Household Gods

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AMY RUNS ONE OF THE KIDS' ALPHABET magnets—a red B, slightly chewed—along the living room wall, hoping to detect a wall stud under the plaster. She pauses when she feels a faint tug—or is that just an irregularity in the wall? Worth a try. She hammers a nail just above the spot. Yes! The nail meets solid wood behind the plaster. Who knew that an alphabet magnet worked as well as those doohickeys from Home Depot?

Lifting her framed poster, she guides the picture wire over the nail, then straightens the frame. She steps back to admire the picture, which she found in a discount bin—no, discount crock—at the Colonial Williamsburg gift shop. It's a typical

folk-artsy, fruit-filled still life, except the quirky nineteenth-century artist, Henry Church, added two frenzied monkeys to the arrangement; they knock over crystal dishes and snatch at tumbling fruit as a tiny policeman rushes in to restore order. It's a weird picture—post-modern yet primitive, Amy decides. The colors are cheerful—bright greens and oranges—and the monkeys evoke her reckless toddler daughters, so Amy had to buy the poster. Finally, after a year, it's on the wall.

Maybe cheap art is the thing that will finally make her house feel like a home. She and Jim outgrew their apartment a year ago, when the twins started to walk, but their new house still feels like a big box crammed with stuff—

furniture, electronics, appliances, toys—rather than a home. Something is missing.

Which must be her fault. She's the one who quit work to care for the girls. She's the one who puts "homemaker" on tax forms, although it always feels presumptuous. She is no Martha Stewart. Coffee-filter roses? Really? But she makes an effort. Just yesterday, she bought red pillows for the sofa.

Maybe the house is just too new to feel like home. It has none of the character of those old houses she toured in Williamsburg. Those were homes—so solid, with rooms on a cozy, human scale, and wainscoting painted rich colors from nature—stone-blue and moss-green and squash-yellow. Elaborately turned balusters lined the well-worn steps, and the windows glinted with bubbly imperfections. Who wouldn't prefer a charming house like that to a vinyl-coated pseudo-colonial with an out-sized garage and ridiculous grids snapped into every window, plastically hinting at mullions? And, of course, the Williamsburg houses had large brick hearths, radiating warmth from the center of the household. What is the modern equivalent? The microwave?

No, she decides, glancing at her daughters; it's the television. Ever since she brought them home from the park, the twins have been watching *Clifford the Big Red Dog*. Transfixed. They don't even blink.

She's reminded of the day last month when she watched a young couple move into the huge new house across the street. They arrived before the moving truck and ran to open their grand front door flanked by waist-high concrete urns into which their real estate agent had cannily popped listing pots of red geraniums to drive the sale. The couple then scurried back to their car and gingerly removed a flat-screen television from the back seat—too precious to entrust to the moving van, apparently. Carefully, they proceeded up the walk

together, turning sideways to fit the large screen between the urns and through the doorway. They leaned the television gently against the wall of their foyer, then engaged in a long conversation, with gestures in various directions, presumably about where they should set it up. They had no furniture with them, no groceries, no suitcases—just a television, which they seemed to venerate. For the first time in years, Amy thought of her high school Latin class, of pious Aeneas and his fellow Trojans risking life and limb to transport their cherished household gods to their new home in Rome. A television, no matter how large, seemed a pretty shoddy substitute.

Amy now tries to distract the twins from their program by announcing, "Hey, girls! Nice picture of you on the wall!"

No response. Bracing herself for their wails, she marches over to the television and switches it off. "Enough for today," she says.

"Not enough!" screams Lizzie. "Not enough!"

Ellie throws herself onto her stomach and keens "Cwi-i-i-fford" into the carpet.

Amy sighs. What has that gargantuan red galoot done to her children? It will take her twenty minutes to calm them down again.

She grabs the girls and plunks them on the sofa, one bawling lump on either side of her. She curls her arms around their shoulders, ready to restrain them if they make a break for the television.

"Did I ever tell you the story of the two naughty monkeys?" she asks. Lizzie's gasps begin to subside. A flicker of interest crosses Ellie's tear-stained face. They relax against her a little, still sniffing resentfully.

"Well, once upon a time, there were two monkeys who were tired of living in a coconut tree . . ."

"What they names?" demands Lizzie.

"Um, Milly and Silly. And one day, Milly and



Silly flung their coconut shells onto the ground and crept up to Mrs. McGillicuddy's open window . . ."

By the time the monkeys polished off Mrs. McGillicuddy's macaroni, dumped her Nestle's Quik onto the carpet, smashed a few heirloom dishes, and tore her fanciest silk dresses because they can't for the life of them figure out zippers, the girls have forgiven Amy and grown drowsy. Amy lugs them to their beds, tucks them in, and instructs them to nap like good little monkeys.

They are up again, recharged, within the hour, and underfoot as Amy tries to prepare spaghetti on the back burners of the stove. Jim arrives home from work and pokes his head into the kitchen.

"I like the picture," he says, before returning to the living room to collapse into his favorite armchair. He grabs the TV remote, and the girls scramble onto his lap.

"Need help cooking?" Jim shouts over a newscaster offering her chipper take on flooding in the Midwest. Next up, she promises cheerfully, childhood obesity.

"Oh, turn the damn thing off," begs Amy, swiping a damp dishcloth across the Ragu splattered across the stovetop.

"Huh?" asks Jim.

"Turn it off. Can't you play with the girls? That thing has been on half the day."

"Just let me get the scores."

"Fine, but then turn it off. It's sucking our souls out of this house."

OK, that was a bit extreme. Why begrudge him a little mindless relaxation? She peeks into the living room. It's nice how the girls are cuddling with Jim. But all three of them are doing that catatonic, no-blinking thing again, staring

at a yogurt commercial like they're sharing an out-of-body experience.

Surely there's a better alternative. What would any decent colonial Williamsburg family be doing at 6:30 on a Thursday evening? Amy envisions muslin-aproned Mother stirring venison and root vegetables in an iron pot hanging over the kitchen fireplace, maybe pausing to check on some just-dipped bayberry candles dangling aromatically from a rack. Mother glances through a pale-green doorframe into the main gathering room where Father, just in from the fields or forge, sits before the roaring hearth. The children, on little wooden stools, surround him—the girls working on their samplers, earnestly dedicating themselves to cross-stitched birds and slightly crooked Bible verse; and the boys whittling something. Maybe whistles. Yes, peeling thin bark from small sticks with their pocket knives, poking out the soft plith, and tossing the bits into the fire. Father, like the Romans before him honoring their household gods, reads aloud from his massive, leather-bound Bible—something Old Testament, but not too frightening because the children are small. Maybe Noah and the ark, glossing over the drownings and destruction? A Psalm with sheep in it? Yes, the children would like sheep. Father then reminisces about his own hardworking parents who built their house from timber they cleared from their land. Father's stories draw the family together, transmit ancient values, link generation to generation.

What would that colonial family think of her own family, right now sitting in front of an electronic box, quietly losing their souls to a YoPlait commercial?

"Hey, turn off the TV," Amy insists. She should get rid of that thing—maybe next week, after the last episode of *The Gilded Age*. She is for sure canceling the cable subscription tomorrow, though.

Jim mutes the sportscast theme music. "What did you say?"

"Could you please do something else with the girls?"

He glances at the baseball scores then switches off the TV. "Sure, what?"

"Tell a story. Read a book. Play a game. Whittle."

"Whittle?"

"Here, try this." She scoots into the living room, flips up the lid of the toy box, and pulls out the girls' favorite stuffed animals—Curious George and Winnie-the-Pooh—and their corresponding board books. She hands her husband the books and perches Pooh and George on the back of his chair—household gods in washable plush. She runs back to the kitchen to turn down the burner beneath the plopping spaghetti sauce.

Jim pries open square cardboard pages stuck together with residual juice, clears his throat dramatically to make the girls laugh, then reads, "This is Georges . . ."

The girls grab their stuffed animals from the back of the chair and shove their felt noses into the book.

"I didn't know they could read," gasps Jim, and the girls laugh hysterically. They bounce their animals up the buttons on Jim's shirt, but he keeps reading, unperturbed. The girls eventually calm down and snuggle against him, fascinated by George's mishaps. Even the framed monkeys above their heads, frozen mid-leap, seem attentive.

Amy listens, too, as she sets the table with shatter-proof melamine and cheap paper napkins and fills the plastic sippy cups with milk. No hand-thrown crockery, no homespun tablecloth, no crooked bayberry candles. No brick hearth with glowing logs, either, but she could swear the house feels warmer. Could it be the stories? The gods must approve. ❁