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The Harcourt Street House Isn't Just a Dream

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This is an excerpt from MacKenzie's recent memoir, ***Dreaming Myself into Old Age*** (Shanti Arts, 2023).

Before I married M in 1992 but was dating him, I'd lived for ten years in San Rafael, California, in a charming one-bedroom cottage. Though it no longer exists, it does live on in my dreams, appearing frequently and in various configurations, making me wonder what symbolism it holds for me. But first, here is the story of what happened to that place.

At 9:00 a.m., during a Thanksgiving visit to my family in Calgary, I received a long-distance phone call from my then companion—now husband—M from California. We had been seeing each other for two years, and he usually called at night before we went to bed, so it was odd to hear from him in the morning.

He said, "I'm at your neighbor's place. There's been an accident."

His voice sounded strained, tight.

I asked, "What happened?"

"There's been a fire at your cottage."

"How bad?"

"Very bad. Everything's gone."

The fire suddenly was there, on that long-distance line, roaring out of control, eating up everything in its way, rushing on ahead. Like a wild animal that's been contained for too long, it was on the loose.

"Did Spook get out?" Spook was my beloved black cat.

"No. But the firemen say he would have died of smoke inhalation and not suffered. We've already buried him."

For ten years I'd rented that eighty-year-old cottage, the longest I'd lived anywhere. It sat under a canopy of trees in a quiet neighborhood of older houses, and from every window I saw green foliage. I could forget I lived a fifteen-minute walk from downtown San Rafael. I could forget I was in an urban area at all.

The cottage once was a guesthouse for one of the larger homes in a neighborhood flooded by elm trees. In the winter, I spent many nights in front of the fireplace, framed by built-in bookshelves, watching blue and yellow flames chase each other, never thinking then that similar flames would one day destroy my home. My eyes flickered over the well-used books overflowing the shelves, the subjects close to my heart: meditation, mythology, religion, psychology, dreams, poetry, art, fiction.

I'd found many of these texts in used bookstores, a habit I'd learned as a child from my grandpa. He'd taken me to Jaffe's Used Books in Calgary when I was barely tall enough to see over the tables that held comic books and old manuscripts. I remember the moldy smell of the place mixed with oil they used on the wood floors. Books forever became associated for me with mildew, something decaying. But since I'd lived on a farm, decay wasn't a negative thing. I knew that rot could lead to new growth. Decay

is part of a process, not the end of one, just as aging is.

Not long before he died, Grandpa came to me for help. He was renting a room in East Calgary. He didn't have contact with his sons or my mother, who wasn't living nearby at the time. Unable to speak because of a growth in his throat, he wrote me notes in perfect Pitman shorthand (he'd been a schoolmaster in Scotland until he moved to Canada in his early forties), asking for help. I called other family members, and we had him hospitalized.

But before he left, he gave me a book he was carrying in his hip pocket, *The Vicar of Wakefield*. He'd written notes to himself in it, my last link to him, something I treasured.

It had been on one of my bookshelves.

Over the years, I spent many uplifting hours in that cottage—reading, reflecting, writing. Taking time to prepare and eat tasty meals, to visit with friends, to have deep conversations. To paint, sculpt, play the piano and guitar—to sing. It was my sanctuary, and it had become M's as well.

When I first moved there, I had a dream welcoming me to the neighborhood. Neighbors brought me gifts, people I'd never seen before, and the feeling in the dream was very positive, as if I were part of a community. Even the trees welcomed me, leaves along the tree-lined street whispering, especially after dark.

For the first month, I sat up every night until after midnight, making floral curtains for the windows and French doors, decorating the house to fit its European country ambiance. Before moving in, I'd painted the kitchen and bathroom and cleaned every corner, claiming it as my own. T, my new neighbor and the person I paid rent to (his grandmother had lived there before I moved in) had put new linoleum on the kitchen floor.

A huge bay window gave me a view of the junipers, hawthorne, creeping baby roses, and hydrangeas growing in the front yard. And from there I could watch my neighbors working outside, learning their habits, their rhythms. They became part of mine.

I finished my first master's in the humanities while living there, leading to my teaching career. I also made a deeper commitment to writing by almost completing a second master's in creative writing before the fire happened, which I finished the following spring. But most important, M and I started our relationship while I was living in that house.

Over the years, I filled the cottage with my own artwork and that of my family. From one wall hung my youngest brother's relief of a horse pressing to be free of its frame. On another my own answering images hung, in dialogue with the gifts my sister had sent from Greece, Egypt, and other travels—an ancient cross with a place for candles, a hand-crafted kitchen witch that oversaw my cooking, a holder for fireplace matches. My mother's colorful, striped, hand-knitted tea cozies kept my teapot warm, and the things she made at the senior citizen's center—decoupage and heads of Beethoven and two children—made her a palpable presence.

I reconstructed my past in that place, reshaping an earlier time in my life in the things I kept around me. We all do this to a certain extent; I'm not suggesting that my impulse to do so was extraordinary. But I think a child from a broken home may need more reminders of family and friends. Consequently, I kept mementos over the years that could help me rebuild a life. I was the family historian, aware of the importance of letters, photos, and other keepsakes.

On my own after leaving Calgary at fifteen, from then on, I'd lived some distance from my Canadian home. With family members so far away, I treasured the things I'd collected that reminded me of them. One time I returned to California from a trip to Calgary with a lamp that had been in my room as a child. Not much else had survived from that time or place, so the lamp was even more precious. It had a black marble base, a bronze stem, and still appeared solid, though that home had long ago disintegrated.

Another time, my favorite uncle had insisted I take an old oil painting I admired that he'd brought with him from the Isle of Skye, his and my mother's birthplace. It was a still life, painted by an amateur but filled with character. The somber browns and blacks and umbers captured something of my uncle, a dour but lovable Scot who often seemed dark and brooding, longing for his homeland. In a way, he'd never left Scotland and represented that place for me.

Actually, when I say "home" and "family," I see how the impulse to construct one goes deep, deeper than I'd realized or understood until then. I not only had packed that house with memories—scrapbooks of my son's achievements and artwork, letters to and from family and close friends that went back to when I first left home, daily journals that I'd written in for years—but I'd tried in some way to reconstruct a family.

Unconsciously, I also had been recreating the gracious living that once filled the house I walked into at four years of age, the year Mother married Chester, my stepfather, and we moved to his farm. My inherited grandmother, my stepfather's mother, had taste and a developed sensibility. I'd never met her; I only had photographs, letters, her collections of china doll dishes and fine keepsakes, and my stepfather's stories to feed my imagination, to help me build a past that lived on in my cottage. But her spirit had somehow entered her belongings, and she became real to me—alive.

The Canadian writer Alice Munro claims that a woman is her home. If it's destroyed, more has been lost than just a few objects money can replace; a life has been grievously disrupted. Once I learned of the fire, my most immediate concerns, after my cat, were for my journals, writing projects, artwork, books, and photographs. If anything had held my "self," these things did. I felt I could survive the loss of personal belongings and eventually replace them. But the journals chronicled my daily life, a record of dreams and reflections, an ongoing dialogue with myself that provided an anchor in the midst of life's storms.

The writing projects—poetry, fiction, non-fiction—chronicled my artistic life and gave expression to my imagination. The artwork—sculpture, collages, paintings—captured a part of myself my writing couldn't. And the books I'd collected since I first developed an intellectual curiosity in my late teens each had my mark in them, passages underlined or highlighted, jottings in the margins, a record of my involvement with the authors and their ideas. It was intolerable to think I'd lost them too.

The photographs—I needn't explain their importance. It's the one thing everyone dreads losing. In my case, no one else had the pictures I'd rescued after the family had scattered so those images wouldn't be lost.

Fortunately, I had taken with me to Calgary the whole manuscript of a novel I was working on, aptly named *Traveling Light*. I'd hoped to find some time to write while I was there. *Traveling Light* gave me something, at least, to build on, a house of words that I could find shelter in. But it couldn't make up for the other losses.

Somehow, I got through that day after M's alarming call, moving around in a trance. I visited a walk-in clinic to get antibiotics for the bronchitis I was struggling with. I packed to go home, treasuring the few clothes I'd brought, now all the wardrobe I had. I tried to fathom my loss, but I couldn't comprehend what had happened. It didn't seem real. My adult son, mother, sister, brother-in-law, and brother all tried to comfort me, but I was inconsolable.

My son—whom I had driven to countless Little League and Babe Ruth games—said, "Geez, Mum, you've been thrown a curve." A curve? The image slammed into my mind, temporarily distracting me. All those years I'd watched him train to improve his pitching so he could throw wicked curves that would fool batters. It hadn't bothered me that the curves he threw might confuse other players, strike them out. But what did it mean that life had thrown me a curve? I didn't know I was up to bat.

I was unable to sleep all that night, prowling my sister's living room, flopping down on the sofa periodically and closing my eyes for a few minutes, trying to pass out. Thinking. All night thinking. Running over in my mind what had happened. Trying to imagine what the next day would bring when I would have to directly face my losses. I kept thinking of things that were gone, that I'd never see again, frantically

trying to resuscitate them in my memory. If I could just hold them in my mind, they couldn't be destroyed.

Still, it was like losing a thousand loves all at once—all the correspondence I'd saved over the years from family and friends, as valuable to me as my journals; the huge impressionistic painting I loved of a shoreline that hung in my bedroom; the print of *The Yellow Cow* by Franz Marc that M and I had bought at the Guggenheim on a recent trip to New York, a remembrance of that visit. I hadn't had a chance to frame it yet. The pictures of family I'd hung on my walls. So many sentimental things. Useless to anyone else. My life.

M met me at the San Francisco airport with a bouquet of flowers and his welcoming arms. We drove straight to San Rafael. Nothing could have prepared me for the burned out, blackened shell barely standing, for the utter ruin, a gaping hole in the street.

The city had blocked off the house and yard with orange plastic, like some crazy gift-wrapping, a touch of black humor. I stood there, looking into my former living room, feeling terribly exposed. The remains of my spinet piano leaned precariously on one leg. I slowly walked around the circumference of the house, trying to take it all in, contents of shelves and bureaus and closets dumped into the yard, much of it still sopping wet. I kept running into pages from journals or file folders, edges blackened, ink running. My words dissolving, pouring off the page.

Henry James claims our possessions are extensions of ourselves. In *The Portrait of a Lady,* he asks, "What shall we call our 'self'? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us—and then it flows back again."

But what happens if those things are destroyed? What happens then to one's self? Is it irrevocably damaged? How can it flow back again if the possessions that contained it are gone?

I suppose the fire could be seen as a preliminary run for my own death, this letting go of material possessions, the detachment. Isn't it the emptiness associated with death that fills us with dread? A coffin is empty until we fill it.

Several months later, I remembered something I'd totally forgotten about—my mother's wedding ring. She'd given it to me one Christmas when I also had been back in Calgary for a family visit. She'd said, "I want you to have this, Lily, in memory of me and your stepfather."

When I'd first put on the ring, I'd felt an overwhelming rush of emotion, as if I was somehow included in the circle of the ring. Recalling that it too had been destroyed, lost forever, I experienced another wave of grief. Mother had reset the stones, replacing two of the tiny diamonds with rubies my son's first long-term girlfriend had given her. The rubies reminded me of the garnets Mother had inherited from my stepfather's mother, set in a bracelet and earrings, one of the few things that had been rescued from an earlier fire on the farm where I had lived as a girl.

I'd looked at them longingly then, in love with their deep, red color and the dull luster of the stones. A fire seemed to burn inside them. I would put the bracelet around my tiny wrist and imagine being dressed elegantly, like the Victorian ladies I saw in old magazines that my stepfather's mother had kept.

After the Harcourt fire, I had denied losing the ring, blocking it from my memory. It represented all I had collected at Harcourt Street, the home I had finally created for myself out of fragments from my earlier life. ✿