A Memory of an Old House

I have this memory that seems to resurface every so often. I don’t remember how old I was, but I know it must have been a long time ago. It was of a house: my great-grandfather’s house. I remember the drive up to his place took us through these winding turns and twisted roads that always made my sister carsick. I remember the long driveway my mom would pull into, leading to the house. Watching as her SUV snaked along the narrow concrete always filled me with a vague sense of dread.

I remember we entered without knocking. We had a key of our own for some reason. The inside smelled like old soap and loneliness. My mom made me take my shoes off before coming inside. Half of the floor was a cold off-white tile, while the other half sprouted beige shag carpeting that plumed with dust when I shuffled through it. There was a small fireplace in the center of the living room that was never used. A thin chain curtain hung over the mouth. I remember thinking it was strange how the fireplace felt colder than the rest of the house.

My mom went through the kitchen, restocking the fridge with groceries, tossing the rotted food, counting out the pills for each day of the week in a yellow rectangle case. While she worked, I would sometimes go into the backyard. I liked how the rough cement scraped on the bottom of my feet. I remember there was a cumquat tree in the back. My sister and I would pick a bunch and throw the orange pellets at each other. I tried eating one once, but it was too sour for me. I’d had to wash my mouth out in the sink to try and stop the citrus burn.

I didn’t go outside that day. I think it was overcast or something, and the cement only felt nice when it was warm. Instead, I played inside. I somersaulted across the carpet, clicked around the
puzzle pieces of a wooden parrot, tried touching the cottage cheese ceiling while balancing on the back of the recliner, little games to keep myself occupied.

My mom told me to find my great-grandfather and tell him that she was making dinner for him. I didn’t want to find him. It felt like a game of hide-and-seek, except, normally you’re only afraid when you’re the one hiding. I don’t know exactly what I was afraid of. The darkness, maybe. Attached to the living room was a hall with five doors. The light in the hallway was always broken, making the path seem much longer than it was. I checked the bathroom first. Then the guest room. Then the office. I finally got up the courage to sneak into my great-grandfather’s room. The curtain was slightly pulled back, allowing a sliver of light into the vacant space. He wasn’t there. I remember looking at the door at the end of the hallway. It was the room we were never supposed to go into: my great-grandmother’s. She died in that room.

I touched the brass doorknob, turning it as quietly as I could. I remember feeling a chill in the doorway. It felt colder than the fireplace. I peeked into the room. My grandfather sat in the middle of the bed, facing the back wall. He didn’t seem to be looking at anything in particular, just the emptiness.

I didn’t tell him that my mom was making dinner. I didn’t say anything. I just stood there as a time traveler, watching in silence as he sifted through the past. Searching for something no longer there.