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Just Around the Corner Down the Hall

One day the man will look back to this young boy, who bounces a red rubber ball around and around, and he will wonder. He will remember, among other things, counting, but will not remember who it was that had taught him his simple numbers. Maybe it was his mother, he will think, or his father, or maybe it was the old German woman who sits in the front room of that Portland house, her bathrobe tied with a piece of cord about her waist, and making herself ready for bed.

He stares at the ball that rests upon the palm of his hand.
“Five,” he says.

He knows the ball well. It is made of hard spongy rubber painted slick fire engine red, but it has seen so much use that the surface is cracking and flaking away. Each time he bounces the ball it strikes the floor with a solid slap and then he takes a step and counts. He loves numbers, so precise, so orderly.

“Six,” he says, and the old woman sits in the front room on a faded over-stuffed couch and strokes her long grey hair with an ivory handled brush.

He bounces the ball from the front room into the hall way, down the hall, through the kitchen and then back into the front room. Each time he enters the living room he calls out a number keeping track of his passage. His goal has always been one hundred. When he reaches one hundred he will start over again and it will not be

until much later that the man, who was this young boy, will know that here began a pattern. In his mind, he will return to this house time and time again, but the answers that he seeks are muted. The man will know that somehow this old woman sits at the apex of his mystery and he will want to know about her. He will think that the answers may lie in the memory of simple things. He would ask of the old woman, if he could, what is the color of your eyes, or why is your hair so long and what does it feel like to touch, to glide the brush through the liquid strands of silk.

Briefly, ever so briefly, he will think of another woman. A woman with long brown hair and he will remember her hair drifting and floating in the wind, catching at her eyelashes and tangling within her smile. He will remember how her hair caught in his own smile, held fast at the corners of her lips and sticking to the moistness of his tongue.

“Seven,” he says, and he quickens his pace as he starts down the long hallway, afraid that the ball may slip from his control and become lost in the dark. He moves toward the light of the kitchen and the sweet smell of her homemade bread and then, there she is again in the front room.

“Eight,” he says, and each time he enters the room and blurts out a number it startles the old German woman. She pauses for a moment breaking the rhythmic brush of her hair. Her head is tilted at an angle as if listening for some sound.

“I want to know,” he says.

“What?” she says.

“When will he be back?”

“Tomorrow,” she says.

“Nine,” he says, and it will take him thirty-seven steps to complete his circle, sometimes thirty-nine, and now and then, his numbers become confused. It angers him when he loses count so he yells louder and louder as he enters the living room hoping that his cadence will resound again in his head as he completes his next passage, but there are always the distractions. There is a fear in the long hallway, the sweet smell of bread in the kitchen and then the front room, filled with things to catch the eye, the fireplace and fire,

the dolls that line the mantle all richly dressed in brightly colored crocheted clothes, her swaying back and forth as she strokes her hair, and then the pictures. He knows each person in each picture arranged upon the wall. She said that he is the spitting image of one man who hangs motionless, suspended, but then he knows the picture looks nothing like his father.

“When will he be back?” he says.

“Tomorrow,” she says.

“Ten,” he says, and somewhere below the sound of her words, he believes he detects a lie, for he thinks she said the very same thing yesterday and the day before.

As he turns the corner and starts down the hall, he thinks about that morning, how he and his father had walked hand in hand in the alleyway, scuffing the frost from the grass, leaving footprints on the cold ground. He tries to remember exactly, every detail so that he will keep it right.

His father stands over him pointing to the back door. His breath is puffs of fog in the morning air.

“That is your grandmother’s house,” his father says, “go there, knock on her door. Tell her who you are.”

“Aren’t you coming?”

“Tell her I will be by later,” his father says.

“Eleven,” he says, and as he starts down the hall he thinks about the first time he saw her face and tries to remember exactly what it was that he felt.

His knuckles are timid on the door and he is shy in introducing himself. She bends down, her face in front of his, her strong hands upon his shoulders and when she understands, he watches her eyes as her gaze looks beyond him and searches up and down the alley.

“Twelve,” he says, and as he starts down the hallway he thinks of another house with a heavy door and his mother standing at an ironing board staring out the window.

He listens to the snap of his mother’s gum and the hiss of her iron as he mimics her actions with a handkerchief and a heavy book on the coffee table. Already her face is vague as if lost in the steam that rises from his father’s shirt draped so precariously.

“Ghosts in the hallway,” he says.

"What?" she says.

"Ghosts."

"Nonsense," she says.

"Thirteen," he says.

She takes up his hand and he feels a slight shudder run through her body as they start down the hall. "It's time for sleep," she says.

She will go to bed each night, with her hair loose, free, and in the morning he will watch as she sits in front of the mirror and braids it, wraps it round and round in a bun, and pins it to the top of her head and it will not be until much later that the man, who was this young boy, will look back into that Portland house and try to understand. Something was left behind, discarded, dropped slowly in the rooms of that Portland house. Now and then he will walk in the footsteps of that young boy collecting the scraps of memory that will help him piece it together.

Briefly, ever so briefly, he will think of another young boy and how this child has the color of his own eyes and the cleft of his own chin, but the thick straight brown hair of the boy's mother. He will wonder what toys and thoughts occupy that child's time.

They sit at the breakfast table. She had broken her arm a year ago and the doctor had made her buy the red rubber ball. The ball is firmly in her left hand and her tea cup in her right. He eyes the ball as she squeezes and releases it over and over again, the cracks appearing and disappearing with each compression. Now and then she will glance at the clock. She reads her fortune in the bits of tea leaves that have collected in patterns and flecks.

"Read mine," he says.

She looks to the tiny scraps of leaves stuck to the side of his porcelain mug and talks about money, mail and strangers.

"And my father?" he says.

"Nothing," she says.

He takes his cup and pours a few drops of tea and swishes it around and around. "Again," he says.

She lays the ball on the white table cloth and takes up his cup with both hands. For a long time she sits silent and then, "Tomorrow," she says. "Tomorrow."

He takes the ball from the table and begins bouncing and counting, that solid thump echoing in the hallway. She moves to the rocking chair and her knitting, occasionally muttering as she drops a stitch.

“One,” he says, and there is the darkness and the fear, then the smell of bread.

“Two,” he says, and there are the bright dolls, the creak of her chair and ticking of her needles.

He thinks, if only he could be sure, the footprints, his father in the fog with the morning sun at his back, too bright to see his face, the hand pointing the way, the door, her fleeting glance, and lips that seem to move oddly. “Tomorrow,” they say.

“Three,” he says, and there are the dolls, the ticking needles, the hallway with dark wooden floors, spaces between the boards and dust trapped within the cracks, and then the kitchen with yellowed linoleum, the smell of bread, and the morning tea cups.

“Get it right,” he says.

“What?”

“Four,” he says.

Today he is particularly unhappy. She doesn't know that each morning while she bathes, he slips out the back door and through the iron gate and checks in the alleyway for footprints in the frost. He checks for the tracks of a man who might pace at night too timid to knock upon the door. This morning there was no frost, only dew, and even though he examined his own steps there was no way to be certain whether his father had been there or not.

“Five,” he says, and the door bell rings.

She opens the door and a man looms in the threshold. He cannot see the man's face so he squints into the sunlight pouring through the doorway and holds his breath.

“These are for you,” a man says.

“For me?” she says.

“Six,” the boy says.

He watches as a man rolls in three large cardboard tubs and she opens each one and looks inside.

“Come see,” she says.

Each one is neatly packed with his clothes, his toys. They are oddly familiar, but the smell of them is not quite right and the toys are not as colorful as he remembers.

"They are not mine," he says.

"What?" she says.

"When?" he says.

She sits back in her chair and takes up her knitting. He listens to the sound of her rocking and the ticking of her needles. "Tomorrow," she says.

"You lie," he says.

"What?"

"Seven," he says, and the circling will continue and one day the man will look back on this young boy and wonder what feeling lies just below the memory of that dull echoing sound from the red rubber ball. He will wonder, among other things, how many times he has walked a pattern and arranged people to fit his simple play. How many times has he tried this or that, until now his hallway is filled with ghosts, specter behind specter, their features blurred, bleeding one through another. He will wonder what his intentions were when he first picked up that ball and took that initial step? Was it meant to be one step from or one step toward that old German woman who sits in the front room of that Portland house, brushing her hair and making herself ready for bed?