

## PRAIRIE VILLAGE

WE ARRIVE In the middle of the night, like thieves, only the U-Haul truck parked in the driveway is loaded not empty. Armed with a ring of keys, my fiancé Jeff tries to fit or pick the front door lock. After seven years we finally move from our college town to a city I never thought twice about, only to find ourselves locked out of the house we have rented in an aging suburb. Any moment the Neighborhood Watch will appear to arrest us. “Is this symbolic?” I ask, laughing. Frustrated and swearing Jeff tells me that not everything is symbolic. I know better—Halloween weekend and our black cat glowers from a “pet taxi.” The key turns, but the door sticks; Jeff gives it a shove and bursts into the living room. Welcome home.

I wrinkle my nose at the smell of the newly refinished floors, the same floors whose luminous smoothness convinced me to rent the house despite the price and the wallpaper in the dining room. We walk through the rooms, switching on lights, turning on faucets, opening closets and closing them again. The house is larger than my memory of it—and the kitchen smaller. I turn on the front burner of the stove and watch the blue ring of flame for a few seconds. The stove is marvelous, built like a Chevy truck from the fifties, indestructible and fun to drive. I open the oven door, a reflex from heart and hearth. Inside the oven is well-scrubbed blue black, speckled with white, a small galaxy and void. Hungry, I remember the pizza a friend made for us the night before, as we packed the last of our apartment. We ate it sitting on the worn oak floor, drinking cheap champagne (having reasoned that two bad bottles were better than one good one), the stereo echoing in the bareness. I close the oven door.

I have that restless, edgy feeling a long drive in the dark gives, a drive that took longer than its three hundred fifteen miles should have. I followed the day-glow logo of the U-Haul all the way, listening to country music and evangelical wrath on AM radio. Had we plunged into the Bible Belt by mistake? Each time I saw a sign for our destination, perversely posted at four mile intervals, I wanted to speed past the U-Haul at eighty and get there, get it over with.

Although it is midnight and Jeff reluctant, we begin unloading all but our heaviest worldly possessions from the truck. We are swift, silent, and efficient. Numb. Finally I stand in the middle of the living room, sur-

rounded by boxes, and watch Jeff, like modern moving men everywhere, hook up the TV first. “Chips and sauce,” I suggest. Jeff sighs, knowing he is being sent into the suburban night to forage. While he is gone I scour the house for a phone jack and find none. I put the unplugged phone to my ear, thinking, we’re here, in Prairie Village, Kansas and can’t even *tell* anyone.

Prairie Village. The prairie long gone and the village nonexistent, only a modest, postwar suburb in their place. When I first drove through Prairie Village, each street curving nowhere, the dormer windows winking in the autumn sun, the leaves gilded, I could not believe such a place existed—the first homes of the atomic age. Jeff and I prowled around this house on a Sunday afternoon, peering in windows, exclaiming over the golden floors and the stove parked in the garage, and eventually standing in the backyard, listening for the city and hearing none. We knew we had found what we were looking for. I also knew whoever named this suburb had tapped a psychic and very American nerve. However absurd and irreconcilable the name, Prairie Village looked to a past longed for but never created and yet believed possible: open and communal; wild and settled; frontier and retreat. That afternoon in our future backyard, I felt the resonance and the discord in the name as I wondered aloud to Jeff if there was too much shade for a garden.

Home improvement begins with a rage. We take the metal awnings off the southern windows and stand blinking and released by the light—the house becomes younger in the sun. Jeff’s best friend from high school helps carry in our massive desk and squeak it through the study’s doorway set at a forty-five-degree angle. We watch the worthless professional football team of our new city and move the sofa around the room. In the following days I scrub floors, kitchen cupboards, bathroom tile. I become a daily customer at the hardware and discount stores. I unpack and sit thumbing through books, curious why I underlined what I did; I reread old letters; I throw things out, amazed I bothered to pack them to bring with me. Jeff calls from his new job. I can see his tie and his responsibility fifteen miles away in the county seat where he maps this, the third richest county in America. I am too busy settling the house to feel what I will feel when the silverware is all in the drawer and the dining room wallpaper is hidden behind the maps of the places I love.

We live in the first suburb and last neighborhood of the city. Our house is modest, our yard large, in a homely microcosm of the village/prairie tension. As in a photograph I saw once, taken with a macro lens, of a dew-drop hanging from a grass stem, an entire meadow mirrored in the bead—this house in Prairie Village reflects the world in small, with a perfect, shimmering surface tension. Suspended and exposed, everything trembles in its newness. I am grateful to the mandate that planted five trees for each lot in Prairie Village; these trees now screen us. In our yard are shagbark hickory, redbud, maple, and ailing red pine beside the driveway. The oak trees arch over our street, graceful and old as my parents' marriage. I believe I am living in a house reminiscent of their first years: a living room with a picture window, a small dining room, a kitchen where the washer sits cheek by jowl with the stove, two bedrooms, all the right closets, and a huge fan to blow the air through the attic in the endless summers the baby boomers were conceived in.

I am a wry outsider to Prairie Village where two children and two incomes and votes for a “kinder and gentler nation” flourish. I was not raised in a Prairie Village, but on the military installations that mushroom across Europe, thanks to NATO, and in the raw subdivisions on the edge of the New Mexican desert. When I describe this house to my mother on the phone I see her memory telescope to the early years before I was born—she sitting slim on the front stoop, everything possible. I want to smooth my hand along her cheek, tell her I'll get married, do things right—but this is only the telephone and I am ambivalent about doing things right.

The first morning we woke up to the silence, half believing we were victims of a nuclear strike. Strange to miss the rhythm of traffic we could never wholly shut out in the past. Even the pleasure of raking my own rented leaves does not allow me to forget our old apartment with no real yard, only a scrap of a garden with all the perennials inherited. The military moved my family regularly every three years, and I believed I was a veteran, vaccinated against typhoid, small pox, and homesickness, free to cross borders and oceans easily and unthinkingly. But seven years in one place and my resilience and immunity to moving have disappeared. Now I watch for the postman limping across our front yard—waiting for letters from the town I've left behind, like someone in prison or in exile. I reach the mail through a small door in the living room wall that opens onto a

cubbyhole; I sort through my disappointment. We have never received this much junk mail—coupons for dry-cleaning, coupons for a free “will kit,” with a guide to funeral arrangements. I am already buried in Prairie Village.

Our street is deserted from eight to six, the dogs chained up in the backyards, the houses blind and inscrutable. I do not meet my neighbors; I rarely even see them. I am submerged in a neighborhood where the day passes silent and suspended, where no one lives. I do not see the children who grow up here and attend the school only a few blocks from our house. Some afternoons I get in the car and drive very fast on the parkways, hugging the curves in anger alongside the other bright, swift fish in this empty ocean. I feel sad and flat as I wind through a muted Prairie Village to our house. I sit in the driveway, waiting; our automatic garage opener is temperamental, often refusing to raise the squeaking door of the American dream.

Dusk is difficult; the day edges toward grey and I hesitate to draw the shades or to wait until true dark arrives. Dusk is not a good time to begin anything, especially dinner, and I often stand helpless in front of the fridge. Cooking relies on one of two things, planning or improvisation—I am a good cook when I plan, Jeff when he improvises. I cook out of books, Jeff out of his own head. Long term, short order: we always eat. I can circumvent the dusk if I plan for Tuscan minestrone. The soup becomes my afternoon meditation, the slow accumulation from beans to garlic to onion to basil, the patient slicing and sauté of each vegetable, the collective simmer. This soup may be the one good thing I have done within the day, if I plan for it.

Most dusks are restless and oppressive. I wander around the house, finishing the last swallows of coffee, folding laundry, unable to concentrate, unable to decide if I should run to the grocery store. I have not seen or spoken to anyone all day. I watch the neighbors I do not know return home. Slowly the lights come on in the houses, inside each window a sealed and golden world; I look out from my own and wait for Jeff.

The cat and I always know when Jeff will arrive, although the time varies. We look up, instinctively, before we see or hear the car, and know that Jeff is arriving, crossing into our awareness of him. The cat uncurls from the sofa and arches into a stretch, and I stand watching from the front door. Jeff always breezes into the house, cold, talking nonstop, shed-

ding coat, folders, news, “Bruce Chatwin is dead,” turning on the radio, the TV, more lights. The world has entered the living room suddenly, where I have kept it all day at bay.

We listen to public radio, to the now dead Bruce Chatwin talking about nomadic cultures and why he moved each time he reached a crisis in his own life. Is that why we have moved here? To resolve or avoid the crisis of staying too long in one place? Already I want to move. I sit opposite the maps on the dining room wall, Antarctica, the San Juan National Forest, the counties Mayo and Galway, and stir my soup to cool it. Jeff is admitting this was the “right move,” in terms of career, but a move against instinct. I no longer see the wallpaper for the maps. The shape of Antarctica is very beautiful, an abstraction, a place I will never go, although I understand the desire to go there and also how desire can go against the gut. Is there ever a right move? Or do we turn back and see the right place, now left behind and lost to us. I am afraid I will become my mother, who crisscrossed Europe and America, happy with each place only in retrospect, in memory, never in actuality. Each move a threshold and when we think we are safely across, we turn to look and something vanishes, Eurydice lost to Orpheus — all for wanting to look back, not forward.

Our bedroom is in the northwest corner of the house and very cold. I am slow to fall asleep and slow to wake in this room. Jeff drifts off easily into the next day. I lie awake in the dark, turning over the surface of my dailiness like those who sort through bills they cannot pay, but look at them, willing them to be paid, knowing someday they will be paid. I get up, put on my robe and pad into the study. I wrap up in a blanket on the sofa and pick up where I left off in the screenplay from *The Last Place on Earth*. This is the fourth time I have raced with Amundsen against Scott across Antarctica, twice on public television, once in the nonfiction account, now in the screenplay. Not the race, but the swift, easy, well-planned stride the Norwegians maintained throughout, I keep coming back to that. Four in the morning, I hear the hush and blow of the furnace kicking in. Amundsen has arrived at the pole. I have arrived somewhere else.

This morning I wake too late, wearing socks to bed against the heating bill, sleeping through Jeff’s good-morning good-bye kiss. I do not know

what I hoped to find in a two bedroom house with a yard. It is not here. Here is a past I cannot inhabit. I could call it my mother's, but I know it is my own.

I force myself to go out for a run before sitting down with the want ads and strong coffee. I run in the middle of the empty streets, in my college sweatshirt, under the intertwining and dormant branches of the trees. I know that this too is a symbolic action. I have read Joseph Campbell and feel the irony of being called to be the hero of my own life here in the suburbs. I am inclined to resist and to resent, to sit in the sun working the crossword, avoiding the want ads, avoiding this run. To be soft, tight, and reluctant, a mollusk, physically and existentially, I laugh out loud. A German shepherd leaps up against a chain link fence, pulling hard on his choke chain, barking furiously. Startled, I run harder. Pack animals in the city. The threshold is not a stopping place.

All my life it seemed that everywhere I was not — was the “real world.” The world outside the military installations, the world outside college towns. Have I reached the limit, the boundary, the frontier, not of money or privilege or education, but of what is possible? Have I finally arrived not in Prairie Village, Kansas, but in the “real world?” I break stride, my lungs hurt, my left leg uncertain. I have arrived somewhere else: not to be soft, tight, and reluctant, in anything, in any way. I walk slowly past the silent, watchful houses. Only trial and revelation, I realize, and spit.

I pick up the pace again. The street curves and drops toward our house. Our cat sits in the window, watching the squirrels pock the lawn looking for cached nuts. I wave to the cat and lie down in the front yard, staring up at the large winter sky. I am in the middle of the world and always have been.