

Museum of Love · Ralph Lombreglia

Love's museum is vain and foolish as the Catacombs, where grinning apes and abject lizards are embalmed, as, forsooth, significant of some imagined charm.

—Melville, *Pierre*

“PEOPLE GRIEVE AND BEMOAN themselves,” said Mitchell, tossing off another shot of peppermint schnapps, “*but it is not half so bad with them as they say.*” He glanced about the room at the little group assembled there, then he drained his other glass of its chaser of beer. His fellows followed suit. “*The only thing grief has taught me is to know how shallow it is.*” Ralph Waldo Emerson.

“Transcendence,” affirmed Bill. “The only way. A new sense of the self.” He extended his arms in a blessing over Edgar’s little house, formerly Edgar and Stephanie’s little house. Mitchell and Bill and Dave were there on a mission of commiseration.

“She’s gone,” said Dave. “You gotta face it, boy. It’s over.” He slashed a finger across his throat. “Over.”

Slumped in his chair, schnapps and beer a fierce chemistry within him, Edgar gazed into the faces of his friends. He was asking himself a question. Are Mitchell, Bill, and Dave now my only companions, their wit, wisdom, and drunken camaraderie all the human succor available to me now? He swept his eyes across the living room full of memories.

“I can’t live here anymore!” was all he could exclaim.

They couldn’t deny it. Edgar was a man of no small gifts, but the breadwinner he hadn’t been. Stephanie, a daughter of old and new money, had walked out with the funds. Under no circumstances could Edgar afford to stay in the little house, or even to take a small studio in town. Times were hard. A discussion of real estate ensued amid the clink and slosh of another round.

Edgar covered his eyes with his fingers, put his thumbs in his ears. Still, the firelight and lamplight confirmed the persistence of a red-and-yellow world on the other side of his hands; he heard muddy murmurs of *seller’s market, money’s tight, location, location, location*. It was his friends, Mitchell, Bill, and Dave. One-third of a decent softball team for which he himself covered first; sensible, educated young men with their heads above water. And oafs. Wondrous oafs and boors.

I can't live here anymore! was the cry of property poisoning, not property lust—a warrior whoop against the house and its miasma of *things* advancing on Edgar's memory like the smoke from the cigarettes Stephanie had rolled out of black pipe tobacco in a little machine, inhaled with relish and blown in people's faces, her most concise gesture of contempt for the parents (noted lung surgeon, wrinkled social creature) who paid for her pleasure. They paid for the little house, too. It took Stephanie two years of cohabitation therein to arrive at the idea that Edgar, her lover, was but another instrument of defiance, a powerful cigarette of sorts, and she got righteous one day during the previous week and decided to quit. Cold turkey. To save both their lives, as she said. A satchel over her shoulder and away in the car, without even taking her stuff. *Without even taking her stuff.*

When he blurted *I can't live here anymore!* Edgar had meant that he couldn't continue to live in the very rooms where he'd loved as no man had loved before, besieged at every step by the personal effects of the woman who would float like a ghost through all his days until death. The other issue, that of not being permitted to remain in the little house and having nowhere else to go, had not, in the heat of heartbreak, occurred to him. He removed his hands from around his head. Someone was calling his name.

"Edgar," said Bill, "are you listening to me? What was said about the disposition of the house, the selling of it or the assumption of the mortgage?"

Edgar looked at them blankly. The events of that day were a muddle of evil.

"Try to remember, Edgar."

He remembered. "She said I would hear from her father."

Low whistles of awe all around. *Hear from her father!*

"Edgar, you had a hot one."

These words put Edgar freshly in mind of his loss. He rose from his chair and clutched the mantel of the fireplace where lay a collection of colorful stones and shells. "We found these on the beach at Key West!" He swept them to the floor, staggered to the window, wrapped the blue batik drapery around his head. "She made these curtains by hand. I remember the day! Stephe! *Stephanie!*"

His friends whispered amongst themselves. Edgar, poor Edgar. On the diamond in their minds they saw trouble at first base—weakness, preoccupation, a foot not on the bag. Dave gave him a brotherly hug,

took away the satin ballet slipper he was pressing to his lips. "Grip on yourself, boy."

"Everywhere I look! Everything I see!"

They installed him on the sofa, held a schnapps beneath his nose. Mitchell patted Edgar's head. "Your own house feels like a mummy's tomb, doesn't it, pal? Every object a token of the life that's gone."

Edgar took a sip of the schnapps, and nodded his dismal assent. Mitchell's mind was a piercing thing. In silence they pondered the dark ramifications. Bill tried to lighten things up.

"Hey, man," he jostled one of Edgar's knees. "Maybe that's the answer! You could charge admission to the place, solve all your money problems!" Nearly everyone laughed. Edgar seemed actually to consider the idea, or else he was drifting away again. Bill kept shaking his knee.

"Edgar," Dave said. "What *did* Stephanie say about all her things? She must have said something."

Edgar raised himself up, struggled to recall. His face went rubbery as it broke in upon him. "She said I could have a yard sale!" he cried, and crumpled onto the coffee table.

They put him to bed. Dave said, "Edgar, are you listening to me? Whatever you decide to do, you should make the first move. Don't sit here like a chump waiting for the old man's emissaries to show up. They'll probably send you a letter, the bastards, telling you to vacate the premises. Beat 'em to the punch. Clear out now, force them to deal with all her stuff. Got me?"

Edgar threw up into a wastepaper basket.

"*Better to have loved and lost—*" burbled Mitchell, but they clapped hands upon his mouth and dragged him out the door, Dave giving a final thumbs-up sign to the rumpled form of Edgar, lying there.

The telephone was ringing; Edgar unslumbered himself to answer it. He had been in the jungle, in a dream, on safari with Stephanie. Tribesmen had captured them, made her a goddess. Edgar, tied up, was being carried to a kettle steaming over a fire; Stephanie was waving goodbye. A chieftain was jangling a bell to summon his distant kin to a feast. A woman from the State Historical Society was on the phone.

"Someone on our staff is quite interested in your proposal," she was saying, "and would like to visit you, today if possible, to discuss it."

Edgar tried to disentangle his body from humid ropes of bedclothes and lingerie. Something else was wound around his mind. His proposal.

"Today," he said.

There was a pause. "Miss Price would like an appointment for two this afternoon."

Edgar glanced at his watch. It was ten o'clock. The house looked like a metaphor for psychosis. "Okay."

"Very good. One other thing. She asks that you not do any rearranging on her account, or remove any objects, or in any way alter the appearance of the dwelling."

"Okay."

The disinfection of his person occupied the remainder of the morning. Then he was ravenous and had to eat, and then he rushed around the rooms trying to flatten the highest peaks of the house's departure from tidiness. He didn't get far. The crushed gravel of the horseshoe drive popped and crackled under the tires of an auto. Edgar peeped out. It was a low-slung red sports car, Italian he thought, from which a tall dark woman was emerging chick-wise as from an egg. Miss Price's great beauty was plainly discernible. He opened the door and waved hello. She came beaming up the walk with a briefcase and a Polaroid.

"I love it already!" she exclaimed, extending her hand. "Katherine Price, from the Historical Society, new curatorial projects department. Friends call me Kitty."

Edgar shook hands, introducing himself.

Kitty said, "I've been looking through our books. Did you know your house was the servants' quarters? The mansion was over there, it burned down about forty years ago. Your garage was the carriage house."

"That's what the realtor told us. Some of the old folks around here still talk about the fire. I think this house is about a hundred years old."

"A hundred and thirteen." She followed him inside. The disarray was quite unlike simple slovenliness. "Now, don't say a word. Don't tell me a thing about her. I want to feel the life in the artifacts."

Kitty wandered around, humming to herself, snapping things with the Polaroid. Edgar tagged along, sheepish, at a distance, vague shame inflating a balloon in his head. To judge by where she lingered and snapped, Kitty had an uncanny sense for the emotional charge on physical things. She sniffed out the mementos that cut Edgar's heart like knives.

"You two collected these together, didn't you?" she asked, taking a picture of the stones and shells from the beach. Edgar had restored them to the mantelpiece before she arrived. "On a romantic journey to the

sea?" Sadly, he nodded his head. "When love was young?" He nodded more emphatically. A long sigh from deep down escaped him.

She shot the blue batik curtains, then held one of them up by its jagged, amateurish hem. "Touching." Stepping away for a better angle, she noticed the pink toe of a ballet slipper poking out from beneath the sofa. She looked at Edgar; her eyes contained galaxies of knowledge and pity. "A thousand words," she said, picking the slipper up. "No, a million." She took its picture. Making her circuit of the study, she came upon Stephanie's pipe tobacco and papers and rolling machine. "What have we here? A little contraband?" Edgar explained. "She rolled her own cigarettes out of black pipe tobacco? To spite her Mom and Dad? How very *outré*!" She snapped them.

Edgar lowered himself softly onto a chair, needing to close his eyes for a spell. He felt fragile, frail. There were sensations from boyhood, of being caught in some monstrous apparatus, of having failed to look very deeply into things. He conceived the scheme of quieting himself, and then throwing open his eyes onto Kitty and the house and the absence of Stephanie, thus literally to look deeply and perceive in a trice the true nature of his circumstances. He threw open his eyes. Kitty was gone. He hustled upstairs. She was in the bedroom, photographing the interior of Stephanie's laundry hamper.

Edgar wandered over to the window, stared down at the garden he and Stephanie had sown. A plunge from that height into the furrowed loam would not ensure the end of his affairs, unless by chance a tomato stake were driven through his bosom. He sat down on the bed. Kitty had lapsed into the rapture of the boutique, feeling her way through the bureau and closet and redwood chest full of Stephanie's clothes, holding certain items up against herself, most of which were a little too small. At length she turned to Edgar, hands on her hips, Polaroid dangling by its strap from her wrist. "I know this woman!" she announced.

"You do?" Edgar's blood bubbled around his bones. "You know Stephanie?"

"Oh, I don't mean I actually know her. I mean I know who she is when I see her things, and what she must have meant to you. Who you were together!" She sat next to Edgar on the bed. "Poor, poor fellow. Going through such agony here in the house you shared with her." She combed his hair with her fingers, gestured to the space around them. "The play of these images like a planetarium of pain." Edgar thought he might rest his head on Kitty's shoulder. Abruptly she stood up, reanimated, and traipsed back down the stairs.

Edgar found her photographing the dining appointments and Stephanie's high-tech kitchen gadgetry. He expressed his regrettable ignorance of curatorial studies.

"No false modesty!" she remonstrated, tweaking his cheek. "Credit where credit's due. You may not know the literature, but your instincts are astonishing. And in the middle of a nasty ordeal! When they told me what you'd proposed on the phone, the genius of it gripped me instantly. The museum of a love affair, indeed. It's inspired!"

Edgar shuffled his feet, tried to appear humble. It was strangely easy. "It really has potential, then? It's a good idea?"

"It's a great idea, Edgar. A curatorial dream. What we're always looking for, those of us in the profession who are thinking progressively, is a new approach, a fresh way to depict perennial human experience with a display of objects, while capturing the spirit of a particular age. The zeitgeist."

She pulled the cord on Stephanie's centrifugal washer-dryer for salad greens. It spun for a minute and stopped.

"We work with collections of things which evoke a legendary past, however recent or remote. But museums as most people think of them, big buildings full of *objets d'art* and open to the public, are a relatively recent phenomenon, maybe two hundred years old. Before that, collections of valuable things were assembled by private individuals, the result, usually, of the hoarding instinct. War is always good for that, or any time of economic uncertainty."

Some great calamity, thought Edgar. Turmoil. Distortion of value.

"The very earliest collections of objects, though, were associated with places of worship. What we call magic collections. On display for the faithful. The light of reason, intellectual curiosity, esthetics, understanding of the past—none of that had anything to do with it. These were power objects, Edgar. Medievalism was the fullest expression of it. The medieval response to antiquity was fear. When some peasant was plowing his field and turned up a pagan artifact, first thing he did was call a priest who bricked it into a wall of the church so it couldn't give anybody the evil eye. And they loved the relics of martyrs and saints, of course. Staged massive expeditions for holy stuff that could heal wounds and cure diseases. The Benedictine monastery at Vendôme in France owned a vial containing a tear wept by Jesus at the death of Lazarus. Skeletons were the hottest items. At one point, nineteen churches claimed to have the jawbone of John the Baptist."

The wild things people used to believe in, thought Edgar. Well, it's behind us now. On with the enlightenment.

Kitty smiled, tapped the windowsill above the kitchen sink. A tiny bird's nest was resting there, a broken blue egg inside it. "What's this?"

"Bird's nest. Stephanie found it in the woods one day."

"But now it's on your windowsill. Why did she feel compelled to bring it into the house?"

"Because it looks nice?"

"Because it's a power object, Edgar. Architecture that would be here if people never were. A vessel, a home, a place to feed babies and watch them fly away. It meant one thing for Stephanie when she found it in the woods. Now it means something else, here on display. You look at that and tell me it's just nice to look at."

Edgar looked at it. There was the rustle of leaves beneath his feet, Stephanie's hand holding his hand. A sweated shoulder against his cheek, nip of teeth on his ear. Her little cry when she saw the nest lying on the ground. Edgar grabbed it from the windowsill, pressed it to his breast. "*Stephanie!*"

"Careful, careful." Kitty took the nest away, gave Edgar a sisterly hug. "And these pebbles and shells on the mantelpiece over here?"

Edgar followed her to the living room. "Power objects?"

"Magic stones. They were the rage in the Middle Ages. People who couldn't afford expensive relics could always find a few magic stones lying around. A man would wait until his wife was asleep, and then put a magic stone on her head to elicit confessions of infidelity. A little late for that, in your case. Also, warriors carried them in their mouths when they went into battle." She placed a stone on Edgar's tongue. "Feel anything?"

"I do feel a little something," he mumbled.

"Of course you do. Now, the Renaissance and Reformation turned all this around. Spirit of rational inquiry, beauty and proportion, Calvin against the veneration of relics. A great leap, certainly, but there was something of the-baby-out-with-the-bathwater about it. These things persist as human needs. In Boston, the Christian Science plaza dwarfs Symphony Hall across the street where the mind-music of Bach is played. Tell them there's no such thing as faith-healing. Anyway, that was my dissertation topic. *Excluded Middle: The Place of Vestigial Medievalism in Contemporary Collections.*"

Edgar always felt humbled in the presence of sweeping erudition. He

sucked his stone reflectively, musing over the proposal he'd summoned up out of schnapps and self-pity and the instinct to survive. Somehow he wasn't following through. He spit his stone into his hand. "How does it all relate to my museum?" he asked.

"Oh," said Kitty. "Well, what you have here would fall into the newest category of all, the Historical House Museum. It's becoming more popular all the time, and seems to be exempt from the problems that plague other sorts of museums. An eco-museum, the French would call it. Whatever's there when you find it. People just love to visit them. And what could capture that magical sense of objects, the impulse behind the earliest collections, better than the power of a loved one's possessions for the lover she spurned? The living record of a doomed affair! It's romance and history and beauty and fate. What everyone wants and no one understands. The oldest kind of museum wedded to the newest kind. A truly American contribution . . . and my first work on my own in the field! Edgar, I'm incredibly excited about this project!"

Two days later Kitty called.

"Edgar! We pushed it through! It's approved!"

Kitty, Edgar thought, has some considerable clout. "It only took two days to get it approved?"

"They loved it. Her wealth and hauteur, your bohemian radicalism. Historic house concept, changing social patterns, new significance of individual lives, emotional resonance of our era. Plus, Grandpa founded the Historical Society."

"Ah."

"A work crew is coming tomorrow first thing."

"Um, Kitty?"

"Yes?"

"Will I be able to, you know, stay here, like I always did?"

"Stay there? Like you always did? That's the whole point! You living in the house, just like it was. With one conspicuous absence, of course, which provides the creative tension for the viewers, the source of their dialogue with the place. They have to feel Stephanie's presence in her artifacts."

"Right, right. But I mean, will I have to pay rent?"

"Rent? No, silly! The state has acquired the house, it's a museum now. It was your idea, after all. You're a big part of it!"

Edgar thought he felt much relieved.

In the morning, the work crew arrived, Kitty's red car not far behind. She was supervising the labors of the crew. Blue jeans, sneakers, scarf on her head, man's shirt tied in a knot at her waist. Edgar was wearing his blue jeans, too. Kitty put him on the payroll as a consultant. "It's our baby!" she said.

Under her direction, the workers toiled like happy demons. To Edgar they seemed a blur of ponytails, beards, cut-offs, and T-shirts, a collective pulse of jocular energy in the service of Kitty's ideas. Edgar wished he were just a member of the happy crew, and not the petrified focus of its efforts. But I've been given the nod by history, he thought. Called to a higher destiny.

The garage was cleaned out, its interior painted white, track lighting and display cases installed. It was being turned into *The Before Each Other Room*, one of Kitty's innovations. She and Edgar scoured the house for all the old stuff from before he and Stephanie met: their baby pictures, crayon drawings, high school rings and sweaters; yearbooks, scrapbooks, a corsage from one of Stephanie's proms. Edgar wondered who had been her date; he hadn't seen the corsage before, nor most of the things in all those boxes in the basement. There were packets of letters, tied with ribbon and colorful yarn, to and from young fellows she'd never mentioned.

When *The Before Each Other Room* was finished, Kitty walked Edgar through on a practice tour. They stood before the display case—one out of ten—devoted to him. In the light of the new lamps he looked at his old things under glass. The identification labels, so professional-looking, startled him. He saw "Edgar's Little-League Baseball Mitt" and broke down badly.

"Edgar, Edgar," Kitty said, patting him on the back, trying to buck him up. "You have to be stronger than that. Anyway, there's only this room and one other formal display. The house proper stays just the way it was, except cleaned up and arranged a little bit."

Edgar made a gruesome face: eyes squeezed shut, lips curled over his teeth. Kitty reminded him that the power of objects was a neutral force, either for good or ill, harm or healing. It was right to be moved, but it was wrong to be a weakling. There was enormous strength and comfort to be had, she said, in giving oneself over to the continuity of things. Maybe the most wonderful windfall of all, she reasoned, was the therapeutic potential of the museum for Edgar himself: the rare chance to evoke his past systematically, and know it as of a piece; really to

inhabit the dark interstices of time. Did he know that “curatorial” shared its etymology with “curative”?

“Think of it, Edgar. How many people get an opportunity like this?” Edgar nodded vaguely. “And you won’t be alone! Every day you’ll see lots of people who want to reconstruct it right along with you. People from all walks of life who want to stroll through your little house and feel the collision of desire and destiny. And I’ll be here, of course.”

“You will?”

“When I conduct the tours, certainly. Three times a day, Tuesday through Saturday, an hour-and-a-half per tour of the house and grounds, with an hour off between tours. Other than that you won’t be disturbed.”

“Oh.”

“The rest of the time all your own, to do all the things you want to do, and no worries about a job. Edgar, you’re a very lucky guy.”

Opening Day said the cloth banner draped across the front of the house, hand-sewn by Kitty, shades of Betsy Ross. A permanent sign was mounted on the lawn, lettered in clean archival graphics. *Museum of Love*, it said. Where the old mansion had been was a parking lot. Many cars were parked there.

Edgar could hear commotion, the sound of excited voices and feet. Kitty’s first tour had tramped through the garden and grounds, lingered in *The Before Each Other Room*. Now they were coming into the house. Kids were running around. “Mothers! Control your children!” he heard the muffled voice of Kitty say. Then, in the relative calm, she began her prepared remarks. The shuffling and murmuring of the tourists obscured some of what she said; the house itself absorbed much of the rest. Still, he could infer enough: it was the part about Stephanie’s wealth and hauteur, Edgar’s bohemian radicalism. “Storybook romance,” filtered through to him, “star-crossed lovers,” “his dilettantism, the fruits of which the world will never see,” “black pipe tobacco,” “satin ballet slippers.”

The visitors moved across the house in a mass, looking at the things, cooing in wonder. “Left one day without a word of warning, leaving everything she had, making this museum possible.” There were geriatric gasps of disbelief, and the clucking of many ladies. “They were to be married in the fall.” It was a lie, but a powerful one. The crowd groaned in a body.

The deep vibrations of the house changed in pitch and timbre; Kitty was taking the tour upstairs. Edgar heard humming that must have been loud voices, the reaction, he supposed, to Stephanie's wardrobe. Some of the nicer items had been laid out across the bed. He imagined the kids playing in the bathroom, standing on the toilet, jumping in and out of the tub.

It seemed a great while before they clumped back down to ground level. He heard the increasing volume of enthusiasm, the museum was a big success. The group assembled at length before the basement door, where Kitty stood waiting to speak. Edgar pictured her there, glowing, patrician, her posture perfect. In the anticipatory hush, he heard her announce the final display, "one man's response to deep mystery and loss." He'd asked her to leave that part out. The key she wore on a chain around her wrist unlocked the basement door. She threw it open.

Light from upstairs ran down the steps. In it, Kitty appeared, leading the way, enjoining the viewers to hold the banister. She wore stockings, heels, a navy cotton suit over lacy white blouse. Her dark hair swept across her shoulders. Kitty is certainly a lovely woman, Edgar thought. The crowd collected at the bottom of the stairs, eyes blinking in the dimness.

Stronger light issued from across the way, reflected along the damp stone walls of the cellar. Kitty walked toward the source of it, guiding the tour past the old coal bin and the ancient central furnace that all the kids thought was a big spooky monster with its many arms reaching up into the house.

Edgar couldn't make out faces, but he heard the singular catching of breath when they saw a man in a pin-striped suit, white shirt, dark tie, carnation in his lapel, sitting in the corner in a bentwood rocker. In his lap was a negligee that he wrung between his hands. "It's the suit he would have worn to the altar," Kitty declared. It was too much, he'd told her so. The crowd made a low and awful moan. "The rocking chair belonged to Stephanie's grandmother." That was true. She drew them closer.

Above his head and to either side, spotlights played on masonry niches erected in the wall. In the central niche, a photograph of Stephanie and Edgar, taken on their trip to Greece; in the left, Stephanie's favorite African Violet. The third niche contained a tiny bird's nest in which was a broken blue egg and a lock of Stephanie's hair. Many Polaroid snapshots were fastened around the perimeter of each niche, recapitulat-

ing scenes of the house and grounds. Kitty made authoritative remarks on the history of museums, various curatorial approaches to the past, the uses of power objects through the ages. At his cue, the part about magic stones, Edgar thrust out his tongue to show the pebbles resting there. "Our two lovers found those on the beach at Key West."

Elderly heads of coiffed blue hair bobbed in front of his face, the popeyed kids stared transfixed at the stones. It was the best thing they'd ever seen, Edgar could tell. He felt a certain pride. Some of the old ladies began to cry. Edgar did battle with the power of suggestion. He reinstalled his tongue, bit down hard on the stones to fortify himself; it seemed only to encourage the burning water that sprang from his head. He reached up to wipe his face with the negligee, Kitty rushed over and stayed his hand. Through the blur, Edgar noticed she rummaged in her bag: for a handkerchief, he thought, God bless her. In her smile he saw appreciation beyond words. Her hand touched his cheek, she whispered "You're beautiful" in his ear. She was holding a little glass vial beneath his eye.