

Breaking and Entering

A WEEK AFTER I BROKE PETE'S HEART, Nora and I broke into an abandoned house. It was the Fourth of July, just days after I told the only boy who'd ever loved me that I wanted to be alone. The summer already felt too long, and I was looking for a way to celebrate my new independence, which didn't feel as liberating as I thought it would. As usual, Nora came to the rescue.

We went to see a movie. The closest theater was thirty minutes away in Juniper, the old steel town where I used to take ballet lessons. I hadn't been back to see Martine since before the musical auditions. I was just about to turn fifteen and I had started to abandon things I'd once desired without much understanding of my own actions. Out of my self-spun cocoon, I was emerging as a girl-moth whose flight pattern was determined by events she could no longer remember.

The road out of town was a wayward one, headed toward mills that had stood empty for years now. They'd worked their way into the rest of our sagging landscape, and people barely noticed them anymore. On our way out, we wound through rows of corn and crowds of trees. Rusty trailers and double-wides, warning signs for leaping deer and turns sharp as bent elbows. "Too many accidents on this road," my mother always said. Makeshift crosses and matted flowers dotted the roadside, marking the spots where cars had collided.

I shuddered as we passed a cluster of shabby memorials. These poster-board signs were eerie with their elegies scrawled in Magic Marker. From a distance, you could mistake them for yard sale advertisements.

The signs had a way of lasting too long, after rainwater muddled the ink and the white crosses faded to gray.

About five minutes outside of Juniper's city limits, Nora's mother yanked on her husband's sleeve.

"Ted," she said. "Pull into that driveway."

"What driveway?" he asked.

"That one," Nora's mother answered, jabbing her thumb against the window. "By the 'for sale' sign."

"I don't see any 'for sale' sign," he said.

"Just turn."

The minivan slowed. In the roadside ditch, a sickly "for sale" sign slouched among a thicket of weeds. Its stake was bowed, the black lettering weakened by the sun. The van crunched down a slender strip of gravel, and I pressed my face to the window to see what had provoked Mrs. Stark.

The house was set back, withdrawn from the highway. From the backseat I examined it, a house I'd passed innumerable times but never noticed. A colonial constructed from blanché, orange brick, two pairs of dowdy white shutters clung to the façade, and one tiny window popped out of the shingled roof.

Because there was nothing but cornfields in Mercury, I was used to long car rides spent passing time and houses. Rumors flew back and forth about them, and the more withdrawn the house, the more spectacular the stories. I'd heard of houses with indoor swimming pools, rooftop staircases, and even one with a carousel horse. I'd never considered going inside one before. No house around here could ever live up to the stories told about it.

Though it wasn't much different from the others on Route 44, this house had an attitude like a pretty teenage girl caught admiring herself in a mirror. The anticipation mounted; the farther we traveled down the drive, the deeper the house seemed to sit. Beside me, Nora sat up on her knees, her gaze trained on the orange brick. As we neared it, the house ballooned in size.

"It's huge," Nora whispered, her hazel eyes squinting at the sunlight streaming through the window.

"I've heard about this house," Mrs. Stark said, as if the place had a reputation of sleeping around.

"Do you think anyone's home?" I asked, but soon I knew the answer. Dandelions overran the patched, dry lawn. The rusty basketball hoop had lost its net. Torn plastic bags with dated circulars smothered the front stoop. No one had been here in a long time.

The van jerked to a stop, and we hopped out. My eyes darted back and forth along the perimeter of pine trees. Surely someone would come and tell us trespassers weren't welcome on such an expensive property, even if it was neglected. *It has to be expensive*, I thought. *Just look how far it is from the road.* The owner must have forked over some real cash to pay for such pretty seclusion. I watched the tree line. No one showed. The cars breezing down the highway buzzed like passing flies.

The five of us—Nora and I, her parents, and her younger sister Nell—stood in a clump, gawking at the giant house. Closer now, I could see the aged siding: chipped bricks, some missing. From where we stood, the parched yard sloped down to the right, framed by dense trees.

"Will you look at this place?" Mrs. Stark said, taking Nell's hand. "Let's take a peek at the backyard."

"I bet there are some nice-sized windows back there, too," Mr. Stark added, trailing behind.

After they disappeared, Nora and I grinned at each other. She jutted her chin toward one of the front windows, and we crept toward it. I had to hoist myself up just to get my eyes above the window sill. Nora was taller and bound to get a better view. A few spider webs glimmered in the dim light from the window. A sitting room, I thought. With hardwood floors. Colonials always had a formal sitting room in the front. Our hometown was ripe with dated structures that we called "Victorian," mostly because that was the name of the arts festival our

town hosted every July: Victorian Days. I cupped my hands against the pane and peered inside, but I could see nothing.

"There's gotta be a better view over here," Nora said, heading for the next window.

As I passed the front stoop, the doorway grabbed my attention. The peeling entrance was sheathed with a flimsy plastic screen door. The closer I got to the house, the bolder I grew, and a burning desire to enter it overtook me. I'd never before attempted such an overt risk. Deep down, I thought, *boys will be boys, and girls will get caught*. And deeper still: *boys will trespass; girls are trespassed upon*.

I wrapped my fingers around the handle and pushed the rusty button with my thumb. The screen door screeched as it swung open. A passing breeze roused a soft jingle. Beneath the knob, a glittery set of keys dangled from the keyhole.

I heard the Starks' muffled voices coming from the back side of the house and smiled at the shivers tracing my spine. I glanced at Nora, whose face was pressed up against the window, her calves flexed as she tried to peer inside.

"Nora!" I hissed. "Look."

She rushed toward me, her eyes blooming when she saw the keys.

"Dude," she said.

As I fingered the keys, I felt powerful. I'd never had a set of keys, not even to my own home. I grasped the knob. It felt cool in my palm, despite the heat. My wrist turned, and the bolt dislodged. The door grunted as I pushed, and it gave way, revealing a sliver of darkness. A gust of sour air poured out from the house, as if it had been holding its breath. I grabbed Nora's elbow and squeezed. The two of us pushed the door open the rest of the way and stepped inside.

My clearest memories of Nora exist underwater. From the time we were ten—the same summer as Mr. Lotte's hearings—our mothers dropped us off at Silver Pulley pool, and we'd spend entire afternoons

in the deep end, fishing for quarters. I whispered what I thought were my worst secrets between dives. This is how I remember my best friend: submerged, hair like dark silk, her eyes shining bright in the turquoise water, tiny bubbles escaping from her nose.

Nora's beauty was the kind that drew attention, though she barely acknowledged anyone who showered her with it. She strutted around the pool in a bikini, and I hid behind a one-piece and a towel. Nora floated and flirted, never feeling the need to lay claim on someone like I did. With glasses and a petite frame, I tended to be overlooked. Until I got contacts and Pete came along, at least. But I was never jealous of Nora because I saw the two of us as a pair. I took pride in her beauty, and she admired my intelligence, one a perfect complement to the other.

Since I'd started to date Pete almost a year before, Nora and I hadn't spent much time together. After I'd told Pete I needed a break, things with Nora had returned to what they were before I fell in love and put him first, as small-town girls are known to do. A newly reunited pair, we returned to our daily phone calls and weekly sleepovers. I had missed my friend.

"We aren't trespassing, are we?" I asked Nora as we stood in the dark foyer of the house. Now within the house's walls, I grew timid.

"Trespassing?" Nora repeated, her voice echoing in the hollow space. "Nah. Nobody's lived here in a long time."

The humidity thickened the air in the house, and it was hard to breathe. Tufts of dust, disturbed by our entry, shimmered in the meager light. Room by room, we strode through the vacant house. We began in the sitting room, a bare, indiscriminate rectangle. Next, we conquered the kitchen, opening every drawer and cabinet as if they were our own. I tried to flip on the lights.

"The electricity's been cut off," Nora said, opening a tired refrigerator. She held her nose.

The back living room was an eyesore. Tangerine shag carpet covered the floor, and fake wood paneling flanked the walls. One large window brightened the space, drawing out the stains in the carpet.

Exhilaration began to pump through me again. I'd never been in an empty house before. I'd only stood inside the bare frame of my own house when it was built ten years earlier. "This is where your room will be," my father told me, pointing above our heads. "Right now, we're standing in the garage." I smiled, delighted at what would become of a lot once used as a campground, with old marshmallows and hot dogs buried in the grass.

But this house wasn't meant to be seen. Nail holes littered the flooring, mold had crept into the oak cabinets, and that horrible orange color permeated every room. Hungry for more, Nora trounced through the first floor and up the creaky steps. I followed close behind.

At the top of the narrow staircase, light broke in through the doorways on both sides of the hall. The space felt both bare and shy, as if the second floor kept all of the house's riddles. We explored the bedrooms, enchanted. Each possessed an architecture all its own. I'd never seen anything like it. In the final room, the walls came together in a hexagon, resembling the spire of a castle. I paused at the threshold because of what I found inside: a small twin bed with a metal frame and an old, lined mattress on top. It was the only piece of furniture left in the whole house.

I couldn't stop looking at the bed, but Nora pushed past me.

"I want this to be my room," she said, twirling around.

"Why? The other rooms are bigger."

"Because. Look."

She went toward the window, and we looked out at the treetops along the edge of the yard. For the first time, I felt what it might be like to look out *above* the town that held me in its thrall, rather than beneath it.

"You can see everything from up here," Nora said.

"Your parents would never buy this old place."

"You never know." Nora turned and looked at the bed. "You know what I heard?"

"What?"

"I heard somebody died in this house. A young girl."

"You did not."

"Did, too," she said. "I swear. I bet she died in that bed." She thrust her finger at the mattress. "That's why this house is on the market. The owners don't want to live here anymore. Problem is, nobody else wants to live here, either."

"Where'd you hear that?" I asked.

"I heard my mother with some of her friends. They were whispering about some old brick house on Route 44."

"This place creeps me out," I said, watching the bed as my eyes played tricks on me. I swore I could see the imprint of a small, dead body.

"That's why I want it," Nora answered.

I smiled. Nora and I were infatuated with ghost stories, and we'd just found one of our own. Pete used to laugh at how frightened I was when we'd watch scary movies together. For a moment, I wished he had come along so I could feel the reassuring heat of his palm against mine. But I banished the thought. I had been the one to find the key and step inside the house. My best friend and I had done this together. I didn't need Pete. I had Nora.

Though I would never have told Nora because I didn't realize it myself, the house resembled what had become of my own memory of Mr. Lotte—abandoned, slanted, and odd. She and I had both been his students once, and we never spoke of him, still. Instead, the two of us stood in the tiny bedroom, staring at the white walls, staring at the empty bed, staring at each other. While keeping still, something happened to us in that house. *Retiré*, Martine would have coined this move the house performed on us, often used when one is trying to balance on one leg. *Retiré*. Withdraw. Though we couldn't have been there for more than a few minutes, a pocket of time opened and we were

reaching neither forward nor backward, but deeper into that moment, deeper into the house itself, as if we'd entered one of C. S. Lewis's magic wardrobes. In years to come, I'd pass this place countless times on my way out of town, and the house—always empty—stared back as if it withheld from me my own secrets.

After Independence Day, Nora enrolled in a lifeguard training course. She was already fifteen, and by next summer, she'd be old enough to lifeguard. She fit the mold well. Not only was she an excellent swimmer, but she was leggy and tan. I had considered taking the course many times. I loved to swim. But when I pictured myself trying to pluck someone from the bottom of the pool, I knew I'd panic. I couldn't be trusted.

But Nora never panicked, even when she was afraid. She knew how to take charge, take responsibility, and take what she wanted for herself. One afternoon, a couple of weeks after she began training, she called me.

"What's wrong?" I asked when I heard her cracking voice on the line.

"It's my pap," she said. "He collapsed on our driveway this morning."

"What?" I said. I knew her grandfather. He was spry and stylish with the blinding smile of a game-show host. "What happened?"

"I don't know what caused it. But I had to give him CPR until the ambulance came." She paused. Her voice was barely audible. "I just learned how to do it."

"Is he—I mean, he's all right, right?" I asked.

Nora struggled to push the words out. "The paramedic told me I saved his life."

I exhaled. "That—that's—amazing, Nora," I stammered.

I, in fearsome awe of her, kept my mouth shut as I coiled the phone cord around my finger.

"I never knew I could do something like that," she said. "Save someone."

I think Nora felt as if she no longer knew herself. She'd saved her grandfather's life, and when confronted with her own power, she couldn't recognize it. I would always be endeavoring to find mine inside myself and come up empty-handed.

I didn't see Nora for a few weeks after her grandfather's emergency because my family had planned a vacation to Hilton Head. It wasn't often that we went so long without communicating, but I didn't think about her while I enjoyed the beach with my family. Pete appeared in my thoughts, unbidden. But I had made my choice, and I resolved never to turn back.

When I returned, I got an unexpected phone call from a well-meaning friend.

"You'll never guess who Pete's with now," she said.

With trepidation, I proceeded.

"Who?" I asked.

"Nora."

"Nora?" I croaked.

"I thought you should know," she said.

A choking sensation gripped me, though my throat was empty. I hung up the phone and rushed to the bathroom, hiding in the dark nook by the hamper. I sat in a ball on the cool floor and started to bite my nails. Nora had swooped in, snatching what I had abandoned. Even though she called multiple times over the next few days, I never answered.

I'd felt this kind of knife-edge betrayal once before when Mr. Lotte's investigation had just begun. Though he maintained his innocence, he also claimed he had fallen ill and needed to cut back on his

ever-expanding list of students. One night over dessert, my mother broke the bad news to me—I would no longer be one of Mr. Lotte's protégés. I was so stunned that I dropped my ice cream sandwich. My mother held me while I cried and told me that Mrs. Lotte was especially sad to see me go. "I just love Amy Jo," she told my mother. Mr. Lotte had no such sentiments to offer, or if he did, I can't recall them. I only remember the feeling of losing my breath. I can't even remember if I'd already lied on his behalf or not.

My young mind couldn't register the possibility that he might have dropped me because of what he'd done. My heart only had that bleeding-out feeling it gets when someone you love plays a dirty trick on you, as I had played—however unknowingly—against the girls who told the truth about Lotte, and as I thought Nora had played against me with Pete. In my anger I couldn't see that Nora had simply done what all of us girls had been trained to do: take the boys and leave the girls behind.

That summer I lost my friend but kept my fascination with old houses. The following year, one summer after the break-in, I volunteered as a house-tour guide during the annual Victorian Days arts festival. I liked to think of myself as an expert because my grandparents used to own one of the famous houses in town, just a few doors down from the courthouse. But under their ownership, the house had fallen into disrepair. Unable to maintain it, they sold the house to a rich college professor who gutted and remodeled it. My grandparents downsized from a striking Victorian in the center of town to a small, one-bedroom apartment a few miles away.

"My blue-and-white kitchen," my grandmother said as her grown sons boxed up her porcelain. "I'm losing my blue-and-white kitchen."

I still remember that house, especially the darkened hallway of the upstairs. The faulty switches were always on the fritz. In one room, my grandmother kept her 1950s vanity with the circular mirror. In a

cabinet along the floor, she stowed a black bag of dress-up clothes for my sister and I to play with when we visited. Inside it, we found threadbare gloves, mismatched high-heeled shoes, a strapless black dress, and a satin, long-sleeved wedding dress with a torn veil much like the one Julia wore in the final scene of *Anything Goes*. We always fought over who got to wear the wedding gown. We relished the feeling of parading around the grand house while our relatives exclaimed, "Everyone look! Look at the young bride before she goes off to marry."

For the house tour, I'd been assigned to a property on the east end of town. The coordinator hurried me inside just before the crowds arrived, and I took my post on the second floor outside a tiny room with a slender bed and an old sewing machine. A chain crossed the doorway to keep visitors out. *Look, but don't touch*. While I was alone, I dipped one foot inside the room, just grazing the floor's black-and-white tile. I wasn't so brave anymore without Nora beside me.

People barged in with their cameras. They each looked at me with expectation. I ought to have a story to tell, but I didn't. Ignoring their disappointment, I remained quiet until a tourist asked me a question.

"So?" he asked. "What happened here?"

For a moment, I thought he meant Mercury, that he meant us, this place that people pass through on their way to someplace else. *Mercury? I want to say. Everyone knows nothing happens in Mercury*. But deep inside the abandoned house in my chest, I knew it wasn't true.

When I realized the tourist was asking about the room itself, my response fell from my lips like water. "Well," I said, taking a small step toward him and flashing a sly grin. "They say that once, a long time ago, a young girl died in this very room."

I still relied on Nora, an estranged friend who now clothed herself with what I'd cast off, even as I hated her for it. My story inspired a hushed awe and the tourists backed away, taking care not to disturb any of the mundane items they mistook for relics.

Like most of the old houses in Mercury, Mr. Lotte's house is stuffed with mundane items that are often mislabeled as antiques. We've hung the Christmas ornaments and old candy canes atop the Lotte's Christmas tree during the past holiday seasons, and we've spied the porcelain plates and state spoons from their viewing shelf above the staircase. Bits of Americana and craftsmanship have found their way into even the tidiest of Mercury homes, but all these items are just for show. The most functional item in Mr. Lotte's employ must be his electric metronome, which sounds off during every lesson, and during the fall of 1991, its ticking decreases by half. *Tock tock*. Once the investigation begins and the police start making their rounds, poor Mr. Lotte develops an odd case of sickness. Mono, some say. Stress, say others. Either way, he insists the illness has nothing to do with the investigation. He is innocent; all this is just bad luck. It's been a tough year all around. Still, his schedule is too frantic. He has too many piano appointments, too many commitments. He has no other choice but to drop some of his beloved students.

Those of us who will lie on Lotte's behalf can't identify those of us he kept and those of us he discarded because of the masquerade that has become our sleepy Rust Belt lives. Like insects preparing to cocoon, we prefer solitude over camaraderie. Even so, the same question teases each of us, and it isn't *why* he did it. We know that the strong will target the weak. We've felt it in science class before dissecting our dead frogs. But how do the strong choose their prey? We want to know *how* Mr. Lotte selected the girls on whom he let loose his addiction. He could have physically overpowered all of his students, so we figure he must have separated out those he'd conquered psychologically, the ones he deemed emotionally weak. Is that what he saw in us when he looked down from his perch on the piano bench? And of course we can't help but wonder if he used this same algorithm for which students to cut when his health took a turn. Did he first prefer the weak and then decide to rid himself of them?

In the years to come, some of us will set out to prove him wrong. We'll grow up to host the high school's morning news and join the speech and debate team. We'll commit to looking older men in the eye. Others of us will sit in the back of the class, earning our quiet straight *A*'s and doodling on the backs of spare exam sheets. The desolate survivor's path isn't wide enough for us to travel it together.

After the police come and go and each of us does our duty, we'll return to Dr. Shaffer's orthodontist office to get our braces removed. For some of us, it will be months later; for others, it will be years. Sitting in the waiting room for the last time, Pam-the-receptionist's repetitive jingle won't seem so funny anymore.

"Good morning, Dr. Shaffer's office, Pam speaking."

Drill buzz drill

"Good morning, Dr. Shaffer's office, Pam speaking."

Drill buzz drill

As the minutes pass, we don't bother to look through the old magazines lying in a heap on the corkboard coffee table. Instead, we just watch Pam and start to wonder if there's even anyone on the other end of the line. As if, when she wakes up in the morning and shampoos her hair, when she drives home after five o'clock, when she scrubs her family's dinner potatoes, she's always saying the same thing. Good morning, Dr. Shaffer's office, Pam speaking. As if she continues to tell herself *this must be true, this must be true, this must be true*, in order to get herself to believe it.

Throughout the fall and into the spring as the investigation proceeds, Mr. Lotte continues to teach his other students who made the cut. They are some of his best—the ones adept enough to tackle Pachelbel's "Canon in D" and the watered-down score to *Les Misérables*. Convinced of his innocence, the parents keep surrendering their five- and ten-dollar bills to him each week. The people of Mercury don't bail when the going gets rough. This we know for sure.

At school, kids in the hall prowl for details.

"Hey," they say to us. "You take lessons from Mr. Lotte, don't you?"

"Used to," we answer as we elbow our way through the crowd, headed for the solace of our desks. "Just leave me alone."

When we reach our desks, we exhale and pretend to study our books until class starts, and so do our recitations.

"*Ain't* ain't a word, people!" the teacher begins. We are learning that the mechanics of language are like the pistons in an engine of an American-made Ford. The verb pushes the noun. They pull and they push, pull and push.

"Repeat after me," the teacher commands. "I pull the wagon."

I pool the wagon.

"Not 'pool.' That pronunciation is incorrect. Try again. Pull."

Pool.

"No, pull."

Poooool.

We make fun of the teacher during recess in the school yard with our own recitations, anything that will keep our lips moving and keep them from telling the truth.

Repeat after us:

Don't say ain't, your mother will faint. Your father will fall in a bucket of paint. Your sister will cry, your cat will die. The dog will call the FBI.

We say it over and over and over, this Rust Belt recitation that keeps our mouths busy and compliant. This kind of doggerel occupies our minds until it becomes a feeble prayer to dumb us, numb us, become the sum of us—just like Pam and her receptionist's jingle, just like our teacher and her nursery rhyme, and just like the gossip running wild in the town of Mercury.