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Going Home

by Vera Gajic

Maria was waiting for them at the house.

“Have you been in, what is it like?” asked Heidi before letting Mum out of the car.

“Sad,” said Maria “there isn’t any furniture and the whole place has been painted, there is very little to see, the heart has gone. I’m not sure I want to go back in.”

Heidi opened the car door and helped Mum out.

“Ah we’re home,” said Mum, “how lovely.”

Heidi’s eyes started to sting, how could she have forgotten tissues, this was going to be harder than she thought. It had been Mum’s home for over forty years, she’d brought up three children and nursed her dying husband here. But for the last eight years she’d been the last one left. Mum couldn’t bear to go in the living room and had only used the kitchen and her bedroom. She’d scuttle between the rooms, only brave enough to go into the living room when her children came to visit.

Heidi held her Mum’s hand as they walked through the hallway to the large living room, now a bland off-white with a new brown speckled carpet and empty walls. There was an empty space where the picture of St Nicolas used to hang behind its floating candle lit by Dad every Sunday, no clock made from offcuts of curly metal fencing by Uncle Mica, a metal worker, nor the framed picture of King Peter, smuggled out of Serbia decades before.

No signs of how full of life the house had been twenty five years ago, the inhabitants sharing the space in so many ways, Dad home from work reading the paper in his chair with the warn arm rest.

Mum trying to get the dinner finished having rushed back from her cleaning job, brother Nick tearing around with next door's twins racing their toy cars, Maria looking in the mirror trying out hairstyles and Heidi at the table trying to get some homework done amid the noise.

Heidi looks around, the house is silent now and she feels like a stranger here. It is the same house but it is no longer home. Then she spots a sticker on the bottom corner window and remembers putting it there twenty Christmases ago, it had stuck fast and she couldn't get it off. A small ripple of guilt flares up and disappears. Turning she thinks she smells the faintest trace of the roasted pickled cabbage they only had at Christmas; the sharp sweet meaty smell lingered tantalisingly for weeks after it was eaten. She looks up and sees the damp patch on the ceiling that no amount of paint would stop and the chip on the doorframe made by the toy car race. Tell tale signs, if you look hard enough that this is their treasured home and not one of the other identical semi's on the road.

Mum was staring out of the patio doors at the unkempt overgrown garden, no one had set foot in it for over a year and it was reverting to its natural state. The ancient cooking apple tree with its long extending bows that produced an abundance of huge sour green apples which mum would cook and freeze in small containers to last until the spring is surrounded by rotting fruit.

"The garden needs me," said Mum as they hugged in tearful silence.