

Ben Freeman
The Barn

Things easily disappear when you you're not looking. When you are looking that something looks as permanent as ever—stoic, calm, and unflappable in the coming storms.

The house was unlike the others in the neighborhood. No one jeered at us, but our neighbors' children did pelt various balls into our yard like one pelts the village idiot with rotten tomatoes. The outcome: an occasional pot smashed and flowers beheaded.

Why don't we start throwing things into their yard and see how they like it? my dad suggested on more than one occasion.

The idea did feel somewhat fitting. After all, our NFL exec neighbor said politely, we could keep the lacrosse balls, tennis balls, and even the bean bags that flew haphazardly over our shoddy picket fence: a fence that divided our dilapidated barn from their McMansion.

To make this metaphor just a little bit more poignant, their house was also on a hill overlooking our own. From our vantage point, any initiation of conversation required an upward gaze at the bust—superimposed by the picket fence—of Mr. and Mrs. Pigskin. I should make a correction here. The house wasn't ours.

This was Nana's house. There were things I didn't understand when I was young even though I had all the facts in front of me. Nana could be irritable, a bit crass, boisterous, and even mean sometimes. Nana had made my mom cry in front of me on more than one occasion. She had said some things to me which confused more than hurt. Nana had also been capable of kindness, adoration, and sympathy. But her moods could change quickly and my dad and her did not get along.

I can't remember the barn without picturing the wine jugs neatly placed against the wall in the mudroom, a faint sanguine odor hanging in the air as you walked by. Ironically, the jugs sat precisely above the hidden room—a distillery in prohibition days but now a windowless and asbestos filled dungeon.

What more signs were there of Nana's alcohol addiction? Things were in disrepair. My grandparents had lived through the Depression. Nana and Gaku knew the importance of reuse, improvised repair, and stockpiling. But after Gaku's death reuse got out of hand. Layers, upon layers of tape on old pipe like the rings of an 'hundred year old tree and rot that had been painted over so many times that no wall existed there anymore pointed to a lifestyle that had not been kind to Nana or the house.

That might have been why some of our neighbors looked down on us. We stuck out in a sleepy beach town that had recently boomed. After Nana passed away, I remember feeling for the very first time, embarrassment about a place that I was starting to partially live in.

I lived—for the most part—in New York City in affordable housing. There were days filled with worry over making rent. My mother, who had been the main bread winner, lost her copy-edit job in the 2008 recession.

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We had conversations at the dinner table about needing to cut back on extra spending. We weren't pocket poor, but we weren't rich either, my dad would say.

The confusion about our situation didn't stop there. Our building happened to be in Midtown, Manhattan in a neighborhood called Hell's Kitchen. The name was a vestige from the crack epidemic that my parents experienced in the 80s. It had not been an easy time to live there. It had been hell's kitchen, one might have said.

But, I guess my parents hadn't been looking hard enough because before they knew it Hell's Kitchen had transformed. While our rent was stabilized from an old building agreement, housing prices in the rest of our neighborhood were lucrative. To help you get a sense of the wealth accumulated from real estate, Russian Oligarchs and Chinese businessmen were buying apartments across the street from our own building, not to live in, but simply to hold wealth like you would a gold bar. On more than one occasion, I was accused of being rich—me— a kid who received free school lunch and was enrolled in medicaid.

Just when I got comfortable saying I was poor, things changed again. With Nana's passing, my parents and my aunt and uncle were set to inherit a modest amount of wealth, including the house. Meanwhile, we heard rumblings of our building agreement being terminated. Our owners weren't too happy to be missing out on their gold bars. They made proving income for recertification a big pain in the ass. They made our family worry again about paying rent. This time our fear was that our inheritance would be grounds for them charging us market rate on the apartment. Market rate, at the time, was \$4,000 a month. We wouldn't last long paying that.

I believe that's when the plan hatched in my parent's mind. My mom could buy out her sister's share in the house. My parents could live there. It was a fixer-upper for sure, but many people would have loved the opportunity to have house, let alone one just a ten-minute walk to the beach.

At this point, my sister had gone away to college and my parents poured themselves into the work of repairing the house. They repaved the sagging driveway, tore out and replaced rotting wood, painted over the faded walls but kept the barn-red color the same. They even made a dent in the large accumulation of things that had cluttered the house, packed the attic, and swarmed the basement. I helped somewhat. I had been kind of a lonely kid in high school. I ran long distances by myself. My only friends were teammates. If we weren't competing, I probably wouldn't see them on the weekend. With everyone gone, I felt very alone. I hadn't realized how much I came to rely on my parent's for company. I guess I wasn't like typical high schoolers. I was friends with my parents, so I decided to join them in the Barn.

After school on Friday, I would take the Metro North five stops from Grand Central to Fairfield. My mom would ferry me through town to the house. I made small contributions to housework, repairing the drywall, raking the leaves, etc. I never caught the bug for getting the house, though. Soon enough, I would be going away to college and living somewhere else like my sister. I could see why my parents did, though. Never mind that

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my dad made his living from playing gigs in the City, never mind that Fairfield boasted some of the highest property taxes in the country, never mind that the house would probably need thousands in repairs because it was, after all, pretty old. It was a good dream.

My sister and I were shielded from the fights our family was having over the house. On one side my parents implored my aunt and uncle to let them buy out their share of the house. This was an opportunity that wouldn't happen again. On the other side, my aunt and uncle implored my parents to consider the costs. They couldn't afford to live here, my aunt and uncle said. They would be ruined. It's eight years later and I still don't know what the truth was. Would my parents actually be ruined, or were they being robbed of a great opportunity?

I knew no one was being deceptive. Everyone was genuine, but it's no wonder Victorian novels made a killing off of inheritance heavy plots. Inheritance seems to be one of those things that introduce conflict in once stable relationships.

In the end, my parents didn't get the house. All my parents work and the house was still sold at the first bid to a real-estate company. If we couldn't have the house, we should have at least tried to sell it for more, my dad said. To be fair, he probably wouldn't have been satisfied with anything less than living there.

My mom was strangely quiet about the whole thing. This was her childhood home, I thought about what it would be like to lose the apartment where I grew up. Last I heard, the real-estate company had done everything but tear the house down. The only reason it still stood was that it was protected under the law as an historical structure. It probably would have been cheaper for the company to tear it down. To this day, I haven't gone back to see what the house is like. I haven't even searched it up on google maps. I'm afraid that the red barn that I remember so clearly will be something unrecognizable. I'm afraid of some loss that I can't quite describe—it's not like it was my childhood home or even my dream to live there; that was all my parents.

The best way I can describe this fear is through an old memory. This was before Nana had passed away, before my sister had gone off to college. This was 2012, the year of Hurricane Sandy.

We were in the house, worried that we might lose power and Nana would need someone to be there to help her. We did lose power, but it could have been much worse for us. The old house stood tall against hard rain and powerful wind. I woke up with guilty excitement wanting to see the results of such a powerful storm. The results were sobering. A large tree had fallen on our neighbor's house, causing some real damage to their roof. A massive tree in our front yard had come down, narrowly missing the row of dominoes which was our red barn and the house next door. Power lines were down and water pooled over half a mile of road leading to the beach. But the red barn remained stoic and calm in the midst of all the disaster. It felt like a guardian of some sort, our protector in the storm. Maybe I hadn't been prepared for the barn to be gone so quickly; although, I feigned indifference before as moody teenagers do. There's really nothing I could have done to save the barn. It wasn't my decision.

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But regardless, every now and then the guilt creeps under my skin, and I remember that we gave our loyal red barn away.