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This Old House, This Old Room

For history and legend sakes, certain attributes, character traits if you will, have to be appointed here at the beginning of This old house (B. 1742), home for half a century of my life, and This old room, dressed with computer by me for the last 23 years. Yet I swear thick-cut Edgeworth pipe tobacco bears its welcome as strong as my grandfather's creaking chair, diminutive Johnny Igoe's chair. This most memorable compartment was also his room for twenty-five years of literate cheer, storied good will, the pleasantries of expansive noun and excitable verb, and his ever-lingering poems, each one a repeated resonance, a victory of sound and meaning and the magic of words. Yet be of stout spirit, for the chair mocks time only in the clutch of darkness thick as the eternal void, and the tobacco's no longer threatening in its gulp.

To start off with, to walk these stairs, up or down, a signal for day or evening in the heart of an otherwise silence, is to hear sassy children underfoot, the underlings of square nails stretching their might, hanging on for two and a half centuries worth of treads and risers and hand-hewn stringers. Ah, *pingsnap!* Last night I heard one letting go, tired of the holding on. Without doubt, age talks back to you at night. *Pingsnap! Pingsnap!* Oh, woe! Hear that message, hear that voice.

Likewise, on a few major beams, newly exposed by my reach back into the house's beginning, some broadly a foot across, ax marks permanent as severe scars, bark on round edges clings in place, refusing to let go. That refusal boggles the mind to think these beams were slabbed out of trees closing now on three-hundred years of being, if not already there. Their span spans, their grip hangs tenacious.

Another note; a special window snugs close by the porch roof. How many times it has been the way in or out for generations of youth on to daughters or destinies we'll never know, where my sons and attesting companions saw one Halloween night, stars mere, the moon absconded with light, the shadow of a man in a felt hat. A strange man, they swore and swear. So strong the sight that all these years later they step aside passing through the back hall, as if making room for the dusky *persona grata*, granting memorial space for the solitary and dark intruder, though it's also sworn he wore the hat of a kind last seen hereabouts only on my father.

From a most personal confrontation comes another point of house lore. Standing by the twin windows of the bathroom one weekend morning, I watched two of my sons and a daughter at early play. The day bristled and crackled, leaves were at heavy spoilage and thick of pile, golden and myriad red Persians at a momentary standstill of their October march. My eyes trained on my own beginnings where an old barn, sloped at ridge beam and atilt, leaning forever, continued to loose energies and imaginations. In the barn rain hung on like old statements. Soft corners kept themselves wetter than rooting, heaved mushrooms out of droppings swept from stallions now but bone. Spider webs, taking up their dew, walked on railroad silver, aimed for stars locked at night where roofed pine knots fall, or the moon, needing a drink, dropped its straws down. It's wetter

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

likely underground, but can't smell like this: old blankets out all night, dog's breath, leather still breathing hide work a mule threw off his brewed chassis barreling the field all day. My intent was to watch and marvel at child's play and hustle, to propose and endure love from a distance, tempest of the far heart.

Mysteriously I was joined by another father who peered over my shoulder, sharing my intent. This man, this visitor, appeared out of the damp air of the room, a specter of comfort and custom, trying, I assumed, to take his place again, steal something back he had lost. I told him without looking back at him, sort of indirectly at first, and then most pointedly, that this time was mine. That father, and who knows how many others in conjunction with him in the same space, went quietly back to his eternal comfort. There were no tears, no ministrations or implorations, no wringing of hands, no fright wrought out of his visit, as though an inalienable right had been invoked.

For true appointment with time, accept this: this house was, in another heyday, in its infancy, the Oyster Inn, a stagecoach stop on the Boston-Newburyport run late in the Eighteenth Century. Put up or eat up, I'd suppose from clues. Part proof of that portrayal is the layer of discarded oyster shells that every garden attempt in the backyard has revealed, a thick white archeological strata most likely boasting both pre-Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary chalk. Such digs have uncovered old sump holes, dried and rock-throated wells gone harshly back to earth again, leech fields and cesspools also bearing rock and all laying a way of drainage off to the river a quick 200 feet away, some almost as modern as me. Who knows where those fluids went? The theory is, after seventeen feet of such plunging their purity is re-established, resurrected.

This is a house whose rafters and beams of its three floors are either 9x12 or 10x13 or 8x11 or thereabouts in its barn-body mix, leveled on the top for floor or the bottom for ceiling sighting. It is where ancient coin has been deposited by carpenter or builder as a token fetish on a base sill thicker than a lineman's thigh. And where, inside one wall and atop one window coming down in constant maintenance of the years, came forth a child's high button shoe nailed with a square nail to a lintel as a carpenter's statement. The old shoe's sole is worn extremely thin on one side as if that carpenter's child or builder's child had dragged one foot through a period of her early life. The shoe most likely is a fetish, a buttoned talisman or an amulet, or, as my father once pointed out from his worldly tours with the Marines, an *antinganting*, which a legendary Filipino had left impressed on his storied mind.

Oh, that child haunts me yet. She comes back each time I look upon the shoe framed in a recess of glass with a museum of house nails and clay marbles exhumed from beam restoration or foundation gravel. Each night dousing the last kitchen light, emptying out day, so much like a shopkeeper at the till, I think she might be the daughter of the other father who looked over my shoulder that day in the upstairs bathroom, where my territory, my time, was invaded, with a quiet retreat following. Honor among parents, perhaps, or the Good Carpenter, Joseph himself, making a stand for his tradesmen.

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

A house it is where boards in the roof are sometimes thirty-six inches broad in their endless cover (telling me the local forests have gone through generation change). It's a house where a portion of one cellar is a single stone no horse of theirs could have moved during construction and instead became part of the house's lasting support. It is where archways of red mickey bricks out of a long-gone nearby kiln stand as tunnels through the basement, and two and a half centuries later continue to hold up for needed warmth all eight fireplaces including two beehive ovens. Some nights alone, letting all my genes work their way into a froth of knowledge, or letting them free of baseboard or wainscoting, I taste the bread and the beans from those ovens, know the mud that sealed these domed cooking chambers, feel the kitchen work its magic.

This is, further, an abode from whose front yard I can, even today and bet the farm on it, throw a stone well into the First Iron Works of America, Cradle of American Industry. Waiting to sit again in that front yard, by the granite walk and steps, is a smooth granite hitching post, four hundred pounds or better, buried I'd guess for near a century in the backyard. There is a hole drilled through ten inches of that granite column, that snubbing post, that horse holder, where the wrought iron ring has fled back into the earth again. Though one son, I know, will put both back where they belong, time coming, time allowed, tools at home in his hands, and history.

On the floor of the wainscoted front room, in front of another fireplace sitting on those red mickey arches, where my wife, as my young son said, "Mommy was kissing (infant) Betsy on the floor." Betsy in the wrath of a momentary seizure, *grande mal*, and Mommy, RN, giving mouth-to-mouth to her daughter for the first of two tries. The spot of that life-saving retrieval was, as it proved out, but feet away from the door where I met her sneaking back in at four o'clock of a morning in her fifteenth year, having slipped out her brothers' window, that route cover thought broadcast safe. "Oh, dad," she unflappably said, "you're up early." (Now *she* has three children she must watch!)

But, all that aside, it is this room here that counts. At one and the same time, it is meager and plush, 11x15 in measure, a fireplace and hearth jutting off one wall, another wall lined with 60 feet of bookshelves. A quick look shows all the signed copies from Seamus Heaney, Galway Kinnell, Donald Junkins and Donald Hall among other Donalds, John Farrow's (sic) "City of Ice," comrade James Hickey's "Chrysanthemum in the Snow," some bound mementos of my own, and at least 60 sports trophies in hockey, football, baseball and softball awarded to my children. It has one window looking out on the Iron Work's original slag pile, Saugus River's salt basin plush with reeds and marsh grass, and telescopes towards Boston and the ocean a mere five miles away, and three doors to front and back halls and a small bathroom. Without doubt it is the warmest room in the house with only one 11-foot wall an outside wall, the other three with camel's hair in the plaster mix all being inside walls. The floor is maple that I can't replace commercially, (the floor where a closet once sat is now lumberyard oak, slightly off-color but in the mix). My original computer, an old Mac with a screen like a postage stamp, no longer humming late into the night or well before dawn, sits against one wall, beside the

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

fireplace; here, where I work, a newer unit, chock full of ideas, aspirations, and memories of him, tonnage.

This is where Johnny Igoe only ate oatmeal in the morning, a boiled potato and a shot of whiskey for lunch. Here he found Yeat's voice to be his own, that marvelous treble and clutter of breath buried in it, *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* popping free like electricity or the very linnets themselves, Maude like some creature I'd surely come to know. Johnny Igoe wrote his poems here, and yielded me Yeats and Mulrooney and Padraic Gibbons out of the long rope of his memory, the knots untied every Saturday evening of his life and mine. Also he launched many of my own poems here, by the dozens, and who, at the end, at 97, stained, shaking, beard gone to a lengthy hoarfrost, potato drivel not quite lost in it, giving me that eye alive to this day, sounds out in his own way:

The saga of Johnny Igoe is the epic of a nation; The root cell---Johnny Igoe at ten running ahead of the famine that took brothers and sisters, lay father down; sick in the hold of ghostly ship I later saw from high rock on Cobh's coast, in the hold heard the myths and music he would spell all his life, remembering hunger and being alone and brothers and sisters and father gone and mother praying for him as he knelt beside her bed that hard morning when Ireland went away to the stern. I know that terror of hers last touching his face. Pandalcon's grace comes on us all at the end. Johnny Igoe came alone at ten and made his way across Columbia, got my mother who got me and told me when I was twelve that one day Columbia would need my hand and I must give. And tonight I say, "Columbia, I am here with my hands and with my rags of war." (In Korea in 1951-1952).

As far back as I go he is there with great white beard and cane of holly that swung in circles at slim ankles, and the reaching hands of sisters and brothers. Perhaps he wrote The Roscommon Emigrant that he read to us in the quiet kitchen at night in winter. I am not sure, but he wound the isle about us, and he teased with his fairies and the names like "Ross, Culleen and Clooniquin." "Though adopted by Columbia I am Erin's faithful child."

He had bent his back in Pennsylvania's mines and Illinois' and swung a hammer north of Boston, poled his star-lit way down the Erie Canal, and died in bed. His years are still with me in the wind he breathed and storms he stood against and earth he pounded with his fist to fill the mouths of his children and my mother. When he was lonely he was hurt and sometimes feared the pain he could not feel because he knew it and knew how it came; and said man had to think hard and often to be wise and nothing was useless to man: not a sliver of wood because it makes a toothpick; not a piece of glass broken from a wine-red bottle because it catches sun and makes wonder; not a stray stone or brick because it is a wedge or wall-part or corner like one, the first or the last, put to the foundation of the old gray house that clings to the light and had wide windows and doors that were never locked.

On snow-bound mornings he laughed with us when daylight sought us eagerly and in cricket nights of softness that spoiled kneeling prayers. Sometimes his soft eyes were sad while we laughed, and didn't know about the man down the street or the boy who died racing black-horse train against young odds. His prayers were not an interlude with God: they were as sacred as breathing, as vital as the word. And the politicians never got his vote because he knew the pain they intended and he hated hurt. Hated hurt. The floorboards creaked beneath him in

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

the mornings and he brought warmth into chilled rooms and coffee slipped its aroma between secret walls to waken us.

The oats were heavy and creamed in large white bowls, and "Go easy on the sugar," was the bugle call of dawn. His books had a message that he heard, alone, quiet, singing with the life he knew was near past and yet beginning. He pampered and petted them like he did Grandma, and spent secret hours with them and lived them with us rehearsing our life to come, and teaching us.

Then, a high-biting, cold spring day in 1955 I knew would be memorial, the sun but snippets, ice still hiding out in shadow, winter remnants piled up in a great gathering, me bound to a shovel for the tenth day in a row. That's when I heard of Johnny Igoe's death in his 97th year. Grass and buds and shoots and sprigs of all kinds were aimless as April. All vast morning I'd hunted the sun, tried to place it square on my back. But the breeze taunted, left a taste in my mouth. Sullivan Marino, brother-in-law, boss who loved the shovel, sweat, doing the Earth over, walked at me open as a telegram. Sicilian eyes tell stories, omit nothing in the relation. "Your grandfather's dead." He was vinegar and oil and reached for my shovel. It would not leave my hands; I saw Johnny Igoe at ten at turf cutting, just before he came this way with the great multitude. I saw how he too moved the ponderous earth, the flame of it caught in iron, singing tea, singeing the thatch, young Irish scorching the ground he walked. He had come here and I came, and I went there, later, to where he'd come from; Roscommon's sweet vale, slow rush of land, shouldering up, going into sky, clouds shifting selves like pieces at chess, earth ripening to fire. I saw it all, later, where he'd come from, but then, sun-searching, memorializing, Sullivan quickly at oil and odds, his hand out to take our tool away, could stand no dalliance the day Johnny Igoe died.

He poled his star-lit way down the Erie Canal. Swung a sledge in Illinois. A hammer north of Boston. Died in bed. But the tobacco smell still lives in this room. His books still live, his chair, his cane, the misery he knew, the pain, and somewhere he is.

He might be housed in this computer, for now he visits, or never leaves, Yeats on record but the voice is my grandfather's voice, the perky treble, the deft reach inside me, the lifting out, the ever lifting out. In the dark asides before a faint light glimmers it is the perky pipe's glow I see, weaker than a small and struck match but illuminating all the same. I smell the old Edgeworth tobacco faint as a blown cloud in the air, the way a hobo might know a windowed apple pie from afar, and I hear his rocking chair giving rhythm to my mind, saying over and over again the words he left with hard handles on them for my grasping.