

The Empty Space

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Family

A house changes after somebody has died.

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*These essays are excerpted from Brian Dillon's **In the Dark Room**, originally published in 2005 and reprinted this year by Fitzcarraldo Editions.*

Lights Out

One of the consoling pleasures of moving to a new home—which nowadays one hears routinely compared to the pain and disarray of a bereavement—is the discovery of those odd architectural features that suggest the aesthetic eccentricity of our predecessors. Why, we wonder, a door *there*, or (odder) *no door at all* where a door ought to be. Peculiar boundaries or openings tend to perplex us most: They conjure up privacies or intimacies with which we can no longer identify. The German philosopher Theodor Adorno, in exile in America in the 1940s, wrote that the modern conflation of bathroom and toilet said a great deal about the loss of a particular European way of life.

A specific sort of conduit from one room to another often exercised my childish imagination. Above each of the three bedroom doors in our house was a small square aperture, lined with the same white-painted wood as the doorway. These were also to be found in other houses of the same vintage on our street, but I have never seen them anywhere else, and my inquiries have elicited only blank looks from people who live, or have lived, in similar houses. The gap above my own bedroom door was intriguing enough to explore regularly. With my back against one side of the door frame and my feet pressed hard against the other, I could inch my way upward and then, one hand clinging to the dusty surface above me, haul myself far enough to look through to the landing on the other side. I was always amazed by what I found there: The aperture seemed considerably thicker than the wall itself. What looked from below like a simple gap in the wall, revealed itself, once I was up there, as a passageway from one discrete part of the house to another. I fantasized about crawling through this narrow space, but by the time I was tall enough to brace myself against the doorway, I could barely get my head through the hole.

By day, this box of empty space was a curiosity to be first explored, then put to another use: On the way down, I could hang, a hand on either side, till my arms ached and my fingers began to slip from the rounded edges of the wood. At night, it turned the room into a half-lit place between waking and sleeping. After the light was out in my room, a pale yellow lozenge would remain on the ceiling by the door; a cone of light with its point lopped off stretched from the hole above the door to the wardrobe against the opposite wall. The light meant that my parents had not yet gone to bed. I always hoped to get to sleep before it vanished. While the light persisted, the bedroom still seemed part of the house, tethered to other, brightly lit but invisible rooms, where my parents were quietly and busily putting out a fire or laying the kitchen table for breakfast.

A passage at the beginning of *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, in which Proust's narrator wakes in bed to find a light still burning outside his room, stages a moment of which my own nocturnal reverie is a pale reflection:

The hour when an invalid, who has been obliged to set out on a journey and to sleep in a strange bed, awakened by a sudden spasm, sees with glad relief a streak of daylight showing under his door. Thank God, it is morning! The servants will be about in a minute: he can ring, and someone will come to look after him. The thought of being assuaged gives him strength to endure his pain. He is certain he heard footsteps: they come nearer, and then die away. The ray of light beneath his door is extinguished. It is midnight; someone has just turned down the gas; the last servant has gone to bed, and he must lie all night in agony with no one to bring him relief.

To wake in the night and find that the light from the opening above my bedroom door was once again stretched across the ceiling was in later years my greatest nocturnal fear. Like the lamp of a lighthouse which no longer turns but is stuck in a single, cyclopean beam of panic, it signaled a danger which would instantly be confirmed by a hushed voice or a footfall on the landing. The light could only denote an emergency, and it was just a matter of time before the door opened and my father would inform us of its full extent. On those nights, my brother and I would lie silent, waiting for the light to go out again. In the morning, I sometimes discovered that it still shone, dimly, through the morning light, though more

often than not my father would have turned it off on returning from the hospital where he had left my mother sleeping at last. Perhaps my memory of that faint relic of the night before is related to those mornings when my father had not returned. Having accompanied my mother in an ambulance in the night, he would not get back until evening, and instead his sister, summoned by a phone call in the early hours, opened the bedroom door to rouse us for school.

My memories grow unnervingly brighter: The room blanches into the light of summer, stripped of the consolation of darkness as I wake on a July morning in 1985. My father is at the door. He has not yet said anything, but I already know what is coming. I have been dimly aware, a few minutes earlier, of the sound of a ringing telephone, but my drowsy mind still hopes it was not the telephone but the alarm clock by my bed. My father doesn't move from the doorway, but stands there looking as if at any moment he might express his usual exasperation at two teenage boys reluctant to stir from their beds. But when he speaks, he says something about a hospital. And the phrase which joins the feeble light from the doorway to the shaft of sunlight from behind the curtains at the other corner of the room is: "She doesn't have long." The curtains remain closed as Paul and I dress hurriedly and step out into the light of the landing. Downstairs, a taxi is already waiting.

Waiting Room

The morning after my mother died, I walked the five minutes to the nearest news agent and bought a magazine. It was a Thursday morning in July, and that was what I did on Thursday mornings in the school holidays. I didn't know what else to do. I could not bear to stay in the house, but also (and here is the source of one minor shame) I wanted to read about the events of the previous weekend, when the global spectacle of Live Aid had glimmered in the corner of the living room of the house in Kerry where we had been holidaying when she was taken ill. I watched it, thinking: Everybody I know is watching this, and none of them, outside of my family, know that my mother is about to die. Leaving the house (in my memory, there is nobody else there), I dreaded meeting our neighbors, and so looked straight ahead, avoiding a glance into the gardens on either side of the road. Returning, I rushed to my room and lay for hours on the bed, reading. I didn't want to move from that spot. Outside the bedroom, I knew that things were taking their course: My father was making arrangements; my relatives in Kerry were perhaps already on their way to Dublin; in a room, somewhere—still at the hospital? At the funeral home a short walk from the hospital? I had no idea—my mother's body lay waiting for the funeral the following morning. But for those few hours, none of that really impinged: I was alone in a room, for the first time in weeks. The previous day, my brothers and I had been brought from the hospital to an aunt's house, where we had sat on a sofa for the whole afternoon, silent. My memory of that week is made almost entirely of space, not words.

A house changes after somebody has died: There is suddenly too much space. We all know

the symptoms of that change. We set an extra place at the table. We leave empty for months, even years, a chair in which the deceased used to sit. We imagine that at any moment the lost loved one will appear in the room (the air, the light, the whole room would subtly alter). These phenomena are familiar to the point of cliché. So well-known, in fact, that, even in the shock of our bereavement, we are surprised (in my case, embarrassed; shame seems to have covered for every other emotion) to find ourselves succumbing to them, as if we feel our grief must, surely, be more original than that. When nothing is said of the absence at the heart of the house, these lapses multiply; if only we could name the emptiness—we do know, after all, its name, her name—we would surely be better able to navigate around it, to keep moving. But time and again we find ourselves stranded in these ludicrous poses, like a photograph from which one figure has been erased: four dummies with nothing to say to one another.

Such is my memory of my home after my mother died. The house seemed to fracture. It no longer enclosed a world, however fraught, but a collection of discrete cells, places where, one would now always be reminded, something had taken place (before, the semblance of a continuum; now, a constellation of vanished moments). In the evenings, I retreated to my bedroom. My brothers started to do the same, until my father, one night, called us back to the sitting room and told us that now, more than ever, was a time to be together, not to wander off on our own. (It was, I think, one of only two moments when he managed to speak to us about what had just happened: The night following my mother's death, as I lay in bed waiting for the light outside to disappear, he had come in to ask us to pray for her.) I think he may have succeeded in dragging us back into an amputated family group for a time, before a routine set in which saw us dispersed about the house again.

Five years later, and the house seems to have been waiting to spring this scene on us again: It is morning, and I have gone to bed late, after taking a day off from university exams. I wake, groggy, to find that Kevin is standing at the bedroom door, and seems to be saying something about the police. (Did he say: "Something terrible has happened"? How else would you say it? How did he, as he climbed the stairs, begin to formulate that sentence?) Something has happened; but there seems to have been a mistake. He says a name. It is not my father's name. They have got the name wrong. Or they have got the man wrong, the family wrong, the house wrong. It's the wrong day, the wrong city, the wrong country. They've arrived, somehow (and now it starts to seem unlikely, this clerical error back at the station), at entirely the wrong conclusion. That is to say: They have got the wrong dead man, and the wrong place. But my brother seems sure: sure that they have made a mistake, but not the mistake I hope they've made. I imagine my father coming home, through the garden gate, to be told that he's dead: greeting his uniformed visitors in a light tweed suit, as if he knew he'd need to look respectable. My father is dead. No, my *mother* is dead (I know because I was here: I lay here, in this room, on this bed, the morning after she died). But my father is dead too. In a second, I am at the end of the bed, dressing. All I can think is: What do we do now? What exactly are we *supposed* to do now? So I start swearing, as I'm dressing;

cursing this morning, this place, right by the window, where I am standing dressing, again, too early in the morning, just like the last time. It is as if time has described a devious spiral and returned me to this point in space, where it will demand of me, again, that I stand here, then go downstairs, where I assume somebody will take me to a hospital, again.

The scene shifts to the hall. At the front door, a man and a woman, uniformed, are standing, and I know as soon as I see them that there has been no mistake. The man is holding a small card in a plastic holder (a union card, I think) on which I can clearly recognize my father's signature, and so I listen without objection as they give me the news. My father collapsed, 10 minutes from our house, and was dead, of a heart attack, by the time he'd been taken to hospital. Soon, I'm sitting at the kitchen table, and neighbors are making phone calls (to my father's sister, to my mother's sister) and demanding that I drink the glass of whiskey somebody has just set down in front of me. Before long, uncles and aunts have arrived and are making plans to take us to the hospital, to phone the same undertaker who dealt with my mother's funeral. But all I can think of is what has just taken place in the hall: that moment of confusion as I came down the stairs, before seeing the two figures in the doorway, when the future seemed to depend on the empty hall itself. For the briefest moment, that space might have contained anything at all; the possibility of a grotesque mistake, of a violent or lingering death, of time turning away from the course to which I am now trying to accommodate myself.

Three years after my father died, I am standing in the same spot in the hall, waiting to leave. Nothing has changed, except that everything has grown a little shabbier, somehow darker, and smaller. Everything depends once more on this threshold, between the house of the past and what is to come. But by now I am so tired of the house, so sick of its constant shuttling between past and present, so weary of the memories that are everywhere crammed into corners and drifting, untethered, across its floors, that I will gladly leave it to rot. The house, my mother had always insisted, was cursed. But the malediction, it turned out, was mine, and it was retrospective. I had simply never known how much I hated it, till the morning I abandoned it.
