

Scout
By Madeline Peacock

The doorknobs always felt wrong after a vacation. My hand would overtake it, as though it had shrunk in size. For a brief moment, I'd believe that my room might not be exactly as I had left it. I'd read about other children who found fantastical places inside of normal spaces – perhaps this new doorknob could take me there. The air was warmer, dustier than before we had left. I had seen enough movies to know the old, dusty houses were full of magic and waiting for the outcasts with dreams bigger than their bodies. The door would make a chunking sound as it released from the latch. Inside, my room would always lie untouched. Within a few hours the AC would remove the excess dust from the air, my family members would disperse to their usual spaces, and the doorknobs would feel normal again.

My parents removed the carpet from our floors when I was about three. At the time, I couldn't understand why they would trade the softness of carpet for bare, wooden floors. As I aged, I started to see the possibilities – perhaps the builders installed a trick floorboard where I could hide all of my secrets. I would stuff notes down inside of it, and I wouldn't read them for ten years. I would forget all about the floorboard, too obsessed with the fabulous goings-on of a teenage girl, until one day I'd spot it and I would remember. I would read the note of my younger self and I'd find some way to come back and talk to her to say thank you or to give advice. I just had to find that floorboard.

Or maybe it wouldn't be a floorboard. The shingles on the roof outside of my second story window always looked suspicious, like they weren't entirely trying to look suspicious, but I had read enough books to know that you had to keep an eye out for these sorts of things. When I got tall enough, I opened my window and reached my hand out. I fumbled my fingers across an entire row of shingles as far as I could reach until finally I found it – a loose shingle. This was it! This must be where the house kept its secrets, or at the very least, where I could keep my own. I tucked that piece of knowledge away but never wrote myself a letter.

Each night in December, I would turn the radio on before bed. I would stay up watching the stars glimmer and shine through my window and listening to a talk show where people called in between the Christmas carols to talk about how much they loved their husband or wife, brother or sister, mom, dad, daughter, or son. Some nights, the house would creak as gusts of wind gave way around it. I would imagine the house caving in, finding myself falling two stories down until I hit the kitchen tile. I could feel myself falling, falling down, down, down, with only the voice of the lovesick callers and sappy Christmas love songs to ground me. I thought how wonderful it would be if someone would call her about me one day. I was about thirteen when I started to recognize the same few callers over the years talking about the same lovers and the same stories. I never turned on my radio at Christmas again.

Eventually, I started to recognize that magic worlds only existed on pages and radio talk shows weren't always truthful. I started to consider myself a logical person and decided anything to the contrary should be taken as an insult. However, it seemed that I alone shared this sentiment. My dad used to tell me I was sensitive, just like my mother, but he always said it with a smile. I think it's important to know that he loved my mother very much, and though a 14-year-old could only ever interpret this as an insult, I could not be more convinced that it was the highest compliment I could have gotten coming from him. He would call me "Little Diane" when I gave him a hard time, but he would smile, because his youngest daughter was speaking her mind without any hesitation. I took it as an insult in part because I believed logical girls were more admirable than emotional ones, but mostly because the person I wanted to be most in the world was him.

He told my older sister that his favorite novel was *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and that I couldn't read it because I had to wait until I was assigned it in school during my tenth-grade year. I decided from that moment on that my favorite novel would be *To Kill a Mockingbird*, too, and once I turned 16 and read it for school, I started to tell everyone that it was. At some point, it became clear to me why he liked it so much. Like Atticus Finch, my dad was a small-town lawyer who could have made a lot of money but preferred to serve the community he grew up in. He tried to right wrongs and bring justice to those who needed a strong voice to support them. If I asked him, he would tell me that he liked the morals of the story, or that being a ham for Halloween is a funny idea, or perhaps that he could just see glimpses of himself and his own life spelled out on those pages. He wouldn't tell me this, but I think it might be true – perhaps in a literary sort of world, I was his Scout and he was my Atticus Finch.

Much like Scout, I couldn't stay little forever, though I didn't realize I would be moving out when I did. I went away to college and came back each summer. After four years, I applied to graduate school to pursue my Ph.D. in the neuroscience underlying drug addiction. After many years of hearing from my father about how great of a lawyer I would be, his eyes softened as he looked at me and said,

"You're going to help a lot of people."

I never once questioned how proud he was of me. A few days later, I moved into a tiny apartment in D.C. There were no windows in my room, and I had to jump over my single bed to get to my closet. I lived off of frozen chicken breasts and rice for the next four years as I completed my education. On the rare occasion that I visited back home, I would slowly turn the doorknob and hold my breath for a brief moment where I'd believe that my room wouldn't be exactly as I had left it. The air always felt dusty these days, the door was more warped than ever, but the doorknob felt the same in my hand as it always had. Though my parents had quickly reclaimed my older sister's bedroom, my room had always remained untouched.

My mother always put sunflowers on my dresser for me whenever I visited. She first started this tradition when my older sister came back home after completing her freshman year at college. I was 15, so naturally I had to make the event about me. I caused a bit of a scene. I get sunflowers whenever I visit now, a little reminder from my mother that my coming home is worth the extra bit of effort.

Growing up, my mom wasn't the type of mother who would bake bread or pies. She tangled my dad's shirt in thread while attempting to sew on a button, and one time, she glued my older sister's eye shut while putting her makeup on before her dance recital. My mom was not a homemaker by any traditional sense of the word, and when I was younger I certainly wished she were different. I seemed to overlook the fact that she may not do our makeup for us, but I was always able to find her sitting in the audience. It was moments like these in my adult years, however, when I could look around my room (untouched), see the sunflowers on my dresser, and appreciate that the scent of fresh bread would be an extraneous detail; nothing could make this place feel more like home.

The truth of the matter was that I could never stay that long. My parents and I would start to bicker after extended periods of time. I was in college when I realized that I was starting to have opinions completely separate from that of my family. This was something very difficult for me to come to terms with because I still lingered on every word my dad would say, but even Scout grew angry with Atticus after moving back home from New York. My room was always waiting for me whenever I came back, untouched aside from the sunflowers.

I didn't care for the city much at first. I felt out of place considering I grew up on ten acres of land that overlooked a creek in the forest. My classmates would ask me to remove all the bugs that somehow got inside, which my dad thought was hilarious because I stopped liking bugs the moment I realized some of them could sting. I suppose family always sees you in one way no matter how you might look to other people. Though I didn't mind being the fearless bug-catcher in the city, I was always happy to let my dad deal with these things whenever I visited them in the countryside.

My parents never hesitated when I needed help with anything: from bugs to taxes, car repairs to life stressors. Naturally, I called my mom when I bought my first house. I was excited to paint my own walls just as she had done when I was a child. I wanted my house to feel like something I taken the time and effort to make by hand. It had never occurred to me that she had done so simply because she had been on a budget. My husband and I pay our mortgage each month, and each month we feel the stress of putting food on our table. In the beginning, I was having intrusive memories of the second-hand store my mom bought my favorite shoes in, the peanut butter sandwiches I'd eat for lunch, the cars my parents drove into the ground. In these moments, my memories would feel less like nostalgia and more like the stress of a budget. To this day, it is difficult for me to reconcile these two timelines in my head. While my parents worked and made sacrifices to put my sister and me through college, I was upstairs looking for secret passageways and trick floorboards.

My new house was two hours north, and I wasn't able to visit often. Whenever I did manage to walk through their front door again, they'd smile and call me "Doctor." First they would hug me and then my husband, as if he were their own. The house smelled a little dusty, but they always had dinner ready for us. My old room was waiting with sunflowers, much more barren since I had taken many of my old things to fill my own home. Late at night, I could still hear the wind give way around the outside of the house, and sometimes I'd start to think that I might fall down, down, down until I hit the kitchen tile. My own home is a new build. The floors are made of plastic that looks similar to hardwood if you've never actually seen hardwood floors before, and the wind doesn't make the second story sway because it's a part of a row house. I don't have a yard, certainly not ten acres of forest and creek, but I can't help but wonder if my own little girl will catch her breath for a brief moment waiting for fantasy lands to appear in her room after a vacation. Will she write herself notes to hide under the floorboards, or will she realize the only thing beneath them is plywood?

The warm, dusty air hit my lungs harder than it should have. Fighting back tears, I grasped the doorknob in my hand. I didn't feel anything at all. I opened the door slowly, because this time, my things would be missing entirely. My room echoed without its furniture. I sat on the hardwood floors that used to have scratches but couldn't be sold in that state. The stain of my blue nail polish used to lie six inches to my left, but now there was nothing to look at except for the shine of the new floors. I resisted the temptation to dig my fingernails into the waxy topcoat as I had done so often as a child. In that moment of stillness, I found myself wishing for the last time that I could find a trick floorboard with a note from my younger self, a self whose parents were still there to care for her as she searched for magic she felt with such certainty – perhaps a magic that was never imagined at all.