

Where the Heart Should Be

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First Place—Essay Competition

The road home is elusive and foggy. What the road looks like depends on where I'm heading. If I'm heading back to my house, the 1024-square-foot lodging my mother works hard to make home, the road is not unbearably long. Only fifty-four miles stretch between where I am and where I'd rather be, and the distance is usually bearable. If I'm heading to my grandparents', the homey stretch of land on which I took my first steps and learned to ride a bike, the drive takes barely half an hour. Even so, if I'm headed *home*, home to Onaga, the little Kansas town where my dad built his business and the two-story masterpiece we lived in, the drive takes a bit longer. Eight hundred and seventeen miles separate me from Onaga; eight hundred and seventeen miles swell between me and that old wrap-around porch, the tree that brandishes my initials like a tattoo, and the people who would still know my name if I pulled my hair back in pigtails and walked down the street singing about little Bo Peep and her lost lambs—yes, lambs. Eight hundred and seventeen miles covering nearly ten years wait between me and Onaga, but Mayberry towns like that never really leave a person on their own.

My family and I have lived in many places: Dancy, which I swear is a real town; Olive Branch, in a house walking distance from the Tennessee line; Inverness, with mosquitos as big as my palm; Memphis, with one king-sized bed for five kids; Conway, for a short business bankruptcy; Mathiston, when we could not stand on our own; Mantee, when we could; and Onaga, the friendly little town to which I was first brought home. Atop the hill that is Leonard Street sits the house my father built from the foundation up, and now, I am heading back with my brother next to me. We'll take the thirteen-hour drive in shifts so we do not have to stop, and to keep the other awake on the endless roads, we tell stories.

"Remember when you got stuck in the laundry chute?" I ask, hands clenched tight around the steering wheel. My brother laughs.

"Mom had half her body in so she could hold my hand while the carpenter cut me out." I was less than three at the time; all that the memory is, is blurry colors and sections of stories I've heard other people tell, yet, still I laugh as the memory swells up around me.

"You deserved it," I tell him without pity. "You were trying to convince *me* to get in there." My brother, nuisance that he was—is, forever will be—had all kinds of awful ideas to get us in trouble.

"You wouldn't have gotten stuck," he says with a shrug, and I cannot help the incredulous laugh that leaves my lips.

"I hope it doesn't
feel like home
anymore..."

"You're right! I would have *fallen* the three floors from the attic to the cellar!" He shrugs, a smile on his face. "Remember Rory from down the street?" I ask, half a state and two candy bars later.

"I remember Rory's hot older sister," he replies, grinning ahead at the road.

"Gross," I toss back, and we go back and forth from there.

"I wonder if my room is still blue."

"I hope they left the tire swing."

"I bet they finally had to pave the driveway."

"I wonder if our heights are still nicked into your door frame."

"I hope it doesn't feel like home anymore," he says when it is his turn, and strangely enough, I know what he means. Onaga still feeling like home would mean having to rip ourselves away again and face the hurt with as much difficulty as the first time. Even so, the time to change our minds is drawing short as the 817 miles become nothing but town blocks.

I am driving again, coasting along the roads I no longer know, the roads I realize I *never* knew. They

have changed in the ten, thirty, one hundred years I have been gone. The little library at the end of Main Street has since burned to the ground, and the park where I spent many afternoons playing with my brother and sister is unkempt with trash and overgrown grass. I glance at my brother, but he is staring at the broken swings, the rusted jungle gym. He is staring at the broken and rusted symbols of his childhood, but when he looks back to me, he forces a smile.

Three more minutes along the hilly and haunted roads, and at last, we are there and staring up at the house, The House. My brother steps out of the car first; I am too shocked, too horrified even to breathe. I am staring up at it through the glaze of dirt on the windshield, but there is no mistaking the house before me, as much as I wish I were mistaking it. The house before me is not my home. My home was sprawling, white, clean, open and loving, warm, and never dull. The house before me is broken; its porch sags overhead, and its doors hang off-center from the hinges. Cigarette butts and broken beer bottles cover the steps of brick leading up to the front door. The fresh, white paint my father coated atop the wood is yellowed and cracked; the windows I spent Saturday mornings watching my mother scrub clean to the cadence of her voice have fallen victim to the rocks of neighborhood kids.

As the lump in my throat threatens to choke me, I brave my first step inside the house. The interior is not in much better condition than the exterior. Where our family photos once hung, there is now a barren and dusty stretch of wall, riddled with nail holes and termite hollows. Where there was once our coffee table and couch covered in Mom's hand-stitched pillows, there now lies an abandoned and broken bookshelf along with a rug of crumpled newspaper covering what was once a shiny, ever-waxed floor. My brother takes my hand, and together we make our way through the rest of the house. The kitchen is water-stained and ruined. The hallway is scuffed and sticky with smoke stain. The laundry chutes have been boarded up on every level of the house, and I am running out of faith. But at the top of the stairs, my beacon of hope: one room remains.

The door creaks as it is pushed open, but the walls are still blue beneath the layers of dust, and the bed that we could not take with us still has his name carved into

the post, E-R-I-C, in blocky handwriting. He smiles a bit, but I begin to cry, the ache in my chest deep and painful. I am not staring at his bed; I am staring at our heights nicked into his door frame. I am staring at the years of memories that no longer live here, no longer live anywhere.

When we leave the house, we check into a motel room a few hours away because neither of us feels able to stay in Onaga, not when my favorite Sunday school teacher offered to buy us coffee, not when the owner of the hardware store called Eric by name after ten years. As we lie in our respective beds that night, I know my brother is not sleeping. I can hear his thoughts from across the room.

"It didn't feel like home," I murmur finally, and through the darkness, I can see his eyes flick open.

"Isn't that what you wanted?" he asks, and I turn away.

"I thought it was." A moment passes; an eternity passes. "It's worse knowing I don't have a home," and by the slow shutting of his eyes, I know he knows what I mean. ▲



Blossom in the Dew

Ella Stone

Honorable Mention—Drawing
Scratchboard