

We went through the base's main gate, where a U.S. Marine checked my dad's badge. A sign next to the gate read "Loose Lips Sink Ships" in big red letters over a picture of a sinking ship. The marine saluted briskly when he saw my dad was a captain, and my dad saluted back, crisply and more sure than anything I had ever seen him do. "Makes you feel important, that does," he said over his shoulder, "though they are so sloppy about salutes these days." At our insistence, he demonstrated how a proper salute should be done, while my mom urged him to keep both hands on the wheel.

Past the gate, the street was wide and lined with sycamore trees and automatic sprinklers that sparkled like rainbows in the sun. But then we turned off the main road, and it was all tumbleweeds and dirt again, with rows and rows of identical duplexes on identical street blocks. The buildings were washed out and faded from the sun, their paint peeling. In this hostile environment, even the paint could not cling, so the houses were a cracking, flaking gray. The government seemed to love gray. The streets were a palette of light brown sand, gray houses, and black streets. At that moment I realized we were moving not to a world of brilliant wildflowers and desert antelopes, but to bland, blocky government houses. The desert did not know that I wanted flowers *now*; it did not care that time for a child is *forever*. I would have to wait.

Rounding the corner to our new house on Rowe Street, we saw that the lawn was a dirt patch with a few clumps of dried grass. The duplex, an ash gray box with a flat roof, looked like an abandoned cell block, with a front porch tacked on that may as well have been a half-finished room: just four cement walls with window-sized holes to look out from. It was not at all like the pictures in *Life* magazine, which showed a smiling family— including a beautiful teenage daughter— standing on a nice lawn surrounded by flowers and a picket fence. Another *Life* photo depicted the living room of their huge house, where the family sat around in suits and high heels, everyone laughing. rocket town! the magazine headline had read. I felt betrayed.

Inside, the house smelled of cigarettes and vague foodlike substances trapped in the forest green shag carpeting. My mom rushed to her familiar Ethan Allen couch, which had been moved in earlier by the navy. My dad followed, and they sat in silence, staring down, as we watched them tentatively. Then my dad looked up at us and smiled, saying, "Well, at least I

don't have to stay in the bachelor's quarters anymore. This is our home, Mary!" He patted her thigh lightly, more out of nervous energy than affection, like the way he sometimes obsessively tapped the steering wheel.

"Don't do that." She caught his hand the second time. "You know I don't like it when you do that." But he never stopped, for the rest of his life.

Our house in Seattle had azaleas, alders, and our blooming cherry tree. Our duplex had one dying cottonwood. It also had no garage, no garbage disposal, and no washer-dryer hookup. Instead, we went to the base laundry; my dad insisted we avoid the one off base, which was better. "He was probably worried about me being able to get on base again," my mom explained later. She didn't have a badge. In the bedroom, a loud swamp cooler hummed, and the kitchen had a stove and refrigerator that looked as though they were from the forties: round and white with a big "General Electric" logo in silver. A sign on the refrigerator instructed us to call Public Works, number 7177, for repairs or problems with the house. My mom pulled the flyer off the refrigerator and went into the living room. She sat again on her Ethan Allen couch, covered in perfect pale blue linen, and began to rub its arm as if to invoke some magical genie that would restore her real home. Christine and I stared at the walls of cement and asbestos slapped over chicken wire to avoid looking at her.

Only as an adult did I discover the base housing regulations, tucked away in my mother's files, which explained how it all worked. If my mom and dad had been childless, I found out, they would have been assigned a motel-sized room with only an electric range. If Christine or I had died, they would have also had to go to that apartment building, since our house had a two-child minimum. If my dad had packed up and left us, my mom would have had five days to move out. It was all in the housing regulations. Mom was completely dependent on him, and us, for even this tiny space. We all had to stay alive.

As for me, my only disappointment was that I had not seen any wild animals.

"Mom, uh," I asked quietly, "where are the coyotes?"

No one replied.

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