

This Old House
by Tom Sheehan

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. 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. They are 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, 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. That window is 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 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 children'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. Every garden attempt in the backyard has revealed a thick white archeological stratum, 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, and leech fields and cesspools also bearing rock. All of them 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, fluid 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 was 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. The shoe was nailed with a square nail to a lintel as a carpenter's statement. The 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. I have framed it 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.

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 wall 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. Two and a half centuries later they 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 times. 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 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. It has 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 fireplace; here, where I work, a newer unit, chock full of ideas, aspirations, and memories, my own tonnage.