

The Sun Room: A Residential Lament
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When my wife and I moved from Oregon to Washington state in 2006, we purchased a 1961 ranch-style house. It's got three bedrooms and a master bath and a full basement with a toilet next to the clothes dryer. There's a large back yard with a swing set, a raspberry patch, and a garden shed. Over its history, the house has seen a number of owners, giving it a checkered reputation in a neighborhood where several residents have lived for over forty years. Though the prior owners took good care of the place, their tastes have not always aligned with ours. We've replaced a hedge with a hospitable cedar fence and planted a few trees to bring a little privacy from windows that loom over our back yard, add some shade and stateliness to the street, and hopefully yield apples and pears one day. Much of the work inside has been that of pure aesthetic maintenance, primarily the removal of old wallpaper and the application of various hues of colorful paint.

I am now entering my tenth year of home ownership, and I'm increasingly realizing how the comfort a home offers is offset by the time and energy required for upkeep. Painting and fence-building take away from time at my desk or out with my kids. It seems one must strike a balance between the self-satisfaction of the former and the unadulterated pleasure of the latter, and my preference lies in unadulterated pleasure. Yet in the interest of not living in disorder and satisfying my wife, I attend to household projects at a rate of one or two a year, something we can both live with.

It's through such regular scheduling that my paternal grandparents have managed to keep their own forty-some year old ranch home in a mid-town division of Riverside, California fresh and pleasant. They are in their eighties now and it's hard to imagine them leaving any time soon.

Their holding fast to their simple and elegant home (and I say elegant because I like the way the conjoined living and dining room are craftily married to the back yard by a wall of windows and a pair of glass doors) has distinguished them as far as I can tell from their old friends and neighbors. Most of the former have migrated to newer suburbs in the foothills on the eastern edge of the city, suburbs with spotless vacant playgrounds, condominiums, and golf courses with higher green fees, or to well-to-do towns along the base of the San Gabriel Mountains to the north, out of an aging and hardening cityscape. I think it is in part their upkeep, which allows them to remain and allows their home to remain a welcoming oasis.

When I was small, a detached garage sat at the end of my grandparents' driveway. My grandmother remembers it with a visceral "ugh" and mentions cockroaches. I don't think I went in there too much. In my vague memories, it remains ordinary: dark and dusty with folding tables piled with boxes of tools and broken fans. I remember a doorway in which hung a beaded curtain, how I liked to move through it, listening to the clatter and feeling the strange tactile offering, a sensation like the one I got when I parted racks of garments while waiting for my mother at the clothing store. Perhaps, I hid there and imagined I was a lion hiding in tall grass.

I remember the building for what it became when I was in my teens, the sun room. My grandparents cordoned off the back yard with an eight foot fence and emptied the garage and put big screen windows along the west and south sides and cabinets on the north. They put in white wicker furniture with blue floral-print cushions and matching wallpaper and a brand-new ping-pong table, with new paddles and balls. When I visit now, my grandfather says to my grandmother, "Hey, Squeak, think Aaron wants to play ping-pong?" giving me the impression that my desire to play was far greater than the rest of the family. It stings a little bit to hear for

that kid is still a part of me, that unquenchable desire to master the game and to win and to be constantly at play. I never could beat my elders, but always believed I was one shot away.

The sun room to me was a lovely place, a room outside, some kind of wonderful fort, open to the yard, the air, the sounds of the city, the small prop planes buzzing low overhead as they descended into the nearby municipal airport. In the last twenty-odd years, however, the sun room has not maintained its luster. A leather bag of unswung golf clubs collects dust in the corner. The ping-pong table sags in the middle, the paddles have broken or their surfaces are worn, the balls that haven't gone missing are yellowed. There's a big TV in a wooden cabinet that's never turned on.

I guess the sun room is not high on the list of remodels now that my grandparents' offspring are older and live farther away. In the last decade, I've been lucky to visit every other year, and when I do I rarely get there. I mostly sit at the picnic table on the back lawn catching up and watching the new generation play. I wonder if my grandparents recognize this, that there is less and less the need to go out there, that their retirement income is better spent on the house, which they inhabit the most. When my wife and I talk of building a deck on the back of our house, so we can spend a little more time outdoors, I always rein us in by considering, in light of the overall cost, the amount of time we'll actually get to use the thing. We're not sure where we'll be in a few years, and over that time a deck will not earn its cost. I wonder if my grandparents are also weighing the cost of things against time. I suppose most of us do in the hope of leading lives of measured comfort.

Yet, I can dream, and in my dream I am a boy. I am in the sun room at the end of the ping-pong table, facing the screen door. Through it come my family, taking turns opposite me, appeasing me by joining a game. My grandparents, my uncle, my father. We play doubles, hit

aces, marvel at long rallies, our bodies leaning in rhythmically and the ball ticking time like the pendulum of a clock. When my cousin two years younger shows up, the game breaks down in some goof. In my dream, the paint, the wallpaper, the carpet and wicker is brilliant, unmarred. I hear idle conversation and laughter and nicknames called lengthily from the kitchen window. And everyone will live forever.

My father gave homeownership a couple runs, the first time with my mother and me when I was a baby. He bought a house on an acre lot in rural western Oregon, the house I grew up in. After my parents separated, he built a place in the desert outside of Riverside. It was family-sized with three bedrooms and a master bath with his and hers sinks. I hoped he was making room for a second wife, more kids maybe. He didn't last there two years before returning to Oregon. That was also when he stopped working, in his mid-thirties. He'd lost both of his feet in Vietnam and received a full pension from the Veterans Administration. He could get by without working. He began to travel. Late in his life, I mentioned the desert house to him, trying to infer some motive on his part of actually settling. He said, having already relegated himself to the past tense, "I never knew what I was going to do next." What can be said for sure is from there on every place he lived in became smaller as he lessened his impression on the earth.

Four years in a two bedroom rental home in Springfield, Oregon. Five more in another in Riverside near the school for the deaf. The landlord eventually put that one up for rent. "I should have bought that place," he said. Instead, he settled across town in an apartment, also two-bedrooms, near an amusement park. He lived there more than ten years. The longest he'd lived anywhere, he told me. But in 2005 high rent and obnoxious neighbors drove him out.

He ended up at a place in my grandparents' neighborhood, his old neighborhood. He described it to me as a place for people like him, those with disabilities and those living on fixed incomes. It was smaller than where he was coming from, but still held two bedrooms. I saw the place the next Christmas. I stayed with my grandparents, because I thought they would have more room for my family of three. But my dad took us over shortly after we arrived. He lived in a meaner tract than my grandparents', one of small square homes on square lots and even streets. A line of flags marked the gate of his complex. It was separated from the street by a short drive and fronted by an office building and a shimmering blue pool. A maintenance worker in shorts and a t-shirt drove by in a golf cart and waved, and a geriatric moved slowly down the sidewalk in an electric chair.

"Dad," I said, "this is an old folks home. You're too young for this."

"No, I'm not. I'm a senior citizen."

"You're not even sixty yet."

There was a little patio in front of his apartment under an awning of chocolate-colored rafters. It would have been a nice place for some tomatoes or a little lime tree, but it was barren save a plastic lawn chair, a small plastic table with a tuna tin for an ashtray, and an antifreeze jug. There was a heavy screen door with a deadbolt. The only furniture in his living room was a used stuffed rocker. He'd put a remnant of Astroturf in front of it, so the hard heels of his oxfords didn't wear out the carpet. At the end of the living room, his brown formica table sat beneath the kitchen bar, its original chairs having been replaced with more plastic lawn chairs. Across from the rocker was Dad's preferred shelving of pressboard and cinder blocks. There were souvenirs from exotic places: a jade sphinx, a brass Hindu god, and a bare-breasted wooden woman holding a cup in her lap. And there was the TV and the cable box, which we eventually

turned on. Dad sat in his easy chair and my wife and I plopped on the floor by his feet to watch a movie called *Coffee and Cigarettes* and our daughter crawled between us.

The master bedroom had big windows, which could have brought in a lot of nice light had the blinds not been closed. Against the wall was a tall street-sized garbage container that was maybe twenty years old and half full of aluminum cans of generic diet cola and malt liquor. The second bedroom had a low shelf of books. During the move, he'd reduced his collection to one work per author. I wonder how many Vonneguts he'd had to get rid of to get to *The Sirens of Titan*. What was it like to let go of those old hardback copies of *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*? He'd done the same with other authors, too. I noticed he kept everything I'd given him. My father had long prided himself on traveling light, that he could move himself with his own van in one day. And in this apartment his lightening came to an end.

It was my grandmother who called and told me he died. His health had been failing and he'd taken his life. I flew down with my family. I had a second child by then. We arrived at my grandparent's first—that oasis at the end of the cul-de-sac. The current recession had begun and the homes of new neighbors were already empty and posted for sale. My grandmother peeked through the curtained window next to the front door and called my name. She unlocked the door and screen and I came in and leaned down to hug her and smelled her familiar shampoo and felt the coarseness of her hair.

After I greeted her and my uncle's family, they led me to the dining room table which was covered with photos of my father. They were removing some for a poster to be displayed at the memorial. There was a photo of my dad looking adventurous as he steered an aluminum skiff across an Alaskan bay and another of him looking unsure as he held my baby daughter.

“We went over to your father’s today and cleared out most of his things,” my grandmother said. “They’re out back.”

My uncle walked with me through the kitchen and the laundry room into the back yard to the sun room. The afternoon sun still shone bright off the concrete patio. My uncle said, “We found the will today. He left everything to you.” He put his hand on my back warmly. I crossed the cobbled pavers through the verdant grass of the back lawn. I grabbed the handle of the sun room’s screen door. It was stuck so I jostled it open. My new possessions were laid out before me. They were heaped on the buckling ping-pong table and formed a pile on the floor surrounded by the aged wicker furniture that had faded from white to grey. The pea coat, the fishing poles, tackle box, tool boxes, pistol, rifles, and knives, an enormous flathead screwdriver over a foot long. Books in boxes and small round laundry baskets which the mesh was breaking from. Grocery bags full of t-shirts and towels. The old Scrabble board, the chess set. The gaudy lamp of the nude. A cane and the forearm crutches with circular braces for the triceps and pegs for the hands to grip. The cheap wheelchair he’d picked up at the Salvation Army after blowing out his hamstring. And there were a couple pairs of the prosthetic legs, sprawled bodiless, the fiber form flesh of the fake calves naked, but the black socks and oxfords still on, the laces tied in hard knots instead of bows, because his socks never needed changing.

The End