



PASSAGES

A few years ago I visited one of my childhood homes, a small A-frame in Wyoming that had been expanded with the addition of two tiny bedrooms, where my younger brother Zack and I slept, ages two and three. A narrow flagstone-lined corridor connected the new rectangular structure to the original triangular one and it was this stone hallway that captured my adult interest, for in the suspended childhood time to which my memories of the house were subject

the passage had taken on mythic proportions. Yet although my recollection of the proportions of the hallway proved hazy, my memory of its significance lingers unblurred.

The main part of the house, with the kitchen in the northwest corner, was bright by day: the long picture windows with their southern exposure flooded the house with sunlight, the thin, weak warmth of winter deepening into summer's gentle glow and eventually succumbing to sultry autumn sun. A blue-and-white checkered tablecloth covered the round table where we ate and painted pictures and sculpted with salt-and-flour clay. In the summer Zack and I brought back centerpieces for the table: bouquets of pussy willows, rosehips, dandelions, and sprigs of aspen, most of which would promptly wilt and dry, scattering withered leaves beneath the yellow enamel pitcher we had placed them in.

At night the house slid into velvety darkness. Before retiring to the loft where he and my mom and our baby sister slept, my dad built up the fire in the wood stove; by midnight it would have burned itself into a pile of coals, the gentle red-orange light undulating on the walls and furniture like the shadows of slow-hipped dancers.

When Zack and I climbed out of our beds and prowled on hands and knees along the passageway it was toward this light that we crawled: spelunkers creeping toward some fiery cave, crouching not out of necessity, but instinctively. We'd advance on all fours toward that light methodically, our palms flat on the cool, smooth flagstones, our progress cautious.

Potted plants along the southern, windowed side of the corridor cast exaggerated shadows on the opposite wall. A twelve-inch avocado plant became a ten-foot palm; a modest ficus appeared in its shadow form as an aspen. Once an insect—probably a ladybug or a box elder bug—happened to crawl up one of these plants to sit atop a leaf and paused as the leaf bowed slightly under its weight. Zack and I paused, too, perhaps more curious than frightened, as an enormous, multi-limbed image loomed above us, swaying slightly before commencing its shadowy journey along the wall.

Once inside the A-frame Zack and I padded over to the long counter that separated the kitchen from the living room. Climbing up onto two little footstools, we peered onto the counter, confident that we'd see the yellow measuring cups filled with raisins—which Zack called "rosains"—that my mom left out for us each night. Perched in our fuzzy sleeper pajamas, we'd munch these snacks silently, solemnly regarding the lifeless bunches of baby's breath suspended from the ceiling, the fat garlic braids and red pepper wreath hanging above the sink.

The last raisin eaten, we'd step carefully off our stools, walk back to the passageway, and drop to our knees. Crawling back through the corridor in the dying firelight, we'd return to our bedrooms, where we slipped beneath the blankets, our sleep hollows now cold.

Images of those hushed nocturnal forays occasionally pulse through the patchy mental filmstrip of my childhood: the enveloping quiet, the first threads of sibling solidarity, and the flames illuminating the passageway, flickering long enough to deliver us to the cozy refuge of our own spaces.