

THE BACKWARD HOUSE

On the road leading south from the village, that winds closer to then further away from the coast, sits a house sticking out from the edge of a thick line of forest extending in both directions across a vacant field of forty or so acres, grown over with tall weeds and interspersed with a few small cedar bushes. The house is a simple “A” frame of weathered wood, once painted but never since, that harkens back to a time of courageous and desperate people intent on carving back the forest in an attempt at farming. The results are obvious as an effort long ago abandoned, and the house, field and forest, stand in proximity and juxtaposition, depicting in portrait some landscape tableau of a bygone past. The only indication of any attempt at upkeep or modernization is the two upright and arched windows inserted into what had once been the blank face at the rear of the house. But all effort stopped there, begging the question as to why someone would put in just the two windows, which by themselves seemed out of place surrounded by empty space, and not add a door, which had an obvious and

ideal location in the middle of the face, and wouldn't have cost much, and made perfect sense as additional access to avoid having to walk around the house to gain entrance.

For the originators of the house, the omission of even windows might have been purely one of limited resource, and if only one door was to be located in the house, it best be placed on the other side, where a door opened to probably a yard of farm implements and maybe a shed of tools or barn of animals. After the homestead became established, the refrain from adding a second door might have been a matter of strategy or instinct to avoid the tendency toward scrutiny and fixation to constantly monitor the incremental and too-meager growth of crops in a too-cool climate or feel forced to scrutinize and measure the persistent damage and decimation of anything planted, by the horde of animals marauding out from the surrounding forest at night to eat anything in sight. But what about the more recent owners? What was their excuse? Besides the seeming short-sightedness of saving on the cost of adding a second door and missing out on the benefit of gaining easier access, the even greater offense seemed to be against the very hierarchy of human needs. Because the house was blessed with a marvelous view; the kind of view people would covet and kill for, not only the area residents who treasured their connection and unobstructed proximity to nature as the measure and cornerstone of a rich and meaningful life but also the people from downstate and beyond, who would pay big money and roamed the countryside near and far searching for that most perfect view as a slice of heaven, to not only fulfill their highest hopes and dreams of what it meant to be fully alive embraced in the power and purity of mother nature, but to be

fully released from all their past failures and sins including maybe even the original.

The house had it all. It offered the epitome of pastoral breadth and serenity. Without another house in sight, it sat perched atop a gentle slope, looking out over a golden expanse of field sweeping down to rolling hills of endless trees and beyond to the water of the great lake, barely seen but fully experienced in the cooling breezes that drifted out and over in the heat of summer. Facing a westerly direction, the house was blessed with a string of endless sunsets. How could someone not take advantage of such an opportunity? After the two windows were installed, people waited for some further renovation as the natural course of things, but nothing happened. As it was, the house seemed unfinished and, more than that felt condemned to be facing the wrong direction. The essence of human civility was that a house should look out at the world and face its neighbors. To continue to face the other way seemed unnatural, deliberate, an affront to sensibility, a full-fledged rejection and conscious assault to decency, a blatant disregard, purposeful, an expression of personal pathology. Eventually, it got to the point of people staring at the two arched windows that a feeling developed of the windows staring back, with the look of two raised eyes, that eventually took on the look to folk of a beloved cartoon character from years past, and the house came to be called “The Felix-The-Cat House”, but enough people weren’t familiar with the character, so the house simply became known as “The Backward House.”

For as long as most people could remember, the house was owned and occupied by Carl and Liz Pruitt. Liz had summered in the area with family as a child, through being a

young adult at a cottage rented from one of the local resorts. Carl and Liz vacationed at times in the area with their own family, then after Liz took early retirement from her position as a health administrator, they bought the old farmhouse and moved in permanently. Carl started a small survey business, which was his trade, never employing more than another person or two, and developed a reputation for being honest and dependable. Carl was stout of medium height, with thick mustache and matching dark hair that belied his years advancing past middle age. If there ever was a complaint about him, it was that he moved too fast and could get ahead of himself, which caused him to be abrupt with people. Liz helped keep the books of her husband's business and, at times hired herself out to other area businesses to do the same kind of work. Liz was thin with thin shoulders, making her seem taller, and pleasant looking with poised brown eyes behind oversized glasses that highlighted her longish face, framed by wavy brunette hair. As a couple, they could be seen on occasion sharing a meal at a local eatery, though rarely in the company of others. It was thought Liz had closer friends out of town because of time spent away.

Most of her socializing locally was connected to her volunteer work. Liz focused on helping organize some of the larger area events, mostly in summer and usually associated with the different art fairs and music festivals that sprung up like flowers to cater to and attract the many hundreds, even thousands of people, who flooded to what one national media outlet designated "The most beautiful place in America." Liz never took the lead in any such endeavor but was one of the trusted and dependable foot soldiers on whom the success of any such event depends. Her just reward as the

fruits of her labor seemed to be that when the event did take place, she could be seen walking amongst the crowd arm-in-arm with Carl, basking in good cheer, visiting and talking with friends and people they knew. Liz was bright and energetic. It was understood that Carl would likely never attend such events on his own, but in the company of his wife, he could be engaging and affable.

And it was through connection to volunteer work that most people came in contact with her amazing home. Liz was never quick to invite company, though she didn't shy from it either, and most of her offers were in reciprocation for having been invited somewhere herself, usually under the guise of advancing the work on some shared project. But a visit to her house was seen as something special, something looked forward to, even as an added feature of something possible, as something motivating to join Liz's efforts. Because people previously visiting talked about the experience of her house in such glowing terms, often with the fanfare of being witness to a marvel, with the effect of no two people describing the experience quite the same, the future initiate felt forced to find out for themselves and preparing for the moment felt a bit anxious but with heightened anticipation, so that almost uninformedly the attempt was made to adopt an attitude and approach of sustained nonchalance, in an effort to thus balance against the amazement they expected to encounter and the desire to maintain a fine sense of decency and decorum.

Arriving at the house, a person would be greeted at the side entrance by Liz, typically dressed in something long and flowing. The first thing noticed upon entering was the flood of natural light emanating from the two arched windows at

the one end and extending to every corner, reflected in the soft dove-grey color of the walls continuing to the full height of the modestly vaulted ceiling of the great room, giving the internal size of the home a much bigger feel than expected, and a great surprise, most because the effect was never mentioned in any description by anyone having visited. Toward the other end of the house and under a low ceiling, a long table extended toward a smallish kitchen. Beyond a full bank of windows stretched across the far end of the house, giving full view to a length of porch extending beneath an overhang. This was where the real event began, the direction where all manner and sense of magnitude and expectation were directed. Stepping out through the door and along the porch, a person was met by a dense and complicated landscape of rising trunks and great twisting limbs beneath a thick canopy of leaves blinking dappled sunlight, causing some to profess half expecting trolls to pop up from the enchanted understory or forest fairies to flitter about amongst the trees.

But that was just the start. With the casual air of a tour guide, Liz led from the porch down a couple of steps onto a flat-stone walkway that extended further to what at first appeared as a wall of evergreen and deciduous bushes that separated into alcoves connected yet secluded as some kind of maze, a veritable Art Park. Each display of sculpture was individual and distinguished, as the distinct space of some great magnificence of carved and curved and polished wood, or shiny metal twisting and extending into great configurations and expressions of fantastic shapes, or expansive conglomerates of colored and clear glass cut and jangled to capture and refract diffused light. One station led to another.

There were more than a dozen, each item of magnificence a world to itself, transcending into such a strong statement of vision and imagination, sparking some confirmation of wonder and magnitude for what was even possible.

The cumulative effect escalated to ooohs and aaahs that escaped any previous intention to be restrained and invariably led to wondering if Liz indeed was at least one of the artists herself, and she, with a flick of the wrist and toss of the hand and subsequent surprise of laughter, as if the mere thought was the most absurd thing imaginable, dismissed the inquiry completely. Yet she was undoubtedly at the center of everything collected and created as the gathering force, the curator if nothing else, in a display of pure artist sensibility, as expression of depth and power of affect, a bona fide genius in her own right. The sculpture park placed her in highest esteem amongst those initiated, ensuring her a status of respect and gratitude, in appreciation for bestowing a great gift, if nothing else, the feeling of being made to feel special. So a visit to the house created a bond of privilege, the foundational aspect of a shared secret, the feeling of having entered a kind of club that ultimately had the effect of dividing people into those who had visited and those who hadn't.

"It's like she's giving us the finger," says Creed Thompson, as one who hadn't been invited to the house, would never be invited, and wouldn't accept even if he were invited, in response to hearing her name mentioned, just as he approached the three women seated at the restaurant table with coffee cups in hand, so that the utterance of the name

Liz Pruitt was perfect timing, as no accident, as something taken as testimony to how the world works, as full confirmation of his connection to the powers that be, as his reward for not only being open and available but also in good standing. Not that he wouldn't have sat amongst the women anyway, that being determined as soon as he saw the empty chair as the kind of opportunity always looked for, but receiving the name Liz Pruitt as the perfect segway to deliver his entrance with the kind of wit and aplomb more accustomed to his standing and talent, understanding that his comment would have meaning to at least the one woman seated directly across the table he recognized if only vaguely, as assurance to her being well aware of Liz Pruitt in reference to her house and its controversy pervading and persistent if not to just below the surface, then a full-blown and prominent weave in the fabric of the area. And his utterance having the desired effect, maybe more than expected, as confirmation from the other two women he didn't know, as a nice surprise, like striking a chord or plucking a string, the eruption of spontaneous chuckle or laugh or something of that sort but reaction of recognition all the same, so that after letting his comment gather weight then be delivered as centerpiece to the table he followed and took his seat as his rightful place in the nature of things.

Creed Thompson was the local curmudgeon and gadfly who earned the bulk of his reputation by standing at local council and committee meetings at the time designated for public input and espousing some outlandish theory of conspiracy and cahoots usually associated with some issue of proposed progress, directed at the governing body in general or some leading member, alleging their support as

the result of some perceived personal interest likely linked to ill-gotten financial gain. Creed Thompson could be sixty or eighty, with longish white hair, a matching beard, and beady eyes reaching out through wire-rimmed glasses. He had a wizened face of sallow skin and the demeanor of a cantankerous knot of muscle.

Across the table from him sits Kate Crowley, local business owner of the women's clothing boutique located on Main Street just down the block, solidly successful and solidly middle-aged, with a rounded face and well-coiffed roundish hair and tasteful make-up and modeling the latest fashion from her store, currently wearing a large-checked black-and-white plaid cape over sage-colored turtleneck perfect for the unseasonably cool fall weather presently being experienced.

And she has plenty of experience with Creed Thompson, not so much from the kind of meetings she rarely attended and he addressed, and she heard about, but from his wandering through town on a nearly daily basis, as the other key component of his public endeavor and subsequent persona, with him stopping in stores and establishments to ingratiate himself as a dominating force, which she was all but impervious to as the owner of a store exclusively selling women's clothes and accessories that he wouldn't be caught dead in no matter how much his need to bend an ear, causing her to be eternally grateful as an added benefit of her choice of endeavor, but aware of the many stories relaying his antics or tales of pontification and holding court and the different efforts and strategies of deflecting and defending and otherwise limiting or holding off or avoiding him altogether.

Now it is her turn to be subject to his personhood. As

soon as he walked through the door and his eyes noticing the empty chair the exact moment she registered the open seat herself from his point of view, knowing for a fact the three of them were in for it, but couldn't be avoided except in the attempt of making them available to some kind of miracle, she continued the line of conversation as if words themselves the power to deter his momentum or act as some kind of barrier which would be the course for any average person, but not Creed Thompson, with no regard for decorum or even decency, and she mentioning the name Liz Pruitt in the continuity of people being suggested to approach who might be willing to help in organizing their marketing committee for the upcoming Christmas festival. And he grabbing her name from thin air like grabbing a baton and twirling it for showing off as ingratiating fanfare, not that she was any great fan of Liz Pruitt and thus no great defender, but as one who had been to her house and didn't believe it to be the be-and-end-all but impressive enough that she would look forward to being invited again, and in the scheme of things if the world was divided into those she respected and those she didn't and such a ledger did exist, there being little doubt which opposite column the two of them fell, so that she wasn't about to tolerate Liz Pruitt or anyone else in her regard being besmirched by the likes of Creed Thompson, even if it might be construed there was hint of truth to his comment, but juxtaposed against the feeling that she was responsible for providing the name to instigate his avenue of entry to their group in the first place, as the leader who called the meeting, and the one who subsequently felt the duty to take the bull by the horns in handling the situation. "Well, you've never been shy in giving your opinion."

And Creed Thompson, taking the full brunt of her directive, not so much the force of it but the taste of it that could be hard to tell exactly like acerbic or ferment, looking at her in full scrutiny as if he were studying the man in the moon, taking full measure to determine his relationship, aware that he being met directly was no surprise, as how things often proceeded, the less-than-welcoming not lost on him, as even familiar, as often was the case. And him prepared, as in the nature of practice, to the point of refinement, in full confidence that the only thing needed was the chance to warm up to him if “warm-up” could ever be the proper term, but any development could hardly be expected all at once, and in that sense, time was on his side, like trusting gravity as an essential component of the universe itself. To emphasize his point as part of his charm, as culmination of acquired skill, in further attempt to ingratiate himself, not so much seeking permission but to further instill his presence, he took a moment as announcement and punctuation to run his hand straight back through his longish white hair then trace down his matching beard with thumb and index finger along the edges of his mouth stained yellow from tobacco, the gesture not unlike a lizard flicking its tongue as measure of scent and temperature before gallantly offering into the middle of them as their just reward. “I trust you ladies are enjoying yourselves.”

And Kate Crowley Looking across the table at what has shown up in front of them, her only interest to continue her strategy of constructing a barrier, to meet head-on, not what she could stop but to hold the line against what could happen because it could be bad, in an attempt to fortify, as if she were driving in ground stakes, in the same manner as

swinging a hammer. "We are having a meeting. I don't suppose you'd be interested in joining the Christmas festival's marketing committee?"

An immediate snigger emitting from the woman seated next to her, a younger but not youngish version of Kate Crowley herself, similar in overall size and shape but of lesser distinction, as if she were not yet fully aware of a similar path available to her life and not yet started. Patty Barlow wore a mauve-colored sweater and had full and falling dark hair, ample swipes of eyeliner, and maroon lipstick. She had a pleasant face of no great merit but big brown eyes that were undoubtedly her most distinguishing characteristic. The snigger she emitted was involuntary and the exact duplicate of her previous outburst released at the very start of the encounter when Creed Thompson delivered his initial indictment of Liz Pruitt in reference to her house, that caught her as the same kind of cutting-edge funny just struck in her again by the retort of Kate Crowley, but of such different source and reason, because her unconscious response to Creed Thompson had left her mortified at the possible interpretation that she not only acknowledged some truth to what he had stated but was agreeing with him, with the full weight of understanding that her spontaneous outburst put her at risk of not only being opposite with the women she was seated with, but on the other side of Liz Pruitt herself, as someone she had only met in the most casual of circumstance, but knew of connected to her magnificent house that caused Patty Barlow to harbor a wish to be invited someday herself, which was part of the latent and not clearly formed reason for her volunteering on different committees in the first place, as the extension of her

working for an area nonprofit and making volunteering the cornerstone of her strategy to becoming a good person, but also to being ingratiated as one of the locals in the place she chose to live her life as part of the community. So the snigger in response to Kate Crowley's statement caused nothing less than relief as the chance to redeem herself in genuine and spontaneous fashion, leave little doubt as to which side of any exchange she was on, and show her acknowledgment and offer support as not only giving full permission to continue in what she perceived as a clear jab at Creed Thompson, but agreement of what should be done and what she would like to do if she were the one doing it.

To the other side and across the table sits Carly Lewis, the newcomer to the group and to the area, youngish of moderate size and modest stature, with pulled-back hair and a taste for clothes no one yet has experienced, and was surely not present in her current attire of solid forest-green chamois flannel shirt over scoop-necked black tee over classic jeans, that was a reflection of a strategy she has chosen to remain neutral in all matters of involvement with the area, as to avoid the chance to reflect back on herself, with the understanding that in matters especially of opinions there were always two sides to every story, and to give credence to any one side caused a shift toward complicity and agreement that caused by its nature a degree of commitment, and made it harder even downright impossible ever to backtrack and recover to any sense of neutrality, so best effort be made to take every reason and measure to avoid even a whiff of taking sides in the first place. Yet the one person who blew that strategy out of the water had come walking through the door in the person of Creed Thompson,

igniting a pile of reaction to the man himself seen striding toward them and that empty chair, as the man she most heard about as the subject told of the most remarkable and outrageous tales, as maybe first and foremost causing her to be appalled he got away with such things, and wasn't decried and admonished and outright thrown out on his ear, as indication not in any way a contradiction to her commitment of staying neutral, but as just fact concluded from some hard-earned understanding of the weakness of people in confronting both cruelty and injustice, personified in the person coming toward her as the conglomerate of all such men ever known or even heard about who bullied and badgered and forced their way through the world leaving good hearts and spirits in their wake to struggle and gasp, without even the slightest caring or concern or even awareness. Creed Thompson was a despicable human being of no redeeming value. The crust had formed around him. His very presence violated her every will and determination as something she was forced to endure and live with. And then for him to mention the name Liz Pruitt, the only other person, though not even remote in stature and intensity, who caused consternation and challenge to her strategy of not taking sides, after having been made very aware of both ends of the issue of Liz Pruitt and her house to the point of feeling pressured by pure force and volume in such strong and decided terms to take position, then forced to confront the situation further on almost a daily basis that had become her dilemma of having to drive back and forth past the house on her way to and from work as counter clerk in a neighboring town, to the point she actually took an alternative route more days than not to avoid the issue, even if it extended her drive by a

whole eight minutes. So the situation of Liz Pruitt in conjunction and conjecture with Creed Thompson as two sides of a coin added together bearing both weight and pressure to become really too much and overwhelming, causing such a revolt to back up in her as the collapse of her intended life's volition like a house of cards, that she felt desperate enough and determined enough to avoid at all cost even the very air he breathed, as a reflex of preservation beyond mere protest, to the point of holding her own breath to the point of causing strain to the verge of actual discomfort.

Creed Thompson looks at one woman and then the other. To one side, a woman seems to be convulsing with bugged-out eyes and puffed-up cheeks, and to the other, a woman seems to be sputtering and stammering into her hands as she covers her face. And across from him, a woman glares as if she wants to eat him alive. The world is full of weirdos! Creed Thompson decides the situation is not something he couldn't win, but something he doesn't want to. To affirm his assessment, he takes a moment to run his hand back through his hair, then down his beard with thumb and forefinger along both sides of his mouth stained yellow with tobacco, stands straight up from his chair, and says before walking directly past the table. "Well, you ladies enjoy your meeting."

And so it goes in the life of the village, through the great changes of hot summer and deep snow, in the vague but persistent feeling that something is always coming and something else fading away. And the issue of The Backward House eventually did decide itself. Carl Pruitt was taken too

soon by one of the cancers, and Liz continued on in declining health until two of her daughters moved her to assisted living. The house was put up for sale and sold. It was the dead of winter and no one moved in, indicating the house probably wouldn't be a permanent residence. Occasionally people could be seen coming and going, mostly on weekends. And without ever knowing, the new owners became the subject of great scrutiny and debate as to the outcome of the place. Eventually in the spring, building material was delivered and workers began showing up, and soon after a door appeared in the face of the house, equally distant between the two arched cat-eye windows. By summer a grand deck stretched across the exterior length. Groups of people could be seen enjoying barbeque and playing games in the large square of lawn cut out from the vacant field. Toward evening, people lounged in comfortable chairs, sipping drinks and basking in the glow of endless sunsets.