The Little House by Eliana Auerbach

We didn't know we were going to die in that house.

We didn't want to. It was small, too small of a place to die in. My sister and I knew it immediately after moving in. We hadn't wanted the change, but Mother insisted we could not stay in a house plagued by our father's memories. Our father had left us for another woman, and for that reason, we tried not to miss him. We missed his money more. This was what Mother always said, and we nodded our agreement. We unpacked our boxes and sold everything we didn't need. It only took us two days, and then my sister and I were free. The summer was fading into fall, but we still had a few weeks to ourselves.

Hide and seek was difficult in the little house. I first hid in the cupboard under the sink, but upon crawling in, the worn wood left me with a splinter. With my sister counting down, *21, 20, 19*, I scrambled out of the kitchen and dove into the laundry bin, under the dirty towels. It only took her five minutes to find me. The laundry room was the last place she looked.

After that, we decided to move the game outside, where the space was a little bigger. There were trees in our yard, and a wooden swing hung from one. Across the street was an open field of tall grass and wildflowers. I once ran through the field, out of sight from our little white house, and hid in the grass. But Mother didn't like how far away I was, so we weren't allowed across the street anymore. By the end of the summer, there were no places left to hide.

School came as the leaves fell, littering the ground and washing out the green. On the first day, my sister and I wore matching skirts and braided each other's hair. Mother made us wake up early so she could paint an outline of us before we left. She would finish the painting later. When we were with Father, it was easier for her to live out her dream of painting. Now it

was not, and the hobby was no longer carefree. Money loomed over each paint stroke, tainting the vibrant colors.

"This one will be for us," Mother said a few days later, showing us the final product. My sister and I were not twins, but the painting almost made it appear that we were. Our hair was the same shade of brown, our eyes pale blue. It was only our facial structure that set us apart, and Mother was able to capture those unexplainable details. There was no denying she was good—good enough to make money, but she was still waiting for a breakthrough. In the meantime, she worked during the day as a manager at the gas station.

My sister and I were not old enough to criticize her; to us, she was just doing what she loved, and we were happy. Later, we would wish she had gotten a better job. We would wish she had tried harder. We might even wish for our father to come back, to tell us he was sorry, to whisk us away somewhere else.

He never did.

When I was in eighth grade and my sister was in sixth, Mother told me she couldn't afford the house without help from one of us. I remember the day clearly. It was mid-December, and I'd had to shovel a path through the snow in front of our house that morning, making me late for school.

"The heating bill is too high," Mother said. The wrinkles on her face had become prominent, but whether from old age or stress, I would never know.

"All right." I assumed I would be the one to get a job, and my sister would be the one to continue her education. Why else would Mother have sat me down alone? I was older, and she always delivered bad news first.

“Your sister is going to get a job working for Mr. Grenstein,” Mother said. I recognized the name. He owned the grocery store in town. My sister and I went every Friday, after school, with whatever money Mother gave us. “You’re going to stay in school,” Mother said. “And I need you to do well. One of you has to get out of here.”

No, I thought. *We both do.*

That was the first time I remember being angry at Mother.

It wasn’t until the next winter that I had to leave school, too. I joined my sister at the grocery store. Mother stayed at the gas station, but above all, she continued painting.

My sister and I saw very few customers throughout the day, but there was always a rush after 3:00, once school was out. We saw some of our old classmates, but we hadn’t been in the school system long enough to know their names. Maybe I recognized a few faces, maybe I only thought I did. We got used to the pitiful stares, the judgemental glances. We wished everyone a good day. We didn’t always mean it.

On the walk home, my sister and I took our time and dragged our feet. We didn’t want to watch Mother paint anymore. We were afraid, I think, that one of us would finally snap and yell. We would scream at her to get another job, to stop wasting her time painting, to look at the life she was giving us and decide it was not enough.

“We could go to California,” my sister said as we walked home on a warm spring day. The air smelled fresh, the snow was melting, and the sun sat on the clouds, peering down at us. I was almost sixteen. We could leave soon, and we would certainly talk about leaving. But we wouldn’t, because Mother was still Mother and we were still her children and we loved her, the way all children are supposed to love their mothers.

Where could we afford to go, anyway?

“I think I’d rather go to the East Coast,” I said.

“Fine. As long as we’re near a beach, though. A *real* one, with lots of sand, not a pile of rocks that touch the ocean.”

“Of course,” I said.

“And we’ll get a dog,” she said.

“Yes. Welsh corgi, or a golden retriever?”

“A corgi, like Queen Elizabeth.”

“Okay.”

“And when we’re both married, I’ll move into the house beside you. We’ll be able to afford it,” she added, “because we’ll work hard. We’ll have good jobs.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. You’ll be a lawyer or something; you’re good at arguing.”

“You hate it,” I teased.

“I won’t once you start making money with your talent.”

I laughed. I didn’t point out that women did not become lawyers, those jobs were reserved for men, and even if we could afford it, women didn’t go to law school. I just laughed and continued walking.

We would talk a lot, about our house on the beach, for the rest of our lives. The white wrap-around porch. The midnight blue shutters. When we went to Main Street and peered through shop windows, we picked out furniture for the living room and bedrooms, hand towels for the bathrooms and kitchen, matching sets of utensils, and crockery. Mother’s paintings would hang on the walls, one in every room. We named the corgi Scooter.

When we celebrated my twenty-fifth birthday in the little house, my sister cried. Later that night, sitting on our front steps, after she'd gone through nearly a full bottle of wine, she told me, "We'll just have to marry rich, then."

"Easy," I replied. She didn't mention Robert, the son of Mr. Grenstein, even though they'd been together for years. He'd brought up marriage more than once; my sister brushed it off. She said marriage wasn't for her, but I knew the real reason. She was afraid of committing to him because she was afraid of being tied to this town. Without a ring on her finger, she could still dream of leaving.

"We won't find 'em here though," she added after a long moment, after the silence was filled by crickets and frogs we could not see. Fireflies danced across the grass, stars made for the earth.

"No, we won't," I agreed.

"We'll have to go to a bigger city," she slurred. "Chicago, maybe, that's kind of close. Lots of rich people in Chicago."

"There are rich people all over America, everywhere but here."

"Chicago," my sister said with finality. "It's only a few hours away."

We didn't have a car.

"What happened to the coasts?" I asked.

My sister glared at me. "You aren't seeing the bigger picture," she scolded. "We marry rich, *then* we move to the coast. And you'll go to law school. You'll become a great lawyer, greater than the men, too, and then you'll sue your husband and we'll have the biggest house on the coast."

“Oh, of course. And I’ll sue more than just my husband. Anyone who looks at me funny will see a lawsuit coming.”

My sister cackled, her body shaking so hard with laughter that wine spilled out of her glass and onto her shirt.

Inside, Mother continued painting.

Over the years, I tried to make more money. We both did. My sister cleaned houses when she wasn’t working at the grocery store, and after Mother retired I became the manager at the gas station and cleaned cars. We tried other things too, but without an education, no one wanted us. We’d never made it to high school. It was hard, some days, not to be angry at Mother. We were here because of her painting. Because she couldn’t let go of her dream, not even for us.

We knew Mother was never going to make it out of that little house. We still held out hope for ourselves, though. We still had a few decades to go, if we lived to the ripe old age of one hundred, like we planned. My sister was a planner. She was certain we would make it that long.

When Mother died, she was seventy-six. The funeral was small, and the box of stuff we kept of her was even smaller. We sold the last of her paintings, all of them but the one of us, from our first day of school, in our matching outfits. We kept her paintbrushes and the paint, as a reminder of her, and because we were told they couldn’t be resold.

We drank and laughed and cried and then we tried to paint our beach house. Neither of us had learned from Mother, but we’d grown up watching her. Despite being drunk, the painting could be interpreted as a house, however abstract. If one really tried, they would understand every detail. Behind the house was the ocean, and my sister painted Scooter on the beach, the sun setting behind him. I painted us in the window. We looked younger, and we were laughing.

When we left the painting to dry, my sister raised her glass to mine.

"You and me?" she asked.

"You and me."

Eventually, I did learn the names of every person in town. It wasn't hard, not as the population sank under seven hundred. We met everyone we would've known in school, had Mother not needed us to work. Some of them left, some even went to college. We would never see them again; some townsfolk asked them to visit, and some told them to return as soon as they could, but my sister and I knew they would not come back. If we left, we wouldn't.

I learned the names of everyone who worked at the post office, bookstore, and cafe. It was easy to pick out newcomers. I learned every child's name.

I don't know when we both accepted that we weren't leaving. Maybe it was when we put money back into the house to fix up the exterior, or had the furnace replaced. Maybe it was when we stopped talking about our house on the coast, even though our painting of it hung in the kitchen, right across from the one of us as children. Maybe it was when Robert died, not from a car accident or a drug overdose, but from a stroke. Strokes happen with old age and we were getting old. I had stopped dying my hair, and the gray was beginning to show. My sister would soon do the same.

We stood in silence at Robert's funeral. My sister cried, and I didn't say anything, just held her hand as he was lowered into the ground. When we left, she said, "You and me?" and I nodded.

Years later, we were too old to be working, but neither of us knew how to stop. The house had been paid off but it didn't matter, not until we could afford to move somewhere else, to a

house on the coast. It didn't even have to be a big house anymore. It could be a little house by the beach and we would be happy because we wouldn't be *here*.

We did, eventually, get a corgi. We named him Scooter.

My sister died before he did.

She went to sleep in our little house, and she did not wake up.

I stared at the painting of us, the painting of our house on the coast. Scooter whimpered and I pulled him close, wrapped my arms around him, and wept. I thought of Mother, who was gone, and Robert, who followed, and now my sister. I thought of our little house on the coast, and it only made me cry harder.

We both died in that house.