

HOUSE OF SENTENCES

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ONCE UPON A TIME a man built a house of sentences. He picked some high ground, because he thought views of sunrise and sunset might be good.

The man worked on sentences for his house's foundation, for its front entrance, for its walls and roof. Some sentences needed to be windows, some to be doors. He knew that a hard winter could come and drive sleet and snow at his house, and so he often stood inside it, to visualize where there were gaps, and stood outside to imagine its inner walls and bracing.

He worked and worked on the house, because he liked working with sentences, because he needed the house to feel livable. He found his house had developed into many, many rooms, and he thought that was good. It felt like a home to him.

Now, houses built of sentences do not behave as do houses built with framing kits from the lumberyard. Squared-dry lumber comes plastic-wrapped and each piece is warranted to be, whether from the top, middle, or bottom of a bundle, identical in its performance. Sentences contain magic. One sentence used as a front door is one thing. Used as a hallway, it is really something different. And, as a back-porch-view those same words in the same order, that sentence, absolutely becomes something else.

A house of sentences is, indeed, almost infinitely magical. In the ordinary world a physical apartment can sleep a family of fifteen or twenty people. A house of sentences can hold a hundred people, and a hundred times that hundred, and even a hundred times those ten-thousand people, and no one notices any congestion, it is so extraordinarily magical.

And the man lived in his house for several years. Yes, he tinkered with it, tuck-pointing some foundation stones, exchanging maybe once a window for a door, but it was a place where he could be relaxed yet alert, alive.

One day he looked out and found he had some neighbors. And more houses were alright. He'd always known it was a good spot to build, and they made the place feel like a neighborhood.

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But, after years and years in this house he thought he'd take a trip to Europe, to the near East, the Middle East, India, the Far East, to learn more for his next house. And so he made sure the windows were closed, the light bill and taxes were paid, and moved on for a little while.

And while he was away, people came and took pictures of themselves in front of his house, because they wanted others to know—like some bridge in the background—they'd been to see it, and that was alright.

Some visitors even removed a board or two—a sentence or two—for a portion of their own house, as if a framed picture, and the man's sentence thrived there. And, didn't I say a house of sentences is magical? The man's house never suffered the board removed, surrounding words remembered. And as he visited with others he would occasionally see pieces of his house helping brace a floor joist, or partly framing a window, in their houses.

These uses are borrowings, as if a bit of vine has been clipped and the cutting rooted in water and planted in soil. The original plant is unhurt and the cutting grows just fine somewhere else as well. The man's house was now in several places and all seemed healthy. The spirits were right.

Even as he traveled the man looked at his house with his heart, sensing ways it could be stronger, imagining places it could be added-on to, feeling for sentences that could make his house yet a little more whole.

When he had traveled-himself-out he came back to his house with hopes of updating it with things he now knew. He wanted to reframe some windows to change views a little, wanted to add-on some rooms he'd not in the first place known how to build.

As he walked forward in the spring breeze, even from a mile down the road he recognized his house. And walked a little faster knowing he had so much he wanted to make better.

He turned west into his gate, up the walk past the flowers, up the steps and to his front door. As if the house knew him, its door opened in greeting.

And he was able to coax his house to resemble his plans. And he liked it better in its newer generation, it more closely matching his mind and heart.

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One day in the fall, though, a friend from miles and miles away told the man that in the world, and really right around the corner, another house existed that had forty-one rooms built exactly of hundreds of the man's sentences, and that it also had nine more rooms underground, and all these hidden rooms also based on things the man had dreamed.

The man went out, walked around two left turns, and looked at the other's house of sentences. Sure enough, there were his fifty rooms.

"What a surprise," he said.

The house was open for visitors, and he went inside. This other house had some of its own rooms as an entryway, but, scattered throughout the rest of this house, here were his fifty rooms. He had entered a museum, he thought. Now his windows and doorways looked out onto, led to, nothing but blankness. These were his older rooms and were not renewed as they were in his present place, and so his rooms were to his eye dusty and cobwebbed.

The one who'd grabbed the rooms had tried to be a collector of the alive. But hack rooms from their origins and they dry out. No matter how long it's watered, that branch cut at one-inch across is a stick the moment it's cut. That stranger-other had imagined he could stand on something as untrustworthy as dust and webs.

There wasn't a human being around for the man to talk to. He shook his head and walked back toward home thinking he wished the stranger had asked if he'd abandoned his only house. The man said to himself: "Aw, hell! Better me dead and gone another full lifetime, and me absorbed in my new existence, than to have to worry in this way about this house of sentences."

When he got back home he walked through his house. He had left it an hour ago, and the words were the same, but now not quite: those rooms the stranger had blissfully copied-out, but that the man had updated, now had a fold in the carpet, or a crack in a windowpane, or some doors looked out onto last year's flowers. And all of these were drying out, and too brittle for him to live in anymore.

Ghosts, now he had ghosts. People, phantom-like, were stopping off in his own rooms that the stranger had reproduced. It was as if the stranger were throwing dinner parties at the man's house, the man the owner not consulted, the stranger as if masked pretending to be one of the man's friends.

The man said to himself, “God, I almost wish I’d stayed with building houses of two-by-fours and plywood, siding and shingles. At least in that reality strangers know what to expect when they go breaking and entering, burglarizing, kicking through front doors in home invasion. My house of sentences is more a wayside than a castle, but it’s where I live. Shoot this dead-of-night house-of-sentences soul-stealing stranger? People would talk. What’s left, club him into submission with the odd dangling participle?”

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And the man stewed about it for a while, maybe a day, maybe part of two, and then said to himself “The talking cure! Yes, let’s employ the talking cure!” And he was happy. He had a direction. Well, maybe not happy happy. But he did have a direction.

So the man talked to a lawyer.

Oh, you thought the man was going into psychiatric therapy, adjusting himself to the state of the world? That’s one talking-cure, psychiatry. It is.

But lawyers make bridges between island camps, two, three, many island camps, all at once, or maybe in several. They all talk and talk and talk, the lawyers and the camps. The lawyers talk to the person who wanted the lawyer to talk for them. The lawyers talk to the other’s lawyer, and to the others’ (multi-plural) lawyers. Talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, it’s all a bunch of talk.

But it’s not a soap opera, their talking, their climbing, their posturing, their innuendo, their lawyerly flings with the truth. It’s not the never-ending soaps drama, because, though they’re talking to each other, as these lawyers are, they’re also talking before a person, a judge, whose own house of

sentences is virtually unbelievably, almost monstrously not only large but huge.

And a right judge has an ability to hear all the various talkings, to recognize them for what they are—good, bad, or indifferent talkings—and is to say “When,” and “Time,” and does call a halt to all the words and can say what’s what: “The winner is.” That’s a talking-cure, it is. How is it not?

And so the man availed himself, and told a lawyer about the ghosts, about phantom dinner parties, about dying rooms.

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You know everything factual about this man, the ghosts, the stranger.

We are now in the story’s present moment. Exactly this moment is its moment. You go outside now, crouch down, and press your finger into planet earth, and say “This moment, now. Now. This moment now.”

How it turns out? Saying more flirts with lies.