

## The Peacock House

*Anonymous*

Standing in the kitchen of the ranch house that sat across from mine, the moms of our neighborhood gang looked skeptically at our young anxious faces. Nobody can remember who was there last, who had made the journey down the rabbit hole, through the seemingly enchanted woods, past the abandoned tennis court with strands of green grass struggling to climb out of the cracks in the pavement. No one remembers who was the last person to glance at the fish in the cramped cement pond, walking past the vacant expansive dog kennels as they approached the large red brick castle. No one remembers who was last to walk up the hill to where the small structure sat or who was last to unlatch the gate. No one remembers who was the last to see their deep sea blue and emerald green plumage, their sandy colored scaly legs, and their glistening obsidian eyes. Although no one could recall leaving the gate open, the fact remained that it had been and that one hungry coyote had wandered in, and now one of those majestic birds was dead. Someone left the gate open and one of the peacocks was dead now, and it was one of our faults.

Ever since I could remember all the kids in our small Warsonwoods culdesac knew about the mystical peacock house. The stories that surrounded the entity were addictive to listen to. The older kids spoke legends of how in the 50s, the couple bred high-end german shepherds and regal peacocks for the new money that had recently started flocking west out of the city. The mysterious house had ivy that clambered up brick walls inscribed with music notes chiseled into them that we would try to interpret. The elaborate windows that studded those walls revealed white drapery that was perpetually closed. Rumors of the reclusive man that owned the estate and his kind wife circulated through my small community for years. I don't remember the first time that the older kids thought I was mature enough to make the trek with them to wonderland, but I'll never forget the first time I met the old lady that lived there. One hot sticky summer evening before dinner, my brother, our next-door neighbor, Ryan, my childhood best friend, Poppy, and I were walking past the mountain of elegantly arranged burnt sienna slabs on our way back to the real world, when a voice called out to us.

“Would you kids like some popsicles?” the voice said.

We turned around to see one of the many windows of the great house was open and a woman with hair like the clouds and a diminutively delicate frame was smiling kindly at us. Of course, we took this extremely rare opportunity to take a step into the mad hatter's home. We took a step through the ornate front door, black with roman figures carved into it, and the white marble foyer opened up. Above us, a large crystal chandelier clung to the ceiling. The woman led us into a red octagonal room with plush sofas, gold framed paintings, and vases filled with hundreds of peacock feathers. She looked at us with kind eyes and passed out four orange

popsicles. Our eyes drank in the room as the orange flavor sugary syrup melted down our hands. At the end of the interaction, she gave all four of us one of the long quills to take home; mine would go on to service my sister and I as a magic wand for years of fantasy. I think about this moment every so often. I wish I could remember her name.

It was about 3 years after the lady died that the incident occurred. I was 8. Back in the kitchen, the parents were interrogating us, convinced we were culpable. The old couple's children, who were now in charge of the property, were certain of our guilt. I know this sounds typical of a group of guilty kids, but despite what our nervously pale faces implied, we were adamant about our innocence. After about 30 minutes of back and forth, which felt like thirty hours, we had convinced the parents of our guiltlessness. One afternoon shortly after this, all the kids in the neighborhood made the journey to the house. We knocked on the daunting front door, cookies in hand to show our condolence. The big black door creaked open, and a middle-aged couple opened the door, looked at us with dismissive eyes, then shut it without saying a word. We didn't know that their father had just passed away and that that peacock would be the last one to live in the red stable at the top of the hill. All we knew was that the magic and wonder that we felt in that place was replaced with sadness for what used to be. The last time I was there was two years after that, when right before my family moved out of the house on the cul de sac in Warsonwoods, my brother and I took our goldfish from our small backyard lagoon and let them loose in the small cement pond at the house; I don't know why we did that, maybe just to get one more glimpse of the house even from a distance. One year after we left, Ryan and his family moved out of the ranch house that was across from ours. All the rest of the kids that knew about that place grew up, and we lost touch. I'm not sure if anyone still living there remembers the house, let alone how to get there.

As the years went on I forgot about that day, the peacock house itself seeming like more of a dream than a memory. When I tried to tell people about my experience, I felt like Alice in Wonderland: every word that came out of my mouth about that place sounded too extraordinary to be true. I began to doubt my own memories. That all changed a few months ago when Ryan, who remains to be one of my older brother's best friends, ran into someone from that time. Somehow, they started talking about the day that the last peacock died and how nine years after it happened, we found out the truth. Apparently, a couple of months after we had moved out, two kids from the neighborhood next to ours confessed to the crime. After he told me the story of how the two brothers went late one night to see the birds, heard a noise coming from the adjacent woods, and ran out of the pasture without closing the gate, I felt instant relief. Although I was pretty sure we were innocent, the feeling of anxiety that maybe we did forget to close that gate-- I hadn't realized it had stayed with me all those years. This run-in caused everything about that place to come flooding back to me. I was obsessed with seeing it again. I searched on google maps and followed the way I got from my childhood sanctuary to the enchanted place, somehow

finding the address. Naturally, I looked it up on Zillow, and found that the estate had been un-lived in for years. As I scrolled through the images of the house online I started to remember more and more, but with every picture, I saw my heart grew heavier, and quiet tears rolled down my cheeks. My memories were validated as images of the musical notes and writing on the red bricks of the house appeared, the big black front door with figures of ancient Romans, and the big pasture with the hill and the red stable at the top appeared on the screen. The miraculous place that had been such a huge part of my childhood was abandoned and empty. The grass in the peacock pasture was overgrown, the small pond was empty, and the red room that I had eaten that orange popsicle in years and years ago was void of the art, ornate sofas, and most importantly, the feathers that used to be there. I'm not sure how long I looked through those pictures but the longer I did, the more I could remember the feeling of the old wood fence that enclosed the birds, the smell of the white flowers that surrounded the pond, and the bewitchment that we all felt being there. All of these feelings prompted me to call my old friend, Poppy. I had not seen her since we moved away in 2012. Talking to her, although I hadn't seen her in years, was easy. We talked about all the adventures that we had at the peacock house, sharing memories and a friendship that I thought had died years ago. Like the magic of the house, it was alive again. I don't think I will ever go back to that house in person. I don't want to know it as the empty shell that it is now, and I don't want it to know I'm not the same person that believed in its mythic presence all those years ago. My memories and those of the people who shared this magical place with me will preserve the otherworldly house, frozen in time as it was through our eyes when the world was magical.