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THE CHILDREN ON THE HILL

BY ADAM KLEIN

The most beautiful views are through the window, where other houses rise up, not so different from ours, in the mist that burns off these hills. The days must be full of light. Light counters silence. Silence is where things grow. Light is where they're arrested, stung by bleach, by lemon-scented sprays, by the rough side of the new sponge.

Will your family be joining you?

I imagine my husband, and in doing so, must imagine myself a woman (to do otherwise would be to make ourselves outsiders here). The man I picture has Michael Phelps's torso, long and wacon, with hairless, shaved armpits that smell of chlorine. His head is that of a Canadian diver whose name I don't recall but whose features are better; whose hair is black. Our children would have been conceived with assisted reproductive technologies, because I would have married later. My husband would be successful, and we therefore could afford to have the children from my own womb, later than biology permits.

Yes, they'll be joining me next month. A high flutter in my voice.

The realtor in the brown terry-cloth KB Homes jumpsuit doesn't seem to notice that my voice squeals like clean hair. The realtor should step aside and let the place sell itself; she's frumpy and always on the edge of the picture.

No outside air. Brand-new ducts and no dust on the vents. I like to live in a place where the air is clean.

One finger on the banister and every banister from childhood returns with that touch. My aunt and uncle once lived in a two-story home in upstate New York. My aunt, who wore nothing but dressing gowns as though she were only standing temporarily and would soon be back on her knees cleaning up after the boys. The children were sent upstairs for "quiet time," and my adopted cousin Tony would put his hand over my mouth, and because he was adopted I didn't know if he could kill a person. He killed animals in the woods out back, cats mostly, and took me to watch the worms move over their eyes.

There are no woods on these hills, just the fog that burns off pretty quickly and the sharp light falls like tin siding out of the sky. No child ever has to be lost. No child ever has to be outside the sightlines of a pane of glass, or too far from a doorbell, one with a vocabulary of soft tones. Doorbells that coo like reminders: the children. Don't forget the children.

Here we've got the two bedrooms and the master suite. Her voice is so nasal, it sounds like it's come from the snout of an anteater.

And here they've drawn on the walls—stenciled, rather, because it's neater—it's All About Me! The stencil some kind of Raggedy Ann font that looks like crayon. There are polka dots (green, pink, white) on the sheets and drapes, the lampshade, clock, and pillows. Circles, I imagine the stager saying, because the kids like round things they can attach themselves to and put in their mouths. Because the circles make them feel safe, protected. It has a clean, 1960s feel to it. The clean 1960s.

My husband and I are figured on a Wheaties box. Our long, waxy torsos melt on cereal spoons.

I imagine the stager of this house as a teenager, plucking all the eyebrows out of his face and wondering what he's going to do with his frantic sense for matching, for seeing the world as a little too jumbled and unreadable.

We enter the other two children's rooms in which you can imagine tears, masturbation, lines of speed, and eating disorders. Our bodies fill out under Target prints, name patterns. They come alive once the dimmer switch is touched. Put on this lipstick. You are all mouth and eyes under the covers, and you lick and kiss your cousin's hand, not knowing whether his real parents dumped him somewhere, near some dim motel or gas station—why his hands can smell like gasoline, like hands that have to leave every open field on fire.

What kind of people live in the neighborhood? The realtor is nervous about the question, doesn't want to make a comment that can be construed as racist; doesn't want to lose her license.

It's a real normal place, she says. Family neighborhood.

The master bathroom with its gold urn stuffed with plastic pearls—like a washy foreground in an Ingres painting—seems always fogged, just out of focus, a gentle rape fantasy. The hand towels and powder puffs are arranged for my private ablutions. I make an aperture with my hands and look at myself, section by section, preparing myself for my husband's scrutiny. My husband, whose face can be any face I've seen on the flat screen—or can be my cousin's face—is worried from incalculable numbers, incalculable stresses. His commute makes his legs ache; he has to stretch and be helped into bed. His pants are as tight as a highway patrolman's, his shoes

fall and echo through the hollow walls. You can smell fresh babies on my body powder. Milled rice from Japan.

The children have their friends from the neighborhood over. I imagine wearing nothing but heels under my apron. When I cut the peach pie, I show it around to everyone like I'm revealing my private parts. Sweet heat rises from it, fills the house with little boy ache.

Nice, open kitchen picnic, the jumpsuit says. The getup dings to her ass and tits, held up by spaghetti straps. It runs between her legs, makes her genitals plush.

My mind begins mocking her: nice open closet, nice open toilet seat, nice open hamper, nice open oat farm. Then the voice changes, hoarsens. Nice open legs, nice open mouth. My cousin's finger pushing between my lips. Pushing at anything that feels achy and gives way.

My aunt, in a washed-out dressing gown, at the kitchen table, during quiet time. Even then, she dreamed of houses so full of light only porcelain children could live there.

She has two new appliances displayed. A game show washer and dryer set. She puts her troubled son's sticky underwear in the washer. He goes through three pairs a day, gifts them to her. He is sixteen when she finds the gas can in his room. Two blocks away, a family of five stands bundled in blankets, watching the house burn in a snow as light as body powder. We are angels, something fuzzy taking shape on the hillside.

Forensic views from here.

She leaves me to look around. I go to the bathroom, where I see my brown Ford on the gravel drive.

My eyes sting as I pluck my brows. I open my pants and lift my shirt. I am rough with myself, just to see the handprints, to remember being handled. I wash the small hairs down the sink. The soap is plastic. My fingers smell like his; they smell like wings, like bombs, like ash.

Tonight I will return to last weekend's phrase I models, to the model with the jet-stream tub and the granite counters. I'll return to Cyprus Canyon Villas, to Tournament Hills, Golden Sands, Mountain Shadows, to Del Mar Estates.

Red lights will sweep down the hills like painted lips looking for something to suck.

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I turn the knob of the front door of The Pinnacle, Plan #4, and it releases with the soft suction of a new bottle of ketchup. I'm in Antioch, California. I could be almost anywhere in America.

Ten years ago I began surreptitiously photographing the interiors of model homes after discovering the detailed effort in staging familial success and class desire rampant in the machine of new real estate. Visiting these new home development sites, I record a promise of prosperity and consumer conformity. In these faux environments, I bear witness to a single repeated construction, a cast shell of an idealized family showcased with all of the prescribed accoutrements of transparent success. Harmonious heterosexual marriage, safe gender identification, and achievement of class compose as much of the foundation here as rebar and engineered particleboard floor joists. On the surface the photographs carry the humor of the contrived arrangements representing family normalcy, but under the surface is a recognizable reality culturally conjoined with its own artifice. We cannot help but recognize our collective self in these vanitas dioramas.

As I traverse miles of Barber competing from Glenview, Illinois, to Henderson, Nevada, I realize this project is also somewhat about the American landscape, truncated into cocoons complicit in the grid of society through the connective tissue of commuter highways and privileged consumption. I have always been interested in the road film genre with its protagonists on an epic journey of forgetting and escape. One that is often endless but more likely tragic. I become the protagonist as I follow billboards leading me to the "inspired living" of the new village of Inspirada or Standard Pacific Homes' "New American Idols."

I'm driving north on 680 looking for Bollinger Canyon Road, which will take me to Gale Ranch, a spectacular new development with over twenty models on view—various price ranges, various elevations. I know what I will find, so why do I continue to seek it out? Am I hoping for an ideological ambush? I wonder what the opposite of a pilgrimage is. Perhaps just by going and recording these fictions, I will cultivate the crack in the veneer.

Jeanne Friscia
San Francisco, November 2008

