

HOUDINI HEART

Perhaps larks and katydids dream. Perhaps absolute reality, as Shirley Jackson once wrote, is absolutely insane.

Given a moment of thought, what the hell is *absolute* reality? Reality, pure or impure, certain or uncertain, is an illusion. So too is insanity. Perhaps death is the ultimate illusion. Perhaps I am already dead.

Of course larks and katydids dream. We all of us dream. What else is reality but dreaming?

River House was a palace when I was nine. When I was nine I intoxicated myself by calling it haunted. A haunted palace. Behind its thick brick walls and tall-windowed rooms, I imagined people laughing, people dancing, people saying things that mattered...and behind them—another world of lunatic darkness they could not see.

From the sidewalk across the Main Street of Little Sokoki, Vermont, my unlettered, foul-mouthed, dishonest mother dragging me along by the arm, I would look back at it, dreaming, for as long as I could.

Almost twelve when we had to skip town, the last time I saw River House I was crammed in with a stray kitten I'd begged to keep, and all my mother's other junk in the back of her aging Plymouth station wagon.

By then, River House was only a hotel. Just another hotel.

For the past few years, I've been thirty-six years old. The years flicker by, and with them my mostly unremembered life, yet I'm not getting wiser. Or deeper. Slyer, perhaps. Of necessity, much slyer. I've begun to think I might be slow. Or maybe empty. I'd even settle for "repressed" if that meant I was damaged goods, another casualty of early neglect or abuse.

But the truth is, I suspect I'm no more than my mother was: clever, but not all that bright. No real depth, what the Brits call "bottom." This is probably why I'm not the writer I hoped I would be.

What the hell. Like my mother, I'm also a liar. Because my mother lied, I have no idea who I am, where I came from. Because I lie, neither does anyone else.

I am thirty-six and I'm home again. Or at least back in Little Sokoki. I had to come somewhere. I had to stop somewhere. And Little Sokoki fills a primary need: they won't think to look for me here. At least not right away.

Stepping out of a Vermont Trailways bus all these years later, weighted down with a large leather shoulder bag and my laptop, I'm in the town we stayed in the longest—even now, three years seems a very long time. Of all the places I lived with my rootless feckless hopeless mother, Little

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Sokoki, Vermont, was my favorite. Because of the river. Because of River House.

Of course now that I'm here, I can see that I've changed—I've changed a great deal. In this town, I used to stand awestruck by tiny purple flowers hidden in the grass, by the shape of roots in the deep woods, by the curve of sweet water lured by the salt sea, by my own elfin shadow on walls. Now they mean nothing. I barely notice them. I'd like to think it's a loss of innocence, but really I've been spoiled, as in "corrupted." I've come to know what a palace looks like. A palace looks like certain great houses in Paris, London, New York, Vienna, Barcelona, Beverly Hills. Like certain hotel rooms I could afford for awhile. When my star was on the rise. When I was the *l'artiste de l'heure* and had won a prestigious literary prize. When the prize had turned into speaking tours, the book turned into a movie—and the prize and the movie turned my head. When I would say things like *l'artiste de l'heure*.

Thinking back, and even with the excuse of youth, I sicken myself.

I'm not surprised to find River House has not become yet again a palace. For one thing, it's too small. Nor is it glamorous or fey. It's still a handsome building; as handsome and as ordinary as many of the old buildings still upright in New England. Stores diminish its ground floor: a Rexall, an Italian restaurant, an opticians, a shop selling lingerie, a dark dusty space with a large "For Rent" sign in its window, a half decent bookstore. (I've already looked. I am not in it.) Worse, its small theater, once a home for roving players, is now become a small movie house showing one of

Joel's efforts. Disturbing to see the thing here. Disturbing to think my recent neighbor from across a winding Malibu road's big budget movie got to Little Sokoki before I did.

Not a palace, River House is also no longer a hotel. Above its shops and movie house, it's an apartment building. Its ceilings lowered, its wide airy rooms chopped into kitchenettes and "efficiency units," its flaws painted and painted again, the revolving door torn out long ago, my wonderful "haunted" hotel is gone.

But then, so am I.

I have fled to the town of my youth, and alone. If I am careful, I have money enough to last me six months, maybe seven. In these last months, I will finally live in River House, rent one of its cheapest studio "units," eat very little, buy less, maybe see a movie or two. I will write one more book and in it I will give all that I have left to give, and then, if it's the usual crap—I'll kill myself.

Assuming it'll be crap, this is my suicide note.

(Note to self: Walker Percy said, "...suicide seems to help sell books." I'd add: but it doesn't guarantee talent.)

There. I've made a beginning. Perhaps I have half a year to live. Perhaps not. Standing on Main Street, looking up at what's happened to River House, I see it doesn't matter.