

Anskan House

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SEFTON WAS JUST A BOY WHEN HE FIRST LEARNED OF ANSKAN HOUSE. He was walking home from school with his sister, four years older than he, when she veered from the usual path and took him instead through an older neighborhood, to the edge of their midwestern town. She stopped before an old, fairly ordinary dilapidated house ringed by a broken picket fence, its grounds unkempt and littered with trash. She reached out and took his hand.

"What is it?" Sefton asked. "Why are we stopping here?"

"Anskan House," Judith said. Or not that exactly. Something similar, a foreign word that he could not quite pronounce. In the years since, he had come to think of it as Anskan House.

"Does someone live there?" he asked.

Judith shook her head. "Not exactly," she said. "Not in the way you mean."

Confused, he asked "Why did you bring me here?"

She turned and looked at him for a long moment, then opened her mouth but for some reason did not speak. And then she took him home.

He didn't think about the house again for perhaps a year. He probably would not have thought about it again at all except for a conversation he overheard. At the time, his father was hospitalized. He had been there for several weeks, having torn his leg on a rusty strut while working a site. At first it was hardly more than a scratch, but his father had not treated it properly and the wound had festered, growing first beet red and then bursting and festering open, giving off a sickly-sweet odor. Doctors had stripped the infected flesh away and doused the wound with various chemicals, but the infection refused to go away.

When Sefton visited his father it was the smell that stayed with him, that and the yellowish-brown stain blotting the gauze. He and his father

had spoken during his daily visits, his father in good spirits despite everything, but whatever they had said to one another had dropped out of Sefton's head immediately, so as to leave more room within his skull for the smell and the stain.

The conversation was between his older brother, Mattias, and Judith. He was coming down the stairs when he heard Judith say the word that sounded to him like Anskan. That alone was enough to make him stop and quietly sit, listen.

"Who's that?" Mattias asked.

"No one," said Judith. "Just the name of the place."

"Why would anybody want to name a house?"

"I told you, it's special," said Judith.

What makes it special? wondered Sefton, but Judith must have already explained for Mattias didn't ask. Instead they simply remained silent. Sefton, sitting on the stairs, felt useless and out of place. He carefully scooted down a stair, then another, until he could see, just around the wall, the back of the couch, the tip of his sister's ear and, across from that, the edge of his brother's arm.

"Anskan," Mattias finally said, trying and failing to give the word the same pronunciation that Judith had given it.

"Anskan House," said Judith, putting the emphasis on the last word. And then they were silent again. Sefton leaned forward a little more, saw part of his sister's head, his brother's shoulder.

"But who is it?" asked Mattias finally.

"Not a person," said his sister. "A house stands empty long enough, unlet and uninhabited, and then something comes to be part of it. It's not a person nor exactly a house, but something in between. It is a token of the dead or, worse still, of the living." She paused. "That's how she explained it to me, anyway," she said.

"And you believed her?"

Judith didn't answer. Maybe she had shrugged or nodded, but not in a way that Sefton could notice from behind.

"No," Mattias said. "It's crazy. It couldn't be real . . . Did you try it?"

"No," said Judith. "But she said she had. And she said it worked. She said she rang the bell and then waited until she heard the sound of it coming up from the basement and could sense it there behind the door. And then she opened the slit of the letterbox and spoke into it. She said she

named someone sick and said 'I take his troubles upon me.' And then she got sick and the other person got better."

They were silent again. Finally, Judith said, "It would work for Dad. You should do it for Dad."

"But I don't believe in it," Mattias said.

"It doesn't matter if you believe. It would work anyway," she insisted. "It would save his leg."

"But then what would happen to me?" asked Mattias.

"I dare you," his sister said, but to this Mattias did not bother to respond.

Save his leg, thought Sefton as he crept back upstairs. He hadn't realized his father might lose the leg, nor was he exactly sure what that meant, *lose the leg*. Cut it off? But then how would his father walk? And if his father couldn't walk who would work for them? His mother? How would she manage as a framer? She didn't even know how to hold a hammer. And if his mother was out working, who would feed them?

No, he thought, his father must not lose his leg. If he did, everything would fall apart.

I dare you, he had heard Judith say to Mattias, but Mattias had shrugged it off. But he, Sefton, had been listening too. Which meant that Judith, even though she did not know it, was talking to him as well. Which meant the dare was as much for him as for his brother.

I dare you, he heard her say again in his mind. He could see in his skull the back of the couch, his sister's ear and hair, his brother's shoulder and arm. And then, still within his head, he stood up and went the rest of the way down the stairs and then stood, very solemnly, before his imagined sister and said *I accept*.

A few days later, he left at the end of school by pushing through the fire escape door instead of going out the front doors where his sister would be waiting. He hurried as quickly as he could across the field, climbing the security fence in the back, catching and tearing his pants on one of the barbs at the top. He kept looking behind him, expecting to see his sister calling to him, running after him, but there was never anything.

He made a broad circle around the school, running until his lungs felt like they were full of ragged, hot cloth. He had some trouble retracing the path he and his sister had taken months before to Anskan House, but

in the end, almost without knowing how, there he was, suddenly standing before it.

It looked more or less the same as he remembered it: half the pickets of the fence broken and the yard overgrown. The brick of the walls was pocked and gouged and the wooden porch was rotted through on one side. The shingles of the roof had come loose in places and had scattered the yard. It was just an ordinary, run-down house.

He thought about leaving, about turning around and going home. But instead he stepped onto the porch. The porch's floor was springy, the nails working loose in spots, their rusty heads up and exposed.

When he tried to ring the bell, he realized there was no bell. He thought first to knock, but then saw the old-fashioned hand-crank doorbell centered and low on the door itself, the kind you turned like you were winding a clock.

He reached out, turned it, and it gave off a series of feeble thumps, barely audible. He banged at it with his fist to work the dust free and turned it again, but the sound was still nothing like bells.

He was just about to knock when he heard a sound. There, somewhere below the house, a scrabbling at a basement window, then the creaking of steps. And then, higher now, the sound of a door opening and shutting. He heard footsteps padding slowly down the hall, tentative, careful steps. They made their way to the other side of the door then stopped, and he heard a creak as something leaned against the door proper.

I dare you, he remembered his sister saying. But a part of him now was saying, *No, that dare, it wasn't for you*, and was trying to hold him back. The rest of him, however, was leaning forward, bending down. His fingers lifted the letterbox slot and his head slipped down until his lips nearly brushed against the brass. "My father," he whispered. "I take his troubles upon me."

He waited for something to happen, but nothing did. Nobody spoke, nothing changed, he felt no different. He bent down further and peered through the letter slot, but saw no one, only an expanse of bare, immaculately clean floor.

He let the slot cover fall and stood up, and only then did he hear movement again, the sound of someone walking away from the door.

But this time as the footsteps moved away there was something different about them, something wrong: a clear footstep followed by a dragging sound, back and forth, back and forth.

By the time he got home, his leg had started to itch. He realized he'd not only torn his pants on the barb; he'd grazed his leg as well. At home, his sister scolded him for not waiting for her after school. *I went home with a friend*, he lied, *I thought I'd told you*. And then he claimed he was sorry. She just shook her head.

He told himself he would not make his father's mistake. He washed the scratch immediately, cleaned it with soap and water, put a bandage over it. But by the time he remembered to look under the bandage a few days later, the scratch had become red and angry, the flesh around it starting to pucker and darken.

Meanwhile, his father was starting to get better. Treatments were finally starting to work, the flesh was no longer dying and rotting and the infection seemed to be fading as well. The doctors had every hope they could save his leg.

Yes, thought Sefton, slightly feverish, *every hope*. It had worked. Anskan House had allowed him to take his father's troubles. He had averted disaster.

Or rather, as it turned out, simply redirected disaster. No matter what he did, his wound grew worse and worse. Worried that it would somehow break the spell if he told someone and his father would grow ill again, he said nothing.

A few days later he was at his desk at school, dizzy and hot, unable to pay much attention to what was going on at the front of the class. His leg felt like it was being twisted first one way and then the other, and then, suddenly, it began to burn. He looked down and saw that blood had soaked through his jeans and was slowly wicking its way through the fabric. Fascinated, he watched it spread, imagining the moment when the whole of the pant leg would be sopped and oversaturated, when his blood would start to drip onto the floor. And then suddenly he had slid out of his chair and was lying face-up on the ground, staring at the ceiling, unable to move, the class in commotion all around him.

He awoke in a hospital bed with no clear idea how much time had passed, how many hours or days. His mother was sitting beside him. His father was there too, no longer in a hospital gown, walking with a limp but still walking.

Judith and Mattias were there as well, seated near the foot of the bed.

"You're better," Sefton said to his father.

"All better," said his father, and gave a smile brimming with health. "Don't worry, soon you will be too."

But he knew he wouldn't be.

"How did this happen?" his mother wanted to know, but he just shook his head. "Why didn't you tell us?" she asked.

"I didn't think it was anything," he lied.

"You'll get better," his father said confidently, and patted his head. "If I could get better, you can too. You're young, your body is strong. There's nothing to worry about."

Sefton didn't bother to answer.

From the foot of the bed his sister gave him a strange look. "It's strange you both had the same illness," she said slowly.

The whole family turned to look at her.

"Maybe a genetic flaw," said his father. "Runs in the family." He turned and wagged his finger. "The rest of you, be careful."

A few hours later, when the rest of the family was stepping out for dinner, his sister volunteered to stay behind, sit with him. As soon as the others were gone, she pulled her chair close to the bed, fixed her gaze on him.

After a while, he squirmed. "What?" he said. "What do you want?"

"What did you do?" she whispered angrily.

"I told you," he said. "I grazed it."

She shook her head. "I'm asking what you really did," she said. She waited. When he did not answer, she said, "Did you go there?"

"Go where?"

"You know where," she said. "How did you know what to do?"

He looked away. "I don't know what you're talking about."

She cupped the side of his head with a hand, turned him slowly but relentlessly toward her until he had no choice but to look at her.

"You shouldn't have done it," she said. "You're just a child. You have no idea what you're playing with."

"I'm not a child," he said.

"Who told you about it?" she said again, but he said nothing.

"I know," she said, and then leaned closer, until her lips were nearly touching his ear, and whispered *Anskan House*. When she drew back her eyes were fierce and hard.

“Swear to me you’ll forget about it,” she said. “Swear to me you’ll never go back there again.”

He tried to break away, but she wouldn’t let him. For a while he wriggled beneath her gaze, not responding, but in the end he nodded.

 3

At first it still felt like he had a leg. He could feel it aching and tingling even months after the surgeon removed it. It was hard to get around, and it separated him from all the other children his age. But he still felt like he had done the right thing, that he had saved his father, saved the family. What was a leg next to a whole family?

And then, slowly, after a year, maybe two, he got used to not having a leg. In time he hardly thought about it anymore. In a way, he hardly even missed it. Putting on the artificial leg began more and more to feel as natural as slipping on a shoe.

He never quite admitted to his sister what he had done, though he knew she knew. He caught her sometimes over the years regarding him strangely. But she never said anything and neither did he.

Then first she and then he grew older and moved out of the house. He went across town to college, then took a job, got married. Soon, except for the few times a year he saw Judith, there was no reason to think about Anskan House.

For years, he did his best to keep his promise. For decades, he did not think about Anskan House, did not think about what he had said at the door or what he had felt or heard when he stood at the letterbox. He did not think about it when, years later, his father died. He did not think about it when his wife miscarried their first child and sunk into months of unhappiness and depression. He did not think of it when, much, much later, after two stillborn children and two that lived, his wife was diagnosed with cancer and given only a few years left to live. His life went on and on, slowly stripping away everyone he had known and still mostly he did not even remember there had ever been a place called Anskan House, let alone what could be made to happen there.

Indeed, it was only at the very end of his life—or what should have, properly speaking, been the end of his life—that he thought of Anskan House again. Both his brother and sister were dead by then. He was well into his

seventh decade, had caught what for a week he thought was a cold. Maybe it had in fact begun as a cold, but by the end it was pneumonia and his lungs were filling with fluid, and he was certain this time he was going to die.

It was then that he suddenly recalled Anskan House, slowly coaxed it up from the depths of his mind. Had it really happened? Had it been real? Or had he and his sister simply convinced themselves it was? Had his own infection simply been an uncanny coincidence? And if Anskan House was real, was it still there?

Befuddled, it took him a few moments to understand what had drawn his mind to Anskan House. It was the boy sitting next to his bed: his grandson, sitting still and quiet, staring at him, looking very much like Sefton had looked when he himself was young. Sefton looked at the boy looking at him and then something opened in his head and there it was again: Anskan House. No, he told himself, it probably isn't real. He had probably made it up. He had probably only imagined it.

Sefton regarded the boy carefully. The child was young and healthy, just as he had been young and healthy when he lost his leg. Pneumonia would be nothing for a child, he couldn't stop himself from thinking. Pneumonia could kill an old man, but it could hardly kill a child, could it?

He smiled at the boy.

No, he told himself again, probably Anskan House was not real. Probably he had only imagined it.

And even if it was real, he rationalized, he could just go back later and wish to take on his grandson's troubles. No harm would be done. He wasn't taking advantage of the boy, not really: he just wanted to know if Anskan House was real.

And so there he was, lungs filling with fluid, dying in his bed, trying to teach his grandson where he must go to knock on a door and whisper through a slot. *You love me, don't you?* he found himself saying. *You don't want me to die, do you?*

A part of him was thinking, *It's not even real, this is not serious, this is just a game, a way of tying up one loose thread before I die.*

But another, colder part knew exactly what it was doing. And this was the part of him that did not regret the way things worked out in the end.