

# Rebuilding Home

*Alicia Rump*

As I slow to a stop and the car behind me switches quickly to the other lane, I am reminded of the first time I made this turn. The car behind me almost hit me then, for the weeds and the woods were so overgrown, it was easy to miss the mailbox and the gravel road beneath it. This entire home, at the time, seemed like a forgotten property. Abandoned, neglected, the greenery growing whichever direction fed it most, a home for no one who cared to take care. This Indiana intersection off Allisonville Road is relentless, but this home was quiet, and forlorn.

Now, though it's dark, the space between the thicket of trees is cut back well behind the mailbox, and the gravel driveway inches out to the road welcoming me in. The gravel crunches under my tires, spewing as my Honda climbs across because I still turn too fast, but I slow as I come up on my family's vehicles. All four of my siblings drove separately, each of their cars lined up on the left, and I spy my mom's BMW tucked between them as if hiding. I'm excited at this development, but nervous, the past begging me to be cautious of disappointment.

Pulling up to my dad's Chevy pickup and his Prius (ever the most practical, this man), my Honda Fit squeezes comfortably between them. I switch off my volume and flick off my headlights. The bright white of the projector's light shines through the screen into the front of my car, the images on the screen backwards. I'm late to our movie night.

As this yard stood prior to my dad moving in, these nights wouldn't exist because the brush was too wild, the lawn unmowed, the weeds encroaching over any available space. Snake holes and hollowed mole hills made the ground unfit for chairs and dangling legs, and the biting bugs were nuisances none of us wanted to bother with.

There used to be tall switchgrass that dipped over the front walkway. It was one of the first things my dad cut away, opening a path to his always unlocked front door and up to the rest of the yard. He then mulched the path and placed circular cobblestone disks as walking steps up the middle. As I step from my car and approach my family, my dad's rust-colored dog comes sprinting from the darkness and I curse, almost tripping over the wire staking the projector's screen in place as he runs circles around my feet. I heard my brother, Nick, snort and I'd flip him off if my hands weren't occupied with my bag and my sweatshirt. He whistles, and the dog darts to him instead.

In front of where my family sits, on a pole that extends from the front porch by the porch swing, where one would normally hang a flag, hangs the screen. From the little table on the porch sits his janky laptop, bowed away to keep the light distant, playing some streaming service to which the projector is connected. In front of all of us is a fire pit, a small one compared to the massive pit he has

further down in the backyard. The trees surrounding the three-acre property form a perfect circle, fortifying the house and its inhabitants against the rest of the city and its occupants. Tonight, we are watching *Ready or Not*, followed by the fifth Predator movie, *Prey*.

“There she is! Finally.” My mom calls over the lone JBL speaker. Something loosens in my chest. She sounds like she’s enjoying herself.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m only a bit late.” I reply.

My dad has pulled out one long sofa resting just behind the path, and my twin sister, Addie, and my sister, Maddie, sit buried beneath the best blankets alongside my mom. Where my dad is all about practicality, my mom and Maddie are all about quality. Two bottles of Sauvignon Blanc peek out beside the legs of the sofa next to my mom, and as I watch she leans over and wrenches something from Maddie’s grasp.

“Mom, that Juul is mine!” Maddie says, and leans over, slapping my mom’s arm, trying to retrieve her stolen vape.

“Then where is mine?”

“I don’t know! Wherever you put it last, but that one-” Maddie snags it and yanks, “is mine!”

My mom leans in to fight her for it.

“Guys!” Gabby, our younger sister, is looking at them in annoyance from her spot on a folding chair beside them.

“She started it.” Maddie mumbles.

“I don’t care.” She says. She’s annoyed, but no one takes her seriously, as seen when my mom and Maddie keep fighting, only quieter.

Addie waves and lifts up her arm, showing another blanket she has hidden away, my favorite one, and I smile, winking.

Gabby sits with her legs kicked over my brother, the youngest, who’s 6 ‘4 frame sits in the folding chair beside her, the both of them swamped beneath a knitted blanket my grandma made. There’s an empty folding chair beside them, and I place my bag on it and pull my sweatshirt on, before kicking Nick in the shin as I ruffle Gabby’s hair. She swats me away with a grin and smacks me on the leg.

Nick smiles around what looks to be Oreos, and says, “Sup.”

“Save some of those for me,” I warn him.

He grins again, about to speak, but Gabby beats him to it. “He bought four bags, plus Cheez-its, and three bags of fruit snacks. Trust me, there’s plenty.”

My dad stands from the loveseat by the porch and hobbles up to the computer and pauses the movie.

“Bathroom break,” he calls to all, and then to me, “you hungry?”

I grabbed my bag and follow him, leaning over to give my mom a quick hug.

“Glad you came,” I say.

“I’m glad I did too.”

Maddie chimes in, “Can you plug this in for me?”

I grab her Juul, ignoring her and my mom as they return to arguing about whose Juul I am now in charge of charging.

“Grab me a water!” Nick calls out behind me as I follow my dad through the screen door into his dimly lit house. There’s a flickering warm glow from twinkling lights wrapped around a fake fern in the corner of the kitchen.

My dad’s hip buckles, still adjusting to standing, and I’m struck yet again by how things have changed.

He reaches an arm around my shoulders and pulls me into a hug, kissing my forehead.

“There’s lasagna and blueberry tarte on the counter and drinks in the fridge. I’m going to use the restroom, grab me a Mountain Dew?”

I chuckle, nodding. It wouldn’t be this house, his house, without something warm and sweet on the stove and mountain dew in the fridge, his addictions sans vodka. At the end of the day, was it this man’s sobriety that brought us to this moment? It’s more than that, though. It’s been every choice since.

I look around, the past pulling at my vision, at this moment, begging to be recognized.

2007

*We’d lived in a three-story brick house behind a gate, with a barn out back, and 22 acres of property. At this time, my twin sister and I were eleven, and there were eight years between us and the youngest, our brother Nick.*

*This was 2007, and our dad must’ve known far before any of us the effects of the recession because he’d started drinking again. We didn’t know until our mom*

*knew, and she only found out once he wrecked his four-wheeler into a tree and almost died. He broke his skull, lost his ear, broke his neck, and survived, but his secret was out.*

*The water went first, and then the heat. We'd shower at my mom's friend's house, and cuddle together in Addie's and my room. Their dream house, a failed dream. A foreclosure soon followed, as did their divorce.*

*From 2008 to 2018, throughout 10 years, we moved between our mom and dads, between 14 houses total. From riches to poverty, from whole to pieces, from stability to chaos. We carried our clothes from one house to the next in Kroger trash bags, hoping to God our dad wasn't drunk when he picked us up and hoping our mom wouldn't be there because if she knew, then the fight would be worse than the risk.*

*We broke the structure. Our uncles and aunts, all happily married, all in the same house for as long as we'd known them...we were outliers. Unstable. Like the houses we lived in.*

*The Tamarisk House. The worst because it followed the big house. A mess, smelling of cat piss, all of us full of lice...we fended for ourselves. Our dad tried to help, but once every other weekend didn't cut it. Our mom worked, and worked some more, and hated him for our circumstances.*

*There was dad's house off River Road, too small and cramped, two people couldn't fit in the kitchen unless it was one of us and our brother Nick, who was maybe three at the time. We had a pet snake. It died in this house due to neglect. Our mom would drop us off, never sticking around to talk to him. They fought a lot around this time, and neither the house nor them had space for us.*

*There was his house off Spring Mill Road. It was a huge house, but it was empty. There was a speaker system that worked and ran throughout the house, but there was no heat. We'd cuddle up on an air mattress in the living room, falling asleep to Scooby-Doo movies, surrounded by space heaters. It was cold, and it echoed. It was hollow. My mom never visited this house.*

*There was his apartment off Eagle Creek, even smaller than River Road. It didn't matter so much that three of us slept in one bed, my brother sleeping in my dad's, and one of us was assigned to the couch. It had heat, water, and electricity. Addie and I had our learner's permits, and our mom trusted us to transport our siblings in favor of interacting with him.*

*There was the house off Wooster Ct. It reeked of animal feces and cigarette smoke, past caretakers forgoing taking care. I slept in the best bedroom because it had hardwood floors, and, since I have asthma, I got it. It didn't matter. I couldn't breathe, regardless.*

*This house, like all the rest since the divorce, since the recession, since he*

*started drinking again, felt as helpless to its circumstances as we were.*

Beginning 2018

*“Hello?” I ask, groggy with a sinking pit in my stomach. My aunt had no reason to call me. There was only one reason she would.*

*“Your dad is in the hospital. He was in an accident. You need to get your siblings and get to the hospital off Post Road. I’m sending you the address.” Succinct. Matter of fact.*

*“Was he drinking?” I asked, already sitting up and pulling on pants, knowing as I asked that this question was pointless.*

*“We don’t know anything yet. All we know is that they said to collect family.”*

*“We’ll be there in an hour and a half.” I hung up, feeling nothing.*

*I pulled on jeans, my shoes, and grabbed my keys and drove to the breakfast restaurant my twin and I worked at. The restaurant hadn’t opened yet, and she was smiling when I walked in. Her face fell as I walked behind the counter and grabbed her wrist, stabilizing myself more than assisting her. I was numb until I tried to say Dad was in an accident. I only succeeded in saying, “Dad-” before the emotions hit and my throat tightened and I couldn’t speak and all I could think was she’s going to think he’s dead, and we don’t know that yet, get it together!*

*I remember everyone who had been there, laughing and talking, disappeared. She waited, her face falling, until I could choke it out. Our manager came up, Addie excused us, and we met at her car to drive from Bloomington back to Indy, up to the hospital.*

*There’s nothing quite like the phone call you’ve been dreading. There’s nothing you appreciate more than a lack of a definite; there’s nothing as dreadful and as hopeful as a lack of answers.*

*Along the way, we collected our siblings, informing them one by one, and collectively coming together, bracing ourselves yet again against a new pain from our parents.*

*I remember my mom asking if she should inform our brother. We denied her, saying we were on our way to pick him up from our aunts, and that we’d explain. In hindsight, this may have been something within her responsibility, but we were far too used to taking on that responsibility that we couldn’t allow her to have it. Not when it came to our father, who she despised with passion. Addie and I met Gabby at our Aunt’s, picking up our brother, and merging in the same car. Maddie was on her way back from Ball State. All our destinations converged at the hospital.*

## Ending 2018

*He looks old, but in a different way than how he looked while drunk. While drunk, he seemed 20 years his age, and it wasn't uncommon for people to ask if we needed help to get away from him. He looked like a creepy, old drunk bothering teen girls. The bags under his eyes, unkempt appearance, watery stare, it aged him. Now, he's lost weight. His hair is gray, and he limps, his hip replacement a permanent pain. The lines in his face are deep set. His smile, though, is bright. His blue eyes are clear, and he gets hyper, an unusual youthful energy not common in 58 year old men.*

*He'd barely survived his accident, which we now call a blessing. With a BAC of .48, had he made it home, the next day we would've found him dead. More accurately, my little brother would've found him dead. The apartment dad lived in at the time was within walking distance of my mom's, and he was the only one who still visited my dad.*

*Instead, he went to the hospital where he stayed in the ICU for a month. He survived delirium tremens, hallucinating and shaking, completely unaware people were in the room with him while he talked about forks walking on the ceiling. He ripped out his catheter during one of these moments. It was brutal.*

*He became sober. The first thing he remembers is the priest who visited three weeks into his stay. The last thing he remembered was two days prior to his accident. He'd been drunk since the week of Christmas.*

*Through CT-scans and X-Rays, the doctors found an abdominal aneurysm. Had they not, he wouldn't have made it to the following Christmas. They opened up his stomach and added another scar to his repertoire.*

*He recovered. He went to jail. He got out. He reapplied for the real-estate license he'd let lapse over the years and started working.*

*Desperate to avoid idle hands, he found a steal within the AA community. Someone wanted to stop taking care of a property, but it wouldn't sell because it's set to be taken by the government under eminent domain. They let my dad move in as a gesture of good faith and community. He rebuilt, starting with this house. It's still set to be torn down, but the date keeps getting pushed back, and instead of one year, it's now been five.*

I hear the toilet flush and shake my head.

The differences between 2018 and now are stark, obvious in the ways that this house is different from all the rest. This isn't fragile, or smoke.

The kitchen, which had been small and cramped because of its design, has an entirely different layout and is now long with tiled flooring and a stainless-steel fridge in place of the stained white broken one that'd been here before.

This new fridge has character and life. On one side hangs a personalized calendar with family photos that he checks off daily. Birthday cards stick in all directions and on the other side is a photo of his father who passed away a year ago. A folded card sticks to the fridge right in front, the cover of which is a drawing of this property I sketched out in pen instead of signing my name, while inside is a gratitude letter I wrote to him the first Christmas we spent here. This sits next to another drawing, another letter, where I sketched his face, his smile, on the cover, for his birthday the following year.

No longer smelling of stale air and dust, smoke from the firepit drifts through the screen door, along with the toasted scent of sugar emanating from the blueberry tarte. Pictures of us and his family, his friends, and his dog line the walls. A wooden plaque hangs in the hallway that reads ‘best dad’ with all of our names carved out below it. He already has his Christmas tree up, along with pumpkins and leftover decorations from my Maddie’s birthday on October 10th.

My mom, unable to be in the same room as him for 15 years, now sits outside laughing with my siblings, her voice loud even while trying to be quiet.

I drop off my bag, grab a Mountain Dew and water, plug in Maddie’s vape, and meet my dad again at the front door. I hand him the Mountain Dew and he holds open the door as I slide past.

I duck once more beneath the projector screen and grab my spot on the last available chair, passing Nick his water.

Addie throws me the blanket she’d tucked away, and I settle in and get comfy. When I breathe out, I’m hit with a feeling I can’t identify. It’s not nostalgia. Our family hasn’t been together like this, as a whole and at peace, in almost fifteen years. I reckon it’s probably gratitude, or awe. Whatever it is makes my chest simultaneously tight, while also making me feel like I’ve inhaled a much richer oxygen than I’m used to, like I’ve given up smoking and my body is trying to readjust to clean air.

It’s been five years since my dad’s sobriety, since his accident. Every day since has been an effort in rebuilding, and now, for the past three weeks, within the cool and crisp month of October, we’ve been having outdoor movie nights on Sunday nights. My mom, after three invites and many, many assurances from both us and our dad, has finally agreed to join us.

My dad returns to his seat, and it grows quiet while we watch. Every ten minutes it seems my mom or my sister Maddie, both talking to each other in whispers and not paying attention, asks a question along the lines of ‘what’s happening’ or ‘why is he/she/they doing that’ and all of us groan, answer, or beg them to shut up. Gabby goes as far as threatening to dump her water over them if they don’t and asking Addie to pinch them since she’s closer. Addie obliges not five minutes later.

My dad cracks jokes making fun of our mom over this, and she laughs; the hints of a friendship reinstated. This experience is as soothing as it is bewildering, but slowly I grow more comfortable, my heart thawing with each positive interaction.

The firepit crackles before us sending out little incandescent particles in concordance with the wind. The screen pushes back into the bushes separating the driveway from the house as the wind picks up. We can easily hear the JBL speaker below the screen, but it is not loud enough to drown out the sound of my dad's dog wandering his yard behind us. It is easy to accept the random noises as his dog's doing, but when the movie goes silent and the wind stops howling, the odd branch breaking creates its own jump-scares.

The serenity of the night envelopes us as we all sit mindful of this moment. The movies, though scary, can't breach the sense of safety and security we've crafted these last few years. The jump scares can't overcome the laughter that follows. The unease can't trump the beauty of the night sky, and the comforting breeze of a perfect fall night with all of us buried under blankets and at peace. The past was a broken foundation that we've now flipped and fixed; this home lively and cared for, no longer forlorn.