**Eternal Home**

Michael Thériault

Atop four concrete curbs and a little slab he himself had laid near the back of their back yard Ben built a shed for Angela, white with a red roof, a yellow door, and two south-facing windows framed in blue, and across from the windows a workbench set low just for her, to pot and unpot plants, and directly below each window a shelf where she could start her tomatoes while awaiting the warmth of late spring.

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He opened his eyes, and the breathing beside him came as it had for forty-seven springs, syncopated by dreams.

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With an arc of his right arm east to west above San Bruno Mountain he indicated to her the four planets emerging from twilight, Mars just risen, Venus near setting, Jupiter and Saturn almost equidistant between them.

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“Your hips,” he said from behind her, his callused hand following the arc of one beneath her nightgown.

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Honeybees thrummed in the Spanish lavender by the shed door. She stood and listened, head bowed as though in prayer.

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“Your breasts,” he said, and caught with his lips the salt bead of sweat and with his nose the lavender scent of her soap between them in the warm evening.

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In a knee-length yellow-flowered blue dress and a thick blue sweater she stood between the shed and back fence and looked straight up into the Monterey pine, toward chickadees and nuthatches chittering and flitting among the needles, which dusk began to blacken.

In her raised face he saw overlaid on her girl’s face a topography of the frets and mirth of decades with him.

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He painted a blue band six inches deep waist-height across two of the kitchen’s off-white walls, and a few days later all along it a chain of green-stemmed yellow flowers like a child’s drawing of daisies.

She laughed. Her laughter, free if staccato, had not changed but for slight deepening since he had first heard it in childhood.

On the table at dinner she placed a vase of cut yellow daisies, and daisies awaited him on his pillow that night.

“Not crazy for the scent,” he said, but put one behind an ear.

“Your back,” he said, and kissed all up her spine.

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She huffed at the gray spots of powdery mildew on the dahlia. She pulled it roots, soil, and all from its large pot, steered it into a paper bag, and waddled with the heavy bag to the green City compost bin in the garage.

“No mercy,” he said.

“That was mercy,” she said.

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“Your hair,” he said, and dipped his nose in its gray tendrils.

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“Please just promise me you will. Let’s not argue,” she said. “Not ever again. There is no time.”

He drew a long breath through tight lips, then exhaled quick and sharp. He said, “Yes.”

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“I believe,” she said, “it’s time.”

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The rhythm of her breathing came dead even through plastic and silicone, in sync with one of the whirs from the machines. Glancing in once, a woman in green pastel scrubs passed back and forth outside the door. Another in blue pastel stood beside the doctor, to whom Ben said, “Yes.” The whir halted. Ben held Angela’s hand. Her chest heaved, then didn’t.

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Beneath the pine, a looking that was no-looking; by the lavender, a listening that was no-listening; at the workbench, a doing that was no-doing: All about him he found an unfilled shape in acts without beginning or end.

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The daisy-chained blue band disappeared one side of the priest’s black shoulders, reappeared the other.

There; not there; there, thought Ben.

Said Father Tomassi, “Your friends at the café asked me to visit you. You haven’t been there in months. They’re concerned.”

“I imagine what point they reached,” Ben said, “to send you.”

“They sent someone else,” said Father Tomassi. “You wouldn’t let him in.”

“We’re fine here.”

“But you let me in.”

“I owe you an apology.”

The priest held up a hand. “After the interment, you were distraught. You said what you said. We can discuss it now, if you’d like, or wait until you’ve had longer to reflect. It doesn’t lessen God’s love for you.”

“I meant what I said but was impolite,” said Ben. “I apologize.”

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The priest leaned forward, rested forearms on the table’s dark wood, and clasped his hands. “None of us can know the mind of God, or His plans for us or for those we love. What we do know….”

Ben reached across the table and patted the priest’s long soft hands with a thick rough cement mason’s hand. “Father,” he said, “I’ve heard this forever.”

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In silence the priest watched Ben, Ben the priest’s eyes brown of strong honey.

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The priest recommenced: “In faith you will join her one day.”

“I’ve never left her,” Ben said.

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The priest recommenced: “In her last days she confessed and took communion, and I anointed her head and hands with the oil of forgiveness….”

“Forgive!?” said Ben. “Father, this time I’ll be polite. I’ll get your coat.”

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Just before following the priest out the door, Ben touched two fingers to his lips, then to the spot worn through dark varnish to blond wood on the frame of Angela’s photo by the front door.

At the sidewalk, Father Tomassi turned back and said, “If ever you….”

“I won’t,” said Ben.

“Our Holy Mother the Church will always welcome you home,” said the priest.

Ben watched him into the late-summer fog, then turned toward street and south. With right arm he described an arc east to west across the foggy, closed-in sky, where the mountain and the planets were not, and where they were.