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COVER: (Front) *Louisiana Jockey* Martin Brown, 16 × 20, digital print, 2010. (Back) *Brown's Photo Album*, 16 × 20, digital print, 2010. Both images from the series "Letters from the Backside," a collaboration with the Neighborhood Story Project documenting life at the New Orleans Fair Grounds racetrack.

THE HOUSE OF MY OTHER LIFE

Lucy Ferriss

There is nothing like blackberry brandy. I tip the pint upward—not even a dark droplet rolls out—and set it back on the bedside floor. Time to haul my ass from under the covers. Stand. When the dizziness passes, I adjust my sanitary pad like a boxer fixing his jock strap and get to work on the plaster.

A half-dozen boxes of dried plaster sit on the floor of my Brooklyn apartment. The kid I hired, Jorge, knocked it all down from the wall dividing the place in two. He probably hauled out a dozen boxes' worth himself before I paid him and let him go. I couldn't afford him anymore. Plus, I had to recover from this abortion I had two days ago, which hit me a lot harder than I thought it would—they tell you it's like period cramps, don't believe a word of it—so I couldn't have some kid banging away at the wall while I moaned and slugged brandy under the covers.

I'm wearing my flannel lounge pants and a gray T-shirt, good enough for a brief trip to the untended Dumpster parked down the street. The boxes weigh as much as stones. I prop open the door to my studio before I pick one up, and when I've lurched my way down the five narrow flights to the front door, I try to balance the thing on my hip while I yank the knob. This doesn't work. I set the box on the third step, open the heavy metal door, hold it with my right foot, lunge toward the staircase with my left, reach for the box, pull it to my chest. By the third box I'm a plaster ghost. I've changed the sanitary pad. The brandy has worked its magic. My pelvis feels like a sunken ship; there's pain there, but it speaks of distant battles; there's no point dwelling on it.

Trudging back upstairs, I run into Wally, the super. Wally's gangly, almost good-looking. Two teeth are rimmed in gold, and one of his eyes wanders. "This is the stupidest thing," I tell him, "I have ever done." I am referring to the demolished wall, of course. Wally doesn't know about the abortion.

"The landlord's grateful to you." His mouth glints.

"He won't be when he sees the mess."

"You knocked down the studs yet?"

I shake my head. "I look through them like I'm in jail. Why a wall there, for God's sake?"

Wally nicks his head to the right, up the staircase. "I'll show you."

When I moved in here, Wally and Neal, the guy downstairs, helped get my bed up the five flights. The mattress and box spring were too wide to make the turns, so we pushed them straight up between banisters. Three fingernails broke below the quick; they're just coming back now, purple below the nails. The box spring's seen better days. It flew off the top of my car in a January blizzard as I was moving to the city from New Hampshire. I pulled over to the shoulder, dashed across four lanes, dragged the thing back, tried

to lift it myself, gave up, put my hands over my face, and burst into tears. When I paused for breath, I heard a calm baritone saying "Ma'am? Ma'am? Do you need help?" It was an off-duty cop with a couple of spare bungees in his trunk. He hoisted, strapped, and went on his way.

Me and Blanche, I think as I'm headed up the stairs with Wally, my pad chafing between my thighs. Depending on the kindness of strangers.

Wally heads over to one of my two rattling, dirty windows, hoists the sash, and leans out. "There," he says when he's pulled his long frame back inside. A cold wind rushes through. Up the hill, near Prospect Park, the forsythia are in bloom, but people hurry by with their scarves wound tight. I lean out where Wally's pointing, into the wintry air. "See those braces?" he says behind me. Below, bolted into the brick, a series of L-shaped metal supports jigsaws up the side of the building.

"Yeah," I say as I shut the window.

"Those were for the ramp," he says. I look at him stupidly. I can still taste fermented blackberries, deep in my throat. "For the horses," he says.

"I've been living," I manage to respond, "in two horse stalls?"

I look around the studio. The wall is almost down. Faint traces remain of the joists that originally held it in place; it would not have run all the way to the ceiling. Evan, my archaeologist husband, would love this. Just enough room, he'd point out, for two small fillies to turn around. At the ends where I now have my closet-sized bathroom and closet-sized kitchenette, troughs for eating and drinking, a pile of hay. Every evening, up the ramp you go, Sunshine, five stories.

"The worst comes," Wally is saying behind me, "in the summer." He's glancing up at the ceiling, which is low, maybe seven feet. "Roof's tin," he explains. "You're gonna roast in here."



Before work the next day, the phone rings. I peel my head from the pillow and blink at the clock—8:30, no alarm set. It's Betty Lou, our realtor in New Jersey. "The tenants are out," she reports, "and I've got exterminators lined up. They want someone at the house to sign off. I'm not going there."

"I know you're not, Betty Lou," I say. I'm up, moving, pulling work clothes off the portable rack that serves as my closet. "I've got some stuff to put in the attic. I'm driving out on Saturday."

"OK, then. Just checking. I'll tell them noon."

"Noon's fine."

"I just don't know, with you people."

"It's fine, Betty," I say. With my free hand I'm pulling off the latest pad; not much bleeding. A fresh one from the plastic bin. "You can count on me," I say. "Just list the place, OK?"

"After this weekend," she says.

I skip the shower, skip breakfast, finger-comb my hair, take the subway. Already I'm exhausted. I can't afford another day off. I just started this job. The obscure branch of the State Department where I work is located in Manhattan to catch the business executives. Our bosses here recruit them, as they sprint into retirement, to volunteer in countries recently converted to capitalism. If an enterprising fellow in such a country wants to start, say, a plastic-hat factory to put all the straw-hat-making peasants along the roadside out of business, we are their man. The retired executives get a nice suite in a four-star hotel and a per diem for themselves and their wives.

My job is to write up the reports of the projects and print them in blue ink on a single sheet of crisp bond. Aileen files them. Aileen is my one friend at work. She keeps a bottle of cheap red wine in one of the filing cabinets, and sometimes we stay after work and drink it out of coffee mugs. Aileen's the only one who knows why I

was out for four days. Today's her thirtieth birthday, and the office is taking her to lunch. This is Mr. Little's idea. Mr. Little—who is, in fact, little, a dapper white-haired man with a pencil mustache—has a crush on Aileen, though Aileen thinks he has a crush on me. Mr. Little is about eighty years old. His secretary, Faye, fixes his coffee every morning and brings it in to him on a tray with a mini-pastry she's picked up from the French place around the corner. When I first came here, in January, I told Aileen I'd never worked anywhere with only male bosses who were addressed as "Mr." and only female employees who were addressed by their first names. "Wait till you see the Christmas party," she said.

Today isn't the Christmas party, but Mr. Little is wearing a red bow tie and even Aileen has traded her jeans for a pair of wool slacks and a silk blouse. After I've survived the morning, we gather at the Lebanese restaurant around the corner. Everyone orders Lebanese beer. I've eaten almost nothing in the past few days; by the time the falafel arrives, I'm a little tipsy. I start laughing with Aileen—who's sitting across from me, next to Mr. Little, positioned for the toasts we'll start making when everyone's passed the plates of food—about Middle Eastern cuisine and how ignorant we all once were. "When my husband first got to Beirut," I say, "he stayed at this B&B. That morning, he sits down at the breakfast table, and there's a bowl of garlic soup and a side of chopped raw meat. He figures that's what you eat so he starts in. And the wife rushes out at him, yelling that he can't, it's not American food, that's for her husband!"

"What does he get to eat?" Aileen asks.

I shrug. "Frozen bagel, I think," I say.

But Mr. Little is leaning our way. "I didn't know you had a husband," he says—a little louder than the rest of us, so his voice carries over the table and everyone shushes.

My cheeks burn. "I didn't know I had to tell you," I said. And

then, feeling I've been rude, I add, "He's not really my husband anymore."

"I just never imagined you," says Mr. Little, and now he turns to the rest of the table, prepared to make some sort of pleasantry, "with a husband."

I never imagined you with a wife, I want to say, but a look from Aileen shuts me up.

Let's get the messy part out of the way. The baby—what would have been the baby—was Evan's. We met three years ago working at a prep school in New Hampshire, and we married pretty much right away. Last summer Evan was headed away from the school to Princeton, for a doctorate in archaeology. We had both quit our teaching jobs, and in June we made an offer on a farmhouse ten miles from the university. The money came from an older archaeologist I'll call Q, who had died and left it all to Evan, "my star, my hope." Don't ask me how I spent two years misunderstanding the nature of this gift or the fact that Q was a man.

By August, when we closed on the house, Evan had decided to defer for a year and go on a dig in Lebanon. Years from now, I predict, Evan will realize that I planted this idea in his head. Years from now, I may admit that he asked me, more than once, to come with him. Anyway, we rented the house out. At first I stayed on in New Hampshire, but when Evan came back for the holidays, I told him I was moving to Manhattan. I said I didn't want to live so far away from everything all by myself.

By the time Evan comes back in the summer, we won't hate each other any more. People make mistakes, we'll say. I can help him move into the house or sell the house, and we'll get a divorce.

I also told Evan at Christmas that I had gone off the Pill. I said there wasn't any point while he was 10,000 miles away. Not that there had been much point before. Yet the day before he left, he insisted on making love. I construed it as a fit ending. We coupled

not on the bed but on the couch he'd inherited from Q. The whole time, I kept counting days from my last period. Safe, I kept telling myself, safe. Now when he comes back in June, dusty and satisfied, he'll remember that we held each other, that we loved each other, that we didn't hate each other.

Stupid. I know. So is renting a pair of horse stalls. So is sleeping with Neal, which I started doing three weeks ago. So is trying to take down a wall slapped up with plaster over an old horse-stall partition. All through the lunch, Mr. Little shoots glances my way, because I've suddenly turned from a fetching young thing into a married woman, and he can't wrap his pencil-mustached mind around it. I've got a lot of mistakes left to go before I do something right.

"Want to come with me," I ask Aileen as we're strolling back to the office, everyone convivial, "to Princeton this weekend?"

"You really in shape for that?" she asks with a quick glance to my belly.

Aileen is jonesing for marriage. She won't sleep with any of the bosses because they're married—smart girl—but she would take a retired widower if one moved into the corner office. Most of the time in the file room she's on Match.com. To her I am a cautionary tale. "I don't know what shape I need to be in," I say. "We're meeting exterminators. Carrying a few boxes to the attic. Be good to get out of the city."

"I've never been to New Jersey," she says and giggles.



Friday night, Neal comes upstairs. I show him the supports for the horse ramp and tell him about the fillies. The boxes of plaster are gone, but I haven't gotten to the wood yet. "I'm thinking I'll leave it up," I tell him. "I'll tell people I live in a barn."

He lies flat on my bruised bed while I rub prescription cream

into his back. Neal's back is covered with bumps and fissures, like moguls on a ski slope. Before he moved downstairs, he had been in a three-month coma after surviving a fire in his Chelsea loft. He thinks the girl he was sleeping with set the fire—she was crazy, he claims, and I don't ask more—and then got out. They found him unconscious from smoke inhalation, collapsed in front of the swollen door. Most of the skin into which I rub the greasy cream is from grafts.

Neal has a bland Waspy face, uninjured from the fire, and a way of looking a couple of millimeters left or right of your eyes. I don't trust him. I think he has another girlfriend. I picture him with his pals cooking meth in the Chelsea loft. But February was a pit of loneliness, especially after the heat in the building shut off, and I knew I'd counted the days wrong, back at Christmas. So when he started asking me to rub cream into his back, I was happy to take things wherever they wanted to go.

"What happened to Jorge?" he asks. His hand strays to my leg.

"I had some medical issues. I had to use the money I was going to pay him with."

"You OK now?" The hand strokes my calf muscle.

"Not yet." With an ungreased pinkie finger I pull his wheat-colored hair back from his ear and kiss the lobe lightly. "But you don't really want me," I whisper. "I'm just the girl upstairs."

"I might move out," he says.

This news hurts in a way I won't acknowledge. I thumb the cream into the valleys between moguls. Neal has never objected to anything I've said. I tell myself I will remember his help with the mattress and how we needed each other's body heat to fall asleep in February. The rest will fall away. "When?" I ask.

"Summer maybe. It's sort of a share situation. But I haven't decided."

This is how we talk—share situation, medical issues. "I'll

probably leave too," I say bravely. "Wally tells me I'll roast under this roof."

"You could move downstairs to my place, when I'm out."

What a sensible suggestion! I could dig my nails into Neal's scarred back. Instead, I picture my rage like smoke from a fire, sneaking through the cracks in the windows and wafting over the cold city. There, it's gone.

By the time I've finished creaming him, Neal's fallen asleep. I lie, clothed, on my side facing him and the demolished wall, my hand on his broad shoulder blades. I picture Mr. Little, propped up in bed next to his wife, both of them reading novels for their book clubs. He folds his across his lap and tells her about the report writer at work, how she turns out to be married. His wife can't understand what's so surprising. Girls do that, she teases him. They can't all be faithful just to you.



Early Saturday, I pick up Aileen. I've rented a van from a lot near the Jackson Heights stop, and together we swing by the storage facility. In it I've stuffed Evan's stationary bike, the frame backpack he lived out of for six months, his collection of Middle Eastern texts, the iron bedstead that once held the now-battered mattress and box spring, our kitchen table, and the infamous couch. The couch isn't worth taking to New Jersey except for its sentimental value to Evan, which I am assuming. I'm feeling good. The taste of blackberry brandy is a lingering memory; the cramps have vanished; my jeans hang loose on my hips. There's a whisper of warmth in the air, the sky hazy, the flowers in the miniature gardens of Queens the fuzzy yellow of baby chicks.

"So glad to be getting out," says Aileen as we blast over the Verrazano. "My roommate Sandy? She's got this new guy, right? So he's

over last night telling us about the girlfriend he had in L.A. who was raped by some prick she used to date, only they lost in court and the guy walked. So you know what? He *shot* the guy."

"You mean he kneecapped him, or—"

"No, I mean he *killed* him. With a .22, he claims. He says he wanted it to hurt. He says he was ready to do time for it, but he never got caught. I mean this guy was in my *house*, Shelley, all right? He looks like a regular Queens guy, you know, a little Italian, a little clueless." Aileen shudders. "I wouldn't get in bed with him," she says.

I laugh, but it's nervous. "Did he ask?"

"No one is asking, you banana. I am a reluctant celibate. Wasn't that a movie or something?"

"*Reluctant Debutante.*"

"I wouldn't be reluctant there. That's who the rich guys marry. Debutantes. You see how Little bugged out at you at lunch the other day?"

"I don't see what difference it makes. I never think of myself as married."

"You say 'my husband.' People who don't think of themselves as married don't do that."

I don't answer. I'm trying to follow the interchanges. I haven't been down here since we closed on the house. Betty Lou, the realtor, was shocked that we weren't going to move in right away. Evan kept saying, "Shelley'll keep tabs. I've got business out of the country. It'll all work out." Even when we were house-hunting, I knew buying a place together was a desperation move, the extreme gesture you make when you're on the precipice. "Let's not get divorced! Let's buy a house instead! Let's have a kid instead! Let's sail around the world instead!" Way over there in the Lebanese mountains, Evan thinks that the interest on Q's money is enough to pay residual expenses on the house, but he's wrong about that. I get the statements.

Evan's been spending. When he gets back, he will have to find some income or sell the place. Meantime, Betty Lou has been calling with tenant complaints. There were rats, the tenants claimed. Running over their kitchen counters. Threatening their baby.

Now they've moved out, taking their security deposit with them, and the exterminator's moving in. Bye-bye to more of Q's money. I haven't told Aileen about the rats. I was thinking she was a tough cookie, a city girl. In the car, she's going on about this fellow with the .22, and I wonder if I should have brought her along. "You know, if you want to just wander around the town or something, while I take care of stuff at this house . . ." I say as we leave the highway and start across the low hills.

"No way! I want to see your place. If it's nice enough, I might ask you to introduce me to this husband of yours."

"I don't think he'd be your type."

"Having a type is a mistake."

I was the one who found the house. Now, descending the long slope into the hollow, I'm shocked at how small and ordinary it looks. In keeping with the foolishness of buying it, I had driven all over the county looking for just the place Evan would love, and I remember thinking, when I stepped into this Federal colonial—with its fenced yard so Evan could get a dog and the neighbor's corn field rising up behind—that I had the ticket. Twenty minutes from the university, with a bright high-ceilinged study where Evan could be a scholar; twenty minutes to the train, which I could ride to some esoteric employment three days a week in the city. Now it looks, despite the blazing forsythia, a little shabby. Across the road, two pickups are planted permanently in the neighbor's yard. But Aileen cries out, when we pull into the driveway, "Shelley, this is a dream palace! You want me to move in here with you?"

"You're what friends are for," I say, and step out.

It's weirder than I anticipated, sliding the key that's been on my

ring since August into the back door lock. I own this place, half of it anyway. Evan and I planned where the furniture would go. We got the engineer's report on the rotting soffits. We negotiated with the sellers—a family, I'm recalling as I step into the sunlit kitchen, with a baby in a playpen, who talked strategically about the great family daycare down the road—for the kitchen appliances, the washer and dryer in the basement. This is not a stranger's home. This is my house. And it's full, I remind myself as I hear Aileen mount the steps behind me, of rats.

"Better be prepared," I tell her.

"For what? I'm from Queens," she says.

Inside, the air's as cold as outside. I wonder if the furnace is on. I know just enough to fear frozen pipes. The kitchen's old fashioned—linoleum floor, wooden cupboards, a blue plasticky counter surface, an electric stove with an analog clock stuck at 3:45. Down a step, an added wing for an eat-in nook, with windows on three sides. The frightened, litigious tenants have left the place clean. Gingerly, I step toward the sink. Betty Lou had her assistant stop by and set traps in the likely places. I should find them before Aileen does. Quickly, as if for surprise, I pull on the C-shaped handle of the lower cupboard.

Two traps, both occupied by mice. Their bodies have gone flat, like tiny mouse rugs, their heads jutting grotesquely from the bar that snapped their necks. No maggots yet. I exhale. "There's mice," I tell Aileen. "That's why the tenants left."

I open other cupboards. Some traps are sprung, others occupied. I count six dead mice in all. The traps are big enough for rats, but no rat bodies bulge from the wooden planks. These vermin are shameless, the tenants have told Betty Lou. As I turn from the kitchen to the sitting room, I see one out of the corner of my eye. It scuttles from the bottom of the fridge to the bottom of the stove. A mouse. A tiny, quick field mouse.

"They got a stack of paper bags here," Aileen says. "You want me to scoop these buggers up?"

"You can do that?" I say.

She grins. "We got cockroaches bigger than this."

She's a good friend. I check the fireplace and close the flue; no point adding swallows to the menagerie. A braided oval rug, blue with brown, graces the center of the room, covering a stain in the wide boards that I remember noticing when we first looked at the house. We were going to sand and polish the floors upstairs and down. In 1870, I think, the house was built, a handsome little farmhouse, just late enough for the high ceilings. I duck around the main staircase to check out the study that was going to be Evan's. It's smaller than I remember, but with its own little fireplace, blocked off. "I'm going upstairs!" I call down to Aileen.

"Take your time!"

The steps to the second floor are steep and narrow, the carpeting worn. Upstairs the ceilings are lower—Evan had to duck his head through the doorways—and the windows begin a foot from the floor and go up to my chin. Faded wallpaper peels from the walls. We were going to strip it and paint. I inspect the plain bathroom, the two bedrooms. A window's been left open a crack; a sheer white curtain lifts in the draft. The south bedroom for us, the north for my study and later for the baby. In the baby's room the tenants have left a wooden chair with a broken strut. Carefully I sit in it and gaze out the window. Across the road, the neighbor's shaking a rug out the back door. She stands in the sun for a moment, getting its warmth on her face. She's maybe in her forties. I think how I'll never know her, and I feel an ache at the back of my mouth. Three bikes in varying sizes lean against the front porch. I follow the woman's gaze across her yard in time to spot a horse amble from the stubbled grass into a ramshackle barn where it has its stall. No ramp.

From downstairs, Aileen calls: "I'm gonna start emptying the van, OK?"

"Great!" I shout back. "Be down in a sec!"

As I look out the dusty window of my house, I can feel it all happening. We've had the baby, Evan's finished his degree, I've done one kind of work or another. We've quarreled a lot. We've opened up the second chimney downstairs, and then closed it up again because it sucks too much heat from the house. We've stripped the wallpaper and painted, then five years later we've painted again, this time the eat-in kitchen after the remodel. I hate having just one bathroom, but building another downstairs would take too much space out of the new kitchen. We've replaced our mattress twice and box spring once, but we've kept the iron bedstead, the paint chipping from the corner posts. The stairs don't seem steep to us anymore; other people's stairs seem shallow. I've come to know this house so intimately, like a lover's body. Its cracks and corners, its smells in all seasons. Every first frost, we get an influx of mice, then another in the spring when they come out of hibernation. We trap a bunch and keep the food sealed up, and for a while we keep a cat. Now and then, especially after the second child, we're tempted to move to a larger place, a newer place. But neither of us makes that much, and our friends come to love visiting us in this house, where we've built a wraparound deck looking over the side yard. Summer parties spill onto the grass. The children take carrots across the road to the filly, and later, when she's an old mare, they're allowed to ride her. Finally the girl and then the boy grow up and leave. Evan reclaims his study, or maybe I claim it this time. Now we don't think about why we married in the first place or why we quarreled so much. Vaguely I remember a moment in my life when I guzzled blackberry brandy in a plaster-strewn horse stall amid a damp and frantic Manhattan winter. I don't remember Neal at all, and I've lost touch with Aileen. When the kids are grown and the money worries ease up, we take a trip or two to those far-flung countries

where the State Department sends retired executives, and we buy straw hats from the peasants by the roadside and wear them home. Sometimes, on weekends, we take the train into the city, and when we come back late at night, the house is here waiting, smoky blue against the stars in a moonless sky.

Sitting on the broken chair, I feel this whole life I will never live pass through me and into the air of the house. I feel pretty happy with it all, even the difficult parts. For a moment that life is mine, mine and the house's. "All right," I say out loud.

Through the window I see a white van pull into the driveway. Mice and cockroaches stare from the van's sides through their cages, red circles with red slashes across the diameter. The exterminators are here to do their dirty, necessary work. I stand and descend the steep staircase, to help Aileen unload the van.