

note how the essay begins with a very straightforward and unambiguous account of the murder

first mention of the side door

### Small Rooms In Time

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first mention of cocaine

Several years ago, a fifteen-year-old boy answered the side door of a house where I once lived, and was murdered, shot twice by one of five people—two women and three men—who had gone there to steal a pound of cocaine. The boy died just inside the door, at the top of a staircase that led to the cellar where I once had set up my easel and painted. The robbers—all but one still in their teens—stepped over the body, rushed down the steps, and shot three people there, a woman and two men.

Somebody called the police, perhaps the people who rented the apartment on the second floor. The next day's front-page story reported that the three in the basement were expected to survive. The boy's father, who was somewhere on the first floor and out of the line of fire, had not been injured.

note that here in the 3rd para, right after the murder story, the author shifts to the present tense, the time of the writing of the essay

It's taken me a long time to try to set down my feelings about this incident. At the time, it felt as if somebody had punched me in the stomach, and in ways it has taken me until now to get my breath back. I'm ashamed to say that it wasn't the boy's death that so disturbed me, but the fact that it happened in a place where my family and I had once been safe.

replica, note the number of times this repeats; note also this is a second house, not the one where the murder took place, but the language ties the two together; and this replica delivers the primary image pattern

I recently spent most of a month building a Christmas surprise for my wife, a one-inch to one-foot scale replica of her ancestral home in the Nebraska sandhills. The original, no longer owned by her family, was a sprawling fourteen-room, two-story frame house built in 1884. Her great grandparents and grandparents lived there. Her great aunt, still living and 108 years old at the time I am writing this, was born there. Her father and his brothers and sister chased through those rooms as small children, and as a girl my wife and her younger sister spent summers there, taking care of their invalid grandmother.

Day after day as I worked on this dollhouse, pasting up wallpaper, gluing in baseboards and flooring, I would feel my imagination fitting

first 2nd instance of the image pattern which begins in the title

but construction connecting past and present and author with wife's ancestral house

itself into **the little rooms**. At times I lost all sense of scale and began to feel grit from the sandhills under my feet on the kitchen linoleum, to smell the summer sun on the porch roof shingles. I had never lived in that house **but** I lived there during those moments, and as I worked, the shadows of windtossed trees played over the dusty glass of the windows. Now and then I would hear footsteps on the porch, approaching the door.

rep of dollhouse and Christmas

Immediately upon seeing the dollhouse on Christmas Eve, my wife began to recall the way it had been furnished when she was a girl, to talk about this piece of furniture being here and that one there. I watched her feed the goldfish in the dirty aquarium and sit down on the stiff, cold leather of the Mission sofa. I saw her stroke-damaged grandmother propped in her painted iron bed under the eaves.

past perfect

Listening to my wife, watching her open the tiny doors and peer into **the tiny closets**, ~~I began to think about the way in which the rooms we inhabit, if only for a time, become unchanging places within us, complete in detail.~~

rep of the rooms; note rep of the word tiny in the previous sentence

mentioning the article is a kind of time switch device that lets us know we're back at the time he found out about the murder

I clipped the article about the shooting and must have read it a hundred times **those first few days**. In a front-on photograph, like a mug shot, there stood the house, sealed off by yellow police tape, looking baffled, cold, and vacant. Next to the picture was a row of slack-faced mug shots of the five arrested. They looked as empty as the house.

I mailed a copy of the article to my first wife. I wanted her to share the shock that I was suffering, like a distant explosion whose concussion had taken years to reach across a galaxy of intervening happenstance. At the site where only the most common, most ordinary unhappiness had come to us-misunderstandings, miscommunications, a broken marriage like thousands and thousands of others-there had been a murder, three people had been wounded, and five were on their way through the courts and into prison, all for the want of a pound of cocaine that the article reported had never been there.

again contrast between ordinary "safe" life and the murder

cocaine repeated with variation

For several years in the early 1960s we'd rented the first floor, which included the use of the cellar that I used as a study. We'd been

repetition of study

married for three years and were then in our early twenties. Diana was a schoolteacher in a nearby town, and I worked as a clerk at an insurance company. While we lived there, Diana became pregnant, our son was born, and when we brought him home from the hospital we carried him in through that same side door where the murder took place.

"the same side door" is a tie-in phrase that brings the murder the the author's newborn son into the same sentence

I remember matted orange shag carpet inside the door and continuing down the steps to the cellar, and more of the same carpet on the damp concrete floor and glued to the walls. (I can't think of it now without seeing bloodstains.) At the foot of the stairs, in a mildewed, overstuffed chair I'd bought at a thrift shop, I studied for night classes at the university. In that room I painted a few amateur pictures by bad basement light, one of a towering grain elevator that I thought was pretty good but which I mislaid long ago. A life-sized nude of Diana disappeared while we were packing to leave that house for another across town. I wonder if someone doesn't have it nailed up over their basement bar. Perhaps over cocktails on football Saturdays their guests try to guess who that pretty young woman might have been.

parenthetical jams the blood, the murder into his memories. A violent little grammatical moment

Two quiet, Latvian women rented the upstairs apartment. They had emigrated from Europe during the second World War and spent spring, summer, and autumn on their knees beside beds of annual flowers they'd put in along the driveway. Olga was the older, then I suppose in her sixties. She had a badly curved spine, a shy smile, and from a forest near Dresden had seen wave after wave of Allied bombers. She told me that a thousand feet over the city the atmosphere stood in red columns of flame. Alida was handsome, dark-eyed, dark-haired, younger than Olga. Of the two, she was the less approving of the young couple who lived downstairs, who drank too much, who had a very barky dog.

more detail, the two women--they get repeated near the end; note how he doesn't just describe them but gives them a dramatic story; note also how they are contrasted and so come more to life

When I think of the exterior of that house, their flowers are always in bloom-petunias, asters, pansies, bachelor buttons, phlox-but when I remember Diana and me living there, it is always winter and we are closed in by heavy snow. The side door where the boy was killed opened onto the driveway, and the first thing I did on those blizzardy winter mornings was to open it to let out our black Schipperke,

the side door repeated, see above

Hagen, and watch him wade through the snow to pee and then turn back, a miserable look on his sharp little face. It was a cheap, aluminum storm door with loose glass panes, icy to the touch. As I waited there I could hear the kitchen radio behind me, turned up loud so that Diana, who dreaded the twenty-mile drive when the roads were bad, could catch the list of schools that were to be closed for the day.

In a few weeks time I could build a miniature version of that house, using the approximate measurements of memory, and as I worked with plywood and paper and glue I would be able to gradually remember almost everything about it. But I won't need to do that; since the murder I have often peered into those little rooms where things went good for us at times and bad at times. I have looked into the miniature house and seen us there as a young couple, coming and going, carrying groceries in and out, hats on, hats off, happy and sad.

he imagines the possibility of building a replica of the murder house; this is how he ties in the dollhouse for his wife with the murderhouse; very cunning; this is also an imaginative reconstruction of something that might happen but won't

As I stared at the article, every piece of our furniture took its place in the rooms. I could have reached in through the door of that photograph and with the tip of a finger roll our antique dental chair over the floor. A friend's big painting of the Rolling Stones hung on the opposite wall. On the living room floor was the plush, white carpet I bought with money from a literary prize. It was always dirty. Down the hall and through a door to the left, our bed, rumpled and unmade, stood right where it stood when we were young parents, with Jeffrey's crib nearby, and by leaning a little forward I could hear the soft, reassuring sound of his breath.

rooms and furniture, imagining it as his wife imagined her ancestral house earlier

It has been more than thirty years since we lived at 2820 "R" Street, Lincoln, Nebraska. I write out the full address as if to fasten it down with stakes and ropes against the violence of time. I hadn't thought about it often, maybe a few times a year. But it was our house again the minute I opened the paper that morning and saw its picture and the faces of the people who had struck it with terrible violence. They didn't look sorry, they looked like they'd do it again if they could.

30 years starts to repeat

Now and then since the murder I find myself turning into that decaying neighborhood and down that street, slowing to look at our house. The window shades are drawn on what were once such bright,

violence of time--a metaphorical analogy w the violence of murder

para about the murder house NOW

3rd mention of the side door

welcoming rooms. Nobody lives there now, as far as I can tell. On snowy days there are no tracks up the drive to that flimsy side door.

rep of the 2 women

rep

I lean down, I try to fit myself inside. Even after thirty years there still might be the smell of Olga and Alida's salt herring being cooked upstairs, and on the first floor the fragrance of phlox, a few stalks in a water glass. For thirty years I had put it all firmly behind me, but like a perfect miniature it had waited in a corner of my heart, its rooms packed with memories. The murder brought it forward and made me hold it under the light again. Of course I hadn't really forgotten, nor could I ever forget how it feels to be a young father, frightened by an enormous and threatening world, wondering what might become of him, what might become of his wife and son.

30 yrs rep twice

tiny para of backfill about divorce

Only a year after Diana, Jeff, and I moved away and into another house across town, our marriage came apart, and I began to learn to be a single father. From time to time Jeff came to visit me at the home of friends who had taken me in. The dead boy, too, had gone to visit his father.

If my luck in this life had been worse I might have been that other father, occupied by some mundane task, perhaps fixing a leaky faucet when my son went to answer the door. But I was lucky, and my son was lucky, and today, long after the murder, finding myself imagining that damp cellar room, peering down into it as if looking into a miniature cellar, I don't hear shots or see blood on the steps. I hear only soft sounds: my breath as I sit with my book, Diana's stocking feet as she pads along the hall above me, and water running into the bathtub as she gets ready to give our baby a bath.

miniature

this is where he begins setting up his ending; the author "becomes" this woman at the end of the essay

footsteps again--but different ones

more of the device of imaginative reconstruction; note how many things he talks about didn't actually happen! A good lesson

The landlord, who owned a little doughnut shop, died many years ago. They had once lived in that house. His wife had Alzheimer's disease and sometimes arrived bewildered at our door, wanting us to let her in. She too is gone. If I were building a miniature of that house I would stand her at the door, clenching her purse in both hands, her hat on crooked.

The flowers that grew along the driveway are thirty years past their

rep

rep

more time passing material, how things have changed, elegaic

all the repetitions here amount to a "gathering" of convergent patterns which is a common device you find at the ends of stories or essays

rep

rep

rep

season and their beds are only dust today. My friend who painted the Rolling Stones has died. Olga and Alida, having survived the horrors of war to come to the new world and take a little pleasure in simple flowers, they too are gone. I've noticed lately when I've driven past that the porch has begun to slope toward the street as if to pour our ghosts out the front door and onto the buckled sidewalk. And I am not that young father any more, but a man in his sixties who is slowly becoming a baffled old woman who hammers and hammers at a door, wanting to be let in again, knowing by instinct that something good must still be waiting just inside.

refers back to the landlord's Alzheimer's wife, always coming back to the old house and wanting to be let in; the compositional principle here is that you can create a tight poetic ending by referring back to something already mentioned in the text. Alzheimer's is a disease of the memory, and the author trying to remember keeps going back to that house

basic compositional principles to note in this essay

the most common device is the time switch, a device telling us when an narrative element is taking place relative to other narrative elements. Note how many time switches there are in this piece. Count also the number of time periods (layers) which are referenced. How far back in time does the essay reach? How far into the future?

boss image essay: the essay coheres around an image pattern (little rooms) which is announced in the title of the story. The pattern includes references to little rooms, rooms, closets. It branches off into replica, dollhouse, miniature and, finally, into memory. The pattern is loaded with meaning via thematic passages and association.

repetition is the heart of art: notice all the various sorts of repetition and where the repeated items are placed and how many times they repeat. Aside from the narrative, the author uses patterns of word repetition and parallel constructions and associations to link one time with another, one image with another, one character grouping with another, one paragraph with another, etc. The essay is written in a cunningly informal style which conceals the amount of technical virtuosity on display.