

An Album of Homes

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The first was a big house. It was multiple levels, had a car port, and was very bright yellow. Each window was outlined in white and helped the house stand out from all the others on the block. From the front door sprung a covered porch filled with potted plants of all shapes and sizes. In the backyard was a small family-run garden. It never produced enough to live off, but it was fun to work in during the spring. There was a birthday party there. Three candles burned on the cake, and a toy buzzed around the yard, chased by a toddler and two others who would never be able to catch it. A mother and father watched but didn't join in the fun.

The second to come was much smaller; this one was a tan trailer behind a grandmother's house. She always looked after them when they needed it. It was nearly hidden by trees, but what stood out was the chickens that always clucked around the house, laying eggs wherever they pleased. The children here played in a giant sand pit next to the house. Even after they were long gone from that place, toys remained in the sand, some buried too far to ever be found again.

The next was another trailer, this one smaller than the last. There were only two bedrooms, so space needed to be shared. It was blue and had a chain-link fence around it. The kids could play freely inside but weren't to leave the fence. The backyard sloped down, forming a nice hill. When winter came, an ice storm coated it in a thick layer of ice that the kids spent countless

hours sliding down with the mother, no father as he had not come with them when they moved. They weren't lonely, however. The mother met a truck driver who lived in Oklahoma. He came to visit them often enough that he convinced the mother to bring them to his own house.

To get there they lived on a bus. It was a school bus remodeled for them. The seats had all been removed, some of the windows had been painted over for privacy, and separate rooms were formed from the way dressers and couches were stuffed into it. At the back, a kennel had been built for the family's two dogs, so they could be comfortable as well. On the outside, it remained a bright yellow school bus with just the name of the school painted over. All their belongings fit into this temporary home. The trip was long but fun for the children. They enjoyed getting to see all the sights.

When the bus stopped, it was in a forest, but the trees were much shorter than at the other houses. There was a trailer nestled into these short trees with a giant stone platform in front of it. This is where the stepdad would leave his truck when he was home visiting. The house had a comfortable feel to it, with enough room for each of the kids to have their own space. They could venture into the forest and explore as far out as they wanted to as long as they could still see the giant stone platform, so they could find their way home. The kids grew here, going from learning their ABCs to learning multiplication before the mother found out the reason the stepdad spent more time on trips

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than at home.

As the children were old enough to help, moving was much easier, this time to a decrepit house next to a rock quarry. It was an older home, bleached a light tan from the once-dark brown it had been painted. On the inside both mushrooms and mold grew on the walls. At one time the water heater had fallen through the floor, which needed to be rebuilt. They worked hard on this home, attempting to make it into their own. It never really worked. One day a lady showed up with an officer and left the mother worried. Things were packed up, and again they were moving.

They ended up in another old house, one where the ceiling was falling in in several rooms, and the floors were all uneven. The outside looked new and clean; that's what drew them in. They didn't have time to look past the recently painted green walls. During the winter the house couldn't stay quite warm enough, at one time growing so cold the toilet bowl cracked and water poured throughout the bathroom, freezing solid before anyone woke up. The mother met another man, one who promised to fix the bathroom for them. He insisted that the children be homeschooled because he didn't trust what happened in the schools. This led to the lady and the officer returning, and the mother moved everyone again, too afraid to stay any longer. The bathroom never had been fixed.

This house was another trailer, small enough that all the children had to share one room. However, nothing was falling in or breaking in the winter. The house was a light blue and was in a trailer park of just four small trailers. Everyone was friendly with each other and shared what they could amongst themselves. They were within two blocks of the school, so the children opted to walk instead of getting on an overcrowded bus. They grew much older here and constantly bickered over the tiny space they all had to share. Word slipped in a class somewhere from one of them, and the lady returned a third time. She gave no more warnings. This scared

the mother once again, and even faster than before, everyone was moving. This time out of the state, far from the lady and her officers.

The house they ended up at was as big and as yellow as the first house had been. It even had a stone porch. Inside the ceilings that had at one time been white were stained a dark yellow from years of cigarette smoke. The walls had cracks down them, and no matter where they put a marble on the floor, it would always roll away seemingly never able to find a flat place. There was room here, so each of the children had their own space. They continued to grow, but as soon as they were ready for high school, a tree was ripped from the ground by a storm and deposited on their roof. Instead of reaching out for help, the mother and current stepdad worried about the lady coming to take the children away. So, they gathered all their belongings and rushed away with the children again.

With less and less options presenting themselves, the stepdad convinced the mother that it would be best to hide. Deep in a forest behind an old man's house, they set up tents to live in, a circle of blue and gray tents with a small tarp over the top of them to keep some of the heat off. Sand got into everything they ate or wore. The children would walk to the road in the mornings and get on a bus to school. They hadn't changed school systems, and the children were too afraid of the stepdad to say anything, so the school officials did not alert anyone to their troubles as they had no way of knowing. The mother and stepfather would beg for food, and at night when the old man would sleep, everyone would steal water from the hose that was attached to the house.

Of course, it did not take long for them to be found and forced out. Before the old man could even call the police, their stuff was packed, and they had moved again. It was several days before the mother could work anything out, but scared from the last time, they made an honest deal with someone to rent a piece of land just outside of town. The man thought that they would

be putting cattle on it, but instead the mother rented a small shed and had it placed there to live in. The shed had one door and two windows. It was made from a light orange wood and had a green roof. This land was very open, with hardly any trees at all. It was hidden from the roads by a giant hill. At the bottom of the hill was a creek, right next to the shed. The children dropped out of school now that they were old enough to and stayed on the land trying to understand their lives as the mother worked small jobs and the stepfather begged. There was no electricity ever run to the shed, nor water. If a bath was needed, they were told to bathe in the creek. They raised chickens and rabbits for food, letting them roam free on the land around the house to feed on bugs and grass. As time wore on, the children learned life was not supposed to be this way, and they convinced the mother as well.

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They found a house in the town that they could afford if the mother picked up another job. It was a giant blue house with more attic space than yard. The carpets were all bright red which looked odd compared to the outside of the house. Just like all the homes before, the ceiling was falling in in several rooms, and the floors were all uneven. Electricity for the house could not be turned on as the wires were so old they needed to be replaced. This was heaven for the children. They could bathe in the bathroom, albeit with cold water. They all had room to breathe, and they could walk to the library since they were in town again. They spent many days going to the library to learn on their own, hoping one day to do something with their lives even though their chances would always be slim. The stepfather refused to let them do anything to help or to better themselves beyond just reading what they could find on their own at the

library.

Being back in the town, back in view of others, the children hoped that someone would alert the lady with the officers again, but nobody ever did. They were old enough that people expected them to take care of themselves, even though they were never shown how. Instead, people looked at them as if they were lazy drop-outs by choice. They weren't given handouts by anyone, but they worked together to raise money without the stepfather learning of it. Twice they let it slip, and he took it for rent even though the landlord never saw a single penny of it. Finally, they had enough for three one-way bus tickets. Before anyone knew what was happening, they had packed and disappeared like they had done so many times before.

Instead of just another house, at the end there was hope. The bus they boarded wasn't like the one before. It was white and filled with nervous people. They could only bring a single bag apiece, clutched tight to the chests of the kids. After they had gone three days without even a wink of sleep, a no-longer-familiar grandmother listened to their story and received them with open arms. Help had always been just a word away, but the mother had been convinced not to take it.

This new home was foreign to the children. It was painted white and had a big wooden front porch that they could sit on. It only creaked a little. Inside, the floors were all even, the ceiling stayed in its place, and electricity buzzed through the wires in the walls. They didn't all get their own rooms, but that was okay because for once they felt safe. As time moved on, they went back into school, and as even more time passed, continue to better themselves, but they would never forget the many houses that led to this new life. ❖