

## AN EMPTY HOUSE

IT IS ONE month since my family was massacred inside their home. The quadruple homicide remains unsolved. The police have no suspects.

Last week, the landlord told me to clean out the house. He wants to rent it as soon as possible. So along with movers and a cleaning crew, I return to the scene, 126 West Fifty-Ninth Street in South Central Los Angeles.

No one else in the family could bear to join me. It is the first time I have been back since my mother, sister, and two nephews were killed.

It is a hot September afternoon, the Santa Ana winds driving the desert air off the Mojave and into the valley.

As I walk the pathway to the one-story bungalow, the lawn on either side is scorched. My mother would have been ashamed.

Instinctively I pat my hip. Reassured that the pistol is secure at my side, I continue up the walkway.

Overhead, tall palms rustle in the dry wind.

I take the two broad stairs onto the porch, where I am met with more signs of disorder, as dirt, dead leaves, and uncollected papers litter the entryway.

I am already sweating. I exhale, brace myself, and open the front door into the living room. It stands frozen at 8 a.m. on August 31, 1984. The TV with outstretched rabbit-ear antennas still sits in the corner. Trophies crowd the mantel. Only the plants show the effects

of time, the greenery by the front window dried and wilted, the poinsettia on the coffee table dead.

I direct the movers, and continue into the dining room.

It too remains unchanged. A white lace tablecloth lies undisturbed. Place mats, salt and pepper shakers, and a bottle of hot sauce stand in place, awaiting the next meal. A pair of reading glasses sits atop a stack of unopened mail. All the signs of everyday life are intact. I wait for family members to come rushing in at any moment, to restore the house to its rightful din. I listen, but only the shuffling of the movers breaks the silence.

On a credenza, beneath the dishware, rows of family photos line a shelf, graduations, football games, proms, weddings, reunions, and picnics. I stare at the pictures of brothers and sisters, nieces, nephews, grandchildren, grandchildren, grandchildren, my freshman picture with the UCLA Bruins, my rookie shot with the 49ers, another on the Rams, more grandchildren. The photos are stacked as thickly as LPs in a record store.

Finally I look away, break the trance. For the first time I notice how hot it is inside. I open a window.

I start boxing the photos.

In the breeze a tiny felt Santa dangles from the chandelier above the dining room table, a fugitive from last year's holidays. I reach up, remove it, and toss it into a box, then head for the kitchen.

Nothing in either the living or dining room hints at what occurred. The killers walked through both rooms, but left no trace.

The kitchen is a different matter. Though previously cleaned of blood, the smell lingers in the heat. Gnats swarm the spot where my mother was slain.

I push open more windows to drive away the stench.

I pat the weapon at my side.

In the kitchen, a kettle of burned beans remains on the stove. A half-finished cup of coffee sits upon the counter. An overturned frying pan lies on the floor. Bullet holes riddle the east wall.

After clearing the kitchen, I move on to the front bedroom. It defies house norms. Even my mother, with her iron rules of order,

was no match for her visiting grandsons. Heaps of clothes bury the furniture. Boyish clutter squeezes the room small. Fingerprint powder coats smooth surfaces. Gnats cluster to the kill sites where my sister and nephews slept.

I direct the movers to pack the room, then head to the rear of the house. I pass by the back door where the killers fled.

I put off the rear bedroom closet until last. As I remove the clothes, I try, but fail, to block out my nephew's nightmare. The boy had saved his life by hiding in the closet, as the sound of gunfire, screams, and shattered glass tore through the house.

Otherwise, the room is untouched. The beds lie unmade. A desk is covered with books. Against the wall sits a couch with one arm singed by fire.

Now, as the movers pack the final pieces of furniture into the truck, I watch the house empty. The absence of long-familiar items drives home the finality. Gone are my mother's clothes laid out for the day ahead, her favorite armchair, the crucifix and rosary that hung above her bed, the couch where siblings once elbowed for space.

After the movers finish, I conduct a final walk-through.

The cleaning crew then goes to work, erasing all signs of crime. Soon the home will be ready for its new tenants. For the first time in seventeen years it stands bare.

My mother's familiar refrain rattles about my head.

Forever surrounded by a large family and constant company, she would always say, "There's nothing worse than an empty house."

For the moment, and for the first time in weeks, sorrow has drowned out rage. But I feel it stirring, clawing for release. With the house packed, the hunt can continue.

As we load the final boxes into the truck, I grab the one with the family photographs and place it in my car. I turn the ignition, but cannot make myself drive.

Before me, the movers' truck pulls away. Still I sit. I unroll the window. With a nervous tic I again feel for the gun.

From above, the palms shake in a harsh gust of desert air. A frond falls to the side of my car.

Still unable to drive, I begin rummaging through the box of pictures.

From inside the house the cleaning equipment hums and whirs, to my left, the sound of a passing car, then another. Across the street a man grabs a hose and waters his lawn. The wind drives the hundred-degree heat into my face. A plane drones overhead.

I am alone. The movers and cleaners are just doing their job. The cars, the man, the plane, all indifferent.

I pull out a photo of each of the departed and place them on the passenger seat beside me. My mother, just short of her sixtieth birthday, smiles from behind big round glasses. Her name is Eborá, but we all call her Madee (pronounced muh-DEE), short for mother dear. She wears a powder-blue dress and matching earrings, the colors of my alma mater, the University of California, Los Angeles. My youngest sister, Diétra, “the baby,” is twenty-four years old and awaits her wedding day. My nephews, Damani, thirteen, and Damon, eight, grin from school yearbook pictures.

I cannot stop staring at the photos.

The car motor continues to run.

They are the last pictures taken of them in life, a portal to the other side, my window into their final hours.

I want to drive, floor the car, get as far away from that house as possible. But I just sit there, immobilized.

To leave is to concede defeat.

Over and over, I replay that morning, hoping somehow to will a new outcome, desperately trying to unwind time.

I dwell on that date. I curse it. August 31, 1984. The day the light went out of my life.