

## 6 DEGREES OF ABANDONMENT

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*It's not my business, not my business,* I chanted to myself as I walked past a ramshackle house near the start of my five-mile walking route. Patched here and there with random boards and sporting a yellow "POSTED: No Trespassing" sign up front, it had shown no signs of life since we moved to our Western Massachusetts hilltown two years earlier. Yet now a pickup truck I didn't recognize sat half on the road, half on the weedy verge of Mrs. James's property. From inside the house, two male voices called to one another. A neighbor had told me the ornery widow had died without a will, with her property taxes unpaid. None of her seven children or other descendants stepped up to take charge of the estate. Maybe the tangled ownership had finally been settled?

A week later, a middle-aged man with worry lines etched on his face rolled his car to a stop when I was raking leaves in my yard. "I'm Billy James," he told me, "Anna James's son—one of them, anyway. Have you seen anything unusual recently at our house up the way?" I mentioned the truck, and he leaned forward. "What kind of truck? Can you describe the guys?" I scrunched up to scour my memory, then shook my head. "Drat," said Billy James. "Can you believe it? They stole the copper pipes out of the house." He exhaled heavily and gave me his phone number in case I remembered something.

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The James place was one of eight seemingly unoccupied or

definitely vacant houses I'd tallied up along my walk. One, foreclosed upon by a bank, had gotten snarled in a paperwork mess even worse than the Jameses'. Another's owners showed up only every beginning of July, to treat the neighborhood and their pals from who knew where to a booming, blooming show of fireworks launched over our lake.

Three properties had a spooky old main house falling into disrepair and a much newer, smaller building beside or behind it where folks actually lived. At a cheery red cottage with a brown metal roof I saw activity just once: a woman replanting the bed of perennials that formed a little semi-circle in the yard. And for years, another with a shredding roof tarp had a digital clock framed through a window, blinking like a forlorn red sentinel.

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For me, the dwellings—and undwellings—faded into a backdrop for the main scene: 200-year-old roads mostly wild and weedy with oaks, beeches, maples, hemlocks and tumbling-over stone walls. Squirrels, rabbits, foxes, porcupines, deer and bears scrambled here and there. Above all I loved my woodsy setting's soundtrack of hush. I'd stride down the crest of the road to the balm of birds tootling, chipmunks chirping, a free-range rooster croaking in the distance and my own feet padding on the rock-studded dirt. Rarely encountering a human or a vehicle,

I felt my being expand beyond my skin, healthy and content.

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On one of my walking circuits, I watched a barn deteriorate from purposeful neglect, its paint worn off by wind and age, its planks beginning to lean every which way. Nearby, horses, goats and cows needed shelter in winter, but this barn's family had just two dogs. Icy weather kept me indoors once for a spell, and when I booted around again, the barn had collapsed into a heap of boards and nails, its roof akimbo, the whole shebang as shapeless as a builder's junk pile.

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While rambling, I'd occasionally step a bit into the woods to pee and there spot a phenomenon not visible from the road: a roundish depression, ten or twelve feet across. At one such site, two rows of rocks shaped like cobblestones peeked out at the perimeter, and in another, a lone tree grew insouciantly right in the center.

From the New England history I'd read, these were remnants of colonial settlement—cellar holes left behind when families couldn't make a go of farming where the soil yielded more stones than crops. They headed to the frontiers of Ohio or Indiana, either taking their house's lumber with them or letting it decompose into dirt and air. Like Shelley's narrator in "Ozymandias,"

I'd ponder the disappointments of centuries past.

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In 2023, I read that Western Mass was losing population. My own town had dropped from 1,054 in 2010 to some 947 in 2022—a decline of ten percent. I couldn't understand this. What accounted for some 100 people decamping? With the arrival (finally!) of broadband in our rural towns and the burgeoning work-from-home trend, I would have predicted an uptick instead. "People prefer to live in cities," my husband suggested. "They need jobs, and public transportation, and they're not willing to live a 30-minute drive from any supermarket, like we do. And face it, people like us who love the quiet are weirdos in today's world."

If quiet lovers are rare, then all the more tranquility exists to bask in. More traipsing without traffic, more wildlife prancing across my path, more buildings gloriously crumbling back into organic elements.

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