In the House of her Mind

Norma Watkins

She moved to Mendocino to purify her life. “Rid yourself of anything that doesn’t bring you joy.” That’s what the Japanese woman said in the book about paring down. She hadn’t actually read that book, but she’d read *about* it.

So she rid herself of the man, the condo, her job, and one whole side of the continent.

Here on the western edge, she’d found the perfect house—not in Mendocino, as it turned out. Mendocino was for rich people and tourists; the perfect house was actually in Fort Bragg, a plainer town eight miles north. That was acceptable. She could still claim to live in Mendocino County. Nobody back east knew the difference.

The perfect house had a gable roof, white shingles, a single white bedroom with windows overlooking a small yard. The garden was planted with white agapanthus and a row of gray bushes with flowers that looked like jasmine, but weren’t.

Before moving, she pared her furniture to the pieces she loved best: her mother’s tea table; two loveseats covered in natural linen; the bed a favorite aunt had left her, its headboard painted with a flaking scene of gods returning from the hunt: the men carrying fruits and grains, the women, bare breasted, with bows, a quiver of arrows, and dead game slung over their shoulders. She liked this reversal of roles. She would be one of those strong women now, freed from the encumbrance of possessions and men.

She planned on paring her diet to match this new purity: vegetables and fruits, seeds, nuts and grains; a coconut cake once a year on her birthday.

Books had been cut back to a favorite one hundred: the Shakespeare, of course; a Bible for reference; Yeats for when she felt blue. She wouldn’t be reading much Yeats. That was part of the plan—serenity without clutter, no room in the house of her mind for negative feelings. She might become a Buddhist once she figured out what that meant.

She also might stop dying her hair, and begin wearing white clothes to match the new house, though it was chilly here on the coast for white clothes. She hadn’t seen anyone else wearing them.

Time enough for a job. She’d done well with the sale the condo. Maybe she’d get something in a bookstore, guiding people to her favorite authors.

Purity would bring peace, perfect peace, which she pictured as a white space in her mind.

Almost dusk now, but she didn’t want to go inside until she finished the planting. She enjoyed this feeling of digging into an earth still soft from the winter rain. At the local nursery, she had purchased six-packs of snap peas, spinach, and spring onions. Digging, she loosened clumps of soil with her fingers. Cool earth in her hands, the last of the sun warm on her neck, what could be more perfect—

Something cold wriggled between her fingers and she jerked her hand away. Carefully, she troweled around whatever it was and watched the thing emerge: white and writhing, with the face of a human baby, the body of an engorged wasp, long translucent legs. The most disgusting creature she’d ever seen.

Trembling, she crushed the abomination with the back of the trowel and covered its death spasms with more dirt. She would dig no more today. She might not be able to dig again ever.

In the kitchen, washing her hands under hot water with plenty of soap, she found herself back in that cold clinic: legs up, stomach cramped, staring over her white-draped knees while the doctor, anonymous behind his mask, scraped away the small being.

She’d known when they went for the marriage license, from the way he waited in line—face miserable, wringing his hands—he didn’t want this. Didn’t want to marry her either. That was all talk. She’d pulled him out of the place, fury lending her strength. Made an appointment at the clinic, forced him to go with her, and become angry all over again, when she wept afterwards over the loss and he did not.

She washed her hands a second time and looked the creature up on her laptop.

***Jerusalem Cricket*.** *This gruesome insect can grow to a length of three inches and has fierce, razor sharp pincers that spit poisonous venom powerful enough to send a grown man into anaphylactic shock.* *Nocturnal, this cricket can often be heard crying with the voice of a child, to lure unsuspecting victims to its underground lair. . .*

She slammed the laptop shut.

And couldn’t eat the pasta she made for dinner.

Lying in bed, she kept seeing that pale white body with its skull-like head, the staring eyes. *Disgusting*. The earth around her white house must be thick with creatures like this, wriggling their way toward the light.

She got up and washed her hands a third time. Put on her white gown, pulled down Yeats, and crawled into bed. She would read herself to sleep.

*Though leaves are many, the root is one;*

*Through all the lying days of my youth*

*I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun;*

*Now I may wither into the truth.*

She closed the book, turned out the light, and stared into the dark. She could still feel the creature’s cold wriggling. She scrubbed her palm against the white sheet and lay listening to her heart, frightened she might wake to find a stain. She turned on the light. Of course there was nothing. She was being foolish. Got up, checked the locks and closed the blinds. Mustn’t let herself be put off-course by one bug. She could hire someone to plant the seedlings.

Four months until her birthday. She’d seen a coconut cake at Safeway, a delicious-looking layer cake with white icing and a snowfall of coconut. In four months, she might have friends.