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THE MONUMENT OF GREAT LIES

The monument of great lies sits at 5467 Arabella Lane and has been painted yellow as long as anyone can remember. The shutters have only just begun to need fixing and the doors squeaking, so both have been shut for preservation purposes. Lizards and spiders stick to the shade of the house, where tea roses wilt, die, but aren't replaced. There are weeds out back, but never in front where there is too much sun, so we do not go there.

It is safe inside. It is not safe outside.

These are the fictions we need to believe: everyone loves green pineapple Jell-O in the mold of a bell. If Mother has enough projects for us, we will never leave home. We will not buy holiday gifts this year and without the stress of shopping for products made in faraway countries, we will enjoy the holidays even if Cousin Charlie or Aunt Vanessa show up. We fought because Charlie opened a bottle of bourbon causing Aunt Vanessa to air long-haired politics no one wants to hear. We missed the timer and the oven temperature was off, causing dinner rolls to burn and the ham to be dry and the ham has never dried out that way before, especially not when Aunt Vanessa was traveling overseas.

If the downstairs is tidy, neat as a pin, the piles upstairs will be invisible, so long as the hallway is clear and bedroom doors are kept shut.

We've canceled our annual New Year's open house because Aunt Vanessa drinks too much and an unguarded mouth ruins any chance at peace. We, being able to hold our liquor and our tongues, shouldn't create opportunities for her to disclose such information. It is no way to start a new year and Uncle Graydon does not control her, despite his obligation to do so.

They say love is blind, but Uncle Graydon must be deaf too.

Easter will be best celebrated in a public place where we will fight about nothing except the bill. We'll offer to pay knowing full well that Charlie, who owns some type of mine and whose wife's grandfather invented a very important widget, will secretly slide his credit card to the waitress, will caress her bum when he sneaks a smoke, and will tip her forty percent to prove he is not a pig. This generous tipping habit, using his wife's money, means he cares about the plight of workers. Charlie is always just back from or just going to a Buddhist retreat in Nevada near his "mining concern." His wife believes him when he says he must go alone for spiritual refreshment and business purposes only. He promises we will see his "mining concern" one day, but in the meantime, he brings back T-shirts with the company logo as proof that it exists.

Nothing is ever our fault, but the neighbors are lazy and the government is responsible for letting nefarious immigrants ruin our country. We are not descended from foreigners because our ancestors were always God-fearing and were never, under any circumstances, Communist or Papist. Those people are all in Aunt Vanessa's line and she is not related by blood.

Mother is, was, and will always be blameless. Father's opinions are unknown, but generally believed to be the same as Mother's. Though it is imperative to have the correct politics, a certain brand of religion, and lots of money, it is never a good idea to talk about any of it in a free country, so Aunt Vanessa is always wrong on every front.

Everyone wants to be just like us, everyone except the pesky dramatists trying to squash our individual dreams and way of life. It taxes Mother considerably to think there are people like Aunt Vanessa who are not capable of decent behavior and grief is no excuse. Her pleas for compassion (written on white paper in ballpoint! not with a fountain pen on prim, watermarked stationary!) prove she is mocking us by claiming she neither desired nor responded to Charlie's advances after Uncle Graydon's funeral. Mother regrets giving Uncle Graydon Grandmother's cracked marble telephone table as a wedding gift because its lack creates a hole that will always remind us of her one misjudgment. Uncle Graydon would want the table reunited with Grandfather's Morris chair, but Aunt Vanessa never understood Uncle Graydon like we did. Her continuing correspondence, sent by email!, is so insensitive. We lost Uncle Graydon too.

Mother is still blameless. Though she stayed silent, Mother suspected Aunt Vanessa's leanings the moment she married Uncle Graydon and worried over Charlie's double nature from the get go. Father always doubted the existence of the mine, but felt it would be ungenerous to speak up. While we have sympathy for Charlie's wife, we hope never to see her again because Mother does not like a scene and boy, there was a scene that no attempts at redirecting the conversation could prevent once Charlie's wife got those calls from Nevada. Charlie has taken a vow of self-denial and restraint in a Buddhist monastery outside Denver, a choice Mother wholeheartedly endorses as we don't care to hear about Charlie or his tall tales either even if he was once our second cousin.

This whole episode proves that silence is golden and it is best to keep the shutters closed. No matter how much we might wish to peek out the windows, Mother assures us it is not safe outside. It is only safe inside.