

Neil Crone Ruminates About Historical Houses

I spent some time last week watching an old house being torn down. It was riveting. Apart from the little boy in me who still has to stop and gawk at every crane, bulldozer and digger he sees, I was held there by something else. Something much stronger. This house was old. Easily as old as the village itself. And as I stood there, in the grey cold, watching the maestro in the backhoe gingerly dismantling the place as though it were a house of cards, I kept thinking of all the souls that had inhabited that building. In it's one and a half centuries how many baby's cries had drifted up through its rafters at two in the morning? How many angry shouts? How many whispered affections? How many secrets?

As each aged, marbled window was wrenched loose and shattered, I wondered how many faces had peered through those watery panes in the grey of a dawn. Faces alight with the hopes and dreams of the day ahead or drawn and downcast with the fear and dread of the unknown.

As roof and walls were torn away, revealing bedrooms, I felt myself flush as though suddenly caught observing an intimacy. And again, the romantic in me wondered how many young boys or girls lay in those rooms over the years, unable to sleep, electrified with the energy of a first date or a first kiss. Eyes, burning with the incandescence of youth, staring up into a tin or plaster ceiling but seeing only a special someone and dreaming of a blissful future.

I never saw the kitchen, the building expertly folded in upon itself by the wizard with the two-ton, diesel-powered baton, but I didn't need to. If the windows are the eyes of our homes and the bedrooms the dreamy minds, then the kitchen is the heart. The gathering place. How many thousands of eggs fried? How many slices of toast? How many cups of coffee? How many children noisily pushing chairs away from the table, bounding outside, screen doors slamming behind them, to join friends in a humid summer evening's game of tag? How many stubborn, frowning faces stranded at the table over a plate of uneaten vegetables? How many husbands

and wives hushed conversations, worrying over unpaid bills, while children slept blissfully above them?

How many Christmas mornings? How many birthdays? How many deaths? How many smiling young men in crisp khaki uniforms striding out the door for the last time? How many mothers holding telegrams in shaking hands?

One of the reasons I love old homes so dearly is that they are so much more than lathe and plaster and shingles, they are repositories of lives lived. Monuments to most of what it means to be human, to have existed. And though we may fool ourselves into believing that those moments when we stood on top of the mountain were the highlights of our life, what really mattered, what really told the tale, were those thousands of breakfasts, lunches and dinners, arguments, lectures, kitchen table chats, bedtime stories, monopoly games and just standing in the yard and looking up at the moon.

When they pulled that old house down yesterday, when the final walls collapsed inward, sending a plume of one hundred and fifty-year-old dust swirling high into the air, I could've sworn I heard the mournful sigh of generations bidding a final farewell.

Neil Crone

www.neilcrone.com

"The most wasted of all days is one without laughter" - e.e.cummings