

With its gabled and turreted roof, bay windows, and patterned shingles, Farleigh House appears from the outside to be quite the ordinary Victorian. Certain features of its interior, however, push back against the typical tastes and conventions of that time, just as the home's architect and original owner, Nathaniel Farleigh (1809–1881), was known to have done with his other designs and constructions. Some have found these features disquieting.

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Farleigh House. The name had struck Nilda as self-important, and ironic given that no Farleigh had lived in the place for nearly a century.

Now, because of what felt like some cosmic mistake, the house was hers.

On her knees in its back yard, she was pulling weeds in a name-only flower bed, trying not to think of the much more important tasks she didn't have the energy, or the money, to tackle: patching the failing roof, upgrading the dodgy, underpowered electrical system, re-mortaring chimneys that threatened to send bricks tumbling. That all these things were now Nilda's responsibility might never cease to bewilder her.

Sidney was closing in from the left, holding out her maybe-kitten/maybe-bear plushie.

"Fuzzy's tummy hurts."

"Awww, I'm sorry. Does she need a kiss?"

Sidney shook her head, still pouting.

"What about a cookie?" For Fuzzy, invisible cookies usually did the trick.

Another headshake. "She doesn't like it here. She wants to go home."

Since they'd moved here two weeks earlier, Sidney had

said she wanted to go home at least five times, and now she was bringing Fuzzy in on the case. There seemed no way of getting across that they would never return to their beloved but cramped and bank-account-busting apartment in Boston, which within hours of their departure was occupied by the next tenant.

“*This* is home now, sweet pea. Remember?”

“No, it’s not.”

Nilda tried another argument for this place, knowing it was a reach. “Angus likes it here.” The last time she saw him he was on the couch, sleeping.

“He likes everywhere.”

She was right.

“Come here,” Nilda said, out of ideas.

She drew Sidney close and rocked her, rocking being the one thing that almost always soothed her. Going through the usual motions, humming the same wordless tune into her daughter’s hair, Nilda realized she was only encouraging Sidney’s clinginess, which had picked up after the death of Nilda’s mother—Sidney’s only remaining grandparent—and worsened since the move here. Once a remarkably independent child, she seemed to have slipped back in time, as if she were six years old going on three.

I’ll set more limits, soon, Nilda told herself once again, knowing she’d break this promise as soon as Sidney needed her to.

A sound stopped her humming: a chattering—no clucking. Looking to the source she saw a chicken emerge from a break in the fence that separated their yard from the neighbor’s—the only other neighbor in sight.

Nilda knew that Nathaniel Farleigh had built the place next door for his eldest son, but like Farleigh House, it hadn’t remained in the family. The most recent occupant, apparently, had been some lone, elderly doctor who’d lived in the home for years, until his death a few months before. Supposedly, his former caretaker was still checking in on the place, including the

chicken coop at the edge of the property. But the trespassing bird reminded Nilda that she hadn't seen him for days.

She, and now Sidney, watched the creature strut along the fence line. Looking both puzzled and dauntless, it jerked occasional glances their way, prompting giggles from Sidney.

"Hi, Chickie!" she said at first. Then "Come *here*, Chickie!"

No, Nilda thought. *Go home, Chickie.*

Usually a hardcore animal lover, she couldn't deal with one more needy thing at this time in her life. That included the rotting fence, which evidently was her responsibility. For now, she felt capable of nothing more than finding some object to block the breach—after she got the chicken back through it.

"*Here*, Chickie!"

The bird shifted course and started strutting in their direction. Nilda waited, knowing if she went for it too quickly, she'd spook it out of reach.

Down the fence line a rustling and crackling sounded from the hedges along the neighbor-facing side of the house. As Nilda tightened her hold on Sidney, the rustling stopped.

"All right if I come through?"

A male voice, friendly sounding.

"Uh, okay," Nilda called.

Seconds later, a tall, lanky man emerged from the greenery: not the caretaker, at least not the one she'd seen before. This guy was younger-looking, and something about him—maybe the black T-shirt and vintage Converse, or his mop of dark curls—telegraphed *musician*. Surely, a misperception born of masochism.

He crept forward, holding out some dowsing-rod-like wire contraption: a repurposed coat hanger, Nilda realized. As if noting her confusion, he paused and held her gaze, then chicken-flapped his arms, grabbed one wrist.

I'm here to catch that bird, was the message Nilda took.

In Sidney his movements set off another round of giggles. He put a finger to his lips, quieting her.

As he closed in on the chicken, the creature picked up its pace and clucking. Then it stopped, started pecking the grass. Behind it, step by cautious step, the man crept closer and extended the hanger, the end of which was bent into a small hook.

With a lunge and swoop, he hooked the chicken by one ankle and grabbed it by the other, letting the hanger drop to the grass. After taming the flapping, squawking chaos into something manageable, he held the bird close to his chest, looking pretty pleased with himself.

“Nice work,” Nilda said. She rose to her feet, keeping hold of Sidney’s hand. Up close, she saw that there was a chemical symbol on the front of his shirt. She had no idea what it meant, if anything.

“I’m sorry it was necessary,” he said. “I gotta fix that door to the coop. And that gap in the fence.”

Nilda decided to keep her mouth shut about the fence being her responsibility. If he was up for fixing it, she’d be happy to let him.

“Well, thanks for coming to get him—*her*?”

“Her. Fortunately, there’s only hens in the coop. No roosters to wake us at dawn.”

“Are you the new caretaker?”

“In a manner of speaking.” He shifted the chicken to free a hand, which he extended to Nilda. “I’m Graham. Graham Emmerly, your new neighbor.”

Emmerly. If she was remembering correctly, that had been the doctor’s last name.

She gave him an awkward, left-hand shake, not letting go of Sidney. “I’m Nilda Ricci. And this is my daughter.”

She knelt and murmured to Sidney, “You wanna tell our neighbor your name?”

Sidney turned away from him, buried her head in Nilda’s shoulder.

Sorry, Nilda mouthed to him.

It’s okay, he mouthed back. Then he knelt to their level.

“Hey,” he said to Sidney. “This chicken needs a name. Would you like to give her one?”

Sidney gave him her grouchiest face. “I already said it. She’s *Chickie*. And I’m *Sidney*.”

“Chickie it is. And pleased to meet you, Sidney.”

As Sidney melted back into Nilda, he headed for the gap in the fence and got the chicken through it.

“I just tossed out some feed,” he called back to Nilda. “That should keep her on my side of the fence for now. The rest of them too.”

He headed for the dropped hanger, then folded it up, crammed it into his back pocket.

“How many are there?” Nilda asked.

“Six? Seven? If you want one, it’s yours.”

Sidney turned her *Gimme* look on Nilda. “Can we, Mommy? Please?”

Since the death of Nilda’s mother, such pleas had become harder to resist. But this time Nilda was going to hold her ground. She didn’t need another pet to take care of. And the one they already had, Angus, was as untested on farm animals as they were. Who was to say that a chicken wouldn’t trigger some heretofore dormant bloodlust in the typically gentle mutt-hound, leading to a scene of carnage no six-year-old should have to witness?

“No, we can’t. But maybe Mr. Emmerly will let us visit Chickie on occasion.”

“Any time,” he said. “And, please, call me Graham.”

It seemed to Nilda that he’d appeared out of nowhere. But the fence was high and the hedges overgrown, and the shed that functioned as the neighbor’s garage was on the other side of the property. Given how busy she’d been with setting up the house and studio, and trying to get that new portrait started, he could have been coming and going for days without her noticing.

Nilda ran her fingers through Sidney’s hair, an apology for

the chicken deprivation. "Are you related to the guy who used to live next door?"

"I'm his son."

She wondered whether the late Mr. Emmerly had been this tall, his eyes this dark.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"I appreciate that. But as they say, his time had come. And I'm glad I'm able to start taking care of what was important to him, chickens and all."

"So the chickens were a longtime thing?"

"Ohhh yeah. My parents kept laying hens for years, got me trained early in caring for them, which I did until I left for college. After my mom died and my dad got too frail to manage things himself, the caretaker took over. And did a half-assed job in my opinion. But there's nothing that can't be put to rights."

She wondered whether he had a partner or kids. He wasn't wearing a ring. "Do you have any other relatives in town?"

"Nope. I'm here for the house. And a teaching gig at the community college."

"What in?"

"Chemistry."

That explained the symbol on his shirt.

"I'm impressed that you can teach chemistry. In high school I barely passed it." Noticing the look that had come over him, Nilda smiled. "Do I detect an air of disappointment?"

"Not in you. I'd lay a bet that your teacher was to blame."

"That's very generous of you."

"It's not generosity. What I mean is, chemistry is its own fascinating world, full of mysteries and revelations. But most instructors, especially in high school, make a stultifying business of it. And that's *such* a disservice."

He smiled, as if to check his turn to the serious. "Enough of my soap-boxing. Let's talk about you. What do *you* do? And what brought you here?"

The first question wasn't hard to answer, and she did. What brought her here was a far more complicated story.

Nilda had no blood connection to the Farleighs. She hadn't even met the great-aunt who'd willed the place to her mother, Jo, only as an afterthought. "Her first choice was the Farleigh Animal Clinic," the great-aunt's lawyer explained to Nilda. "She wanted them to move their operations to the house and dedicate a wing to her two favorite Yorkies, now in the Great Beyond. But then she learned they might tear the place down or sell it as soon as they got their hands on it. And that was it."

For months the great-aunt's death notice, will, and an explanatory cover letter from the lawyer had sat in an unopened envelope on Jo's notoriously messy, mail-covered desk—until Jo died, leaving Nilda to sort through all the piles, discover the letter and will, and eventually call the lawyer. The understanding that the house would be hers, should she choose to accept it, had warped the grief she'd been immersed in, added a sickening thrill. A thrill of new possibilities. Still, she might have passed on the deal if not for one big incentive: a dear friend from college, Toni, happened to live just a short distance from this place.

Now she gave Graham the briefest version of this story, and the two of them laughed over the coincidence that they'd both inherited, at roughly the same time, homes so closely connected to Nathaniel Farleigh.

"I wish I knew more about him," Nilda said. "I checked out his Wikipedia page and it's, uh..."

"Lame-o?"

Nilda laughed. "Yeah." The entry included a photograph of Farleigh and a list of some of the homes, businesses, and institutions that his architecture firm had designed. Little more.

"Well, I've got a few stories about him."

"Really?" Nilda said.

"Really. As a matter of fact, that room up there?"

She followed his gaze to an upper window, belonging to Sidney's room.

"That used to be his study. And apparently the place where he turned out hundreds of architectural models, after he was ousted from his firm."

“What happened?”

“It’s a long story. But let’s just say his designs were getting stranger and stranger, and—”

“And what?”

“It appears he...he wasn’t well. And in some of the later entries in his journals, he claimed this house had something to do with that. He said he felt like the walls were closing in on him.”

Great, Nilda thought.

“But he was okay with that study. Apparently, he spent hours there, working.”

Graham seemed to sense that Nilda wasn’t loving all these details. “I’m sure that whatever he was struggling with had nothing to do with this house. I’m just glad he had the model making to take his mind off his troubles, real or imagined. To maintain some feeling of control.”

Sensing Fuzzy traipsing across her bare feet, Nilda glanced down at Sidney and waved. When she turned her attention back to Graham, he looked remorseful.

“I’m sorry I brought up such dark stuff. Not a great way to make you feel at home.”

“It’s fine, really.”

“No, it isn’t. It’s one of the drawbacks of being a history buff. Sometimes I get carried away.”

In truth, Nilda was ready for a change of subject. “What about Eula Joy. You have any memories of her?”

She’d explained that it was Eula Joy who’d left her mother the house.

He brightened up. “Of course I remember Mrs. Austerlane, and Mr. Austerlane. They were great people, and great neighbors. Summer nights, my folks used to hang out with them on this very lawn, sometimes for hours. They’d knock back more than a few ‘twilight daiquiris,’ as my mom used to call them.”

Somehow, this didn’t square with what Nilda’s mother had told her of Eula Joy, who, according to Jo, preferred her Yorkies to all of human society, including her late husband. The

pictures Nilda had seen of her great-aunt seemed to capture this attitude better than any words could have. Several of them caught her smoking in a lawn chair, a Yorkie—or Yorkies—in her lap, and glaring at the intruding photographer. As Jo once said of her aunt, “It would have been hard to find a more ironic middle name for her.”

Sidney tugged at Nilda’s T-shirt. “I’m hungry, Mommy.”

“Okay. Let’s get you some lunch.” Nilda looked to Graham. “Would you like to join us?”

“No, no, no. I’ve taken up enough of your time. But thanks.”

Nilda felt a quiver of disappointment. Then she checked herself. This wasn’t the time to invite more complications into her life.

“But listen,” he said. “I’d love to have you two over soon. As soon as I get things a bit more sorted out over there.” He nodded toward his place.

“That would be nice.”

“All right, then. I’ll be seeing you soon.”

He started turning away then paused, spotting something in Nilda’s hair. Slowly, he reached for it, then stopped.

“May I?” he asked.

She nodded.

Looking into her eyes, he plucked whatever it was from her hair and held it before her: a maple seed. He let it spin its way to the ground, then turned away. Watching him retreat to the hedges, Nilda wondered whether the shiver he’d sent through her had been the slightest bit intentional.

“Hey!” she called, before he vanished. “What’s with the symbol on your shirt?”

He stopped and turned back to her, smiling. “It’s the formula for dopamine, one of my favorite molecules.” Then, with a wave, he was gone.

Dopamine. Was it good or bad, or a little bit of both? Nilda couldn’t remember.

As she and Sidney headed back to the house, Nilda felt her phone buzz in her pocket. Against her better judgment she

took it out, saw that Clay was calling—as if he’d sensed the intrusion of a handsome stranger. He, who’d enjoyed more than his share of pretty strangers, on tours and off them.

She dismissed the call.

“Is it Daddy?”

Nilda didn’t want to lie to Sidney. “Yes. We’ll call him back after lunch.”

When they were halfway back to the house, Nilda stopped. “Hey. Where’s Fuzzy?”

Sidney dropped Nilda’s hand and ran back to where they’d visited with Graham. There, she retrieved Fuzzy from the ground.

The plushie had become Sidney’s favorite, perhaps because it had been Jo’s last present to her. For that same reason, Nilda had formed her own attachment to the toy. She couldn’t bear the thought of it being lost or abandoned, even in this yard she now owned.

Grow up.

In this new reality she was one hundred percent mother, no longer anyone’s child.