



Source: Steven Erlanger and Isabel Kershner, 'Olmert facing effort in party to oust him over '06 war', *New York Times online*, 02/05/07.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [art](#), [ghosts](#), [home](#), [death](#)

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She knew when he finished it: that painting would one day be the last remaining fragment of Smoke House.

The portrait was not true to life. Mikhail spent the daylight hours applying shades of purple and blue to a wrinkled suit meant to resemble their father's. For weeks he applied stroke upon stroke of cerise to indicate the deep crease their father's bulky weight impressed on the arm chair. The cobalt curtain drawn back behind his left shoulder, revealing the grounds behind the main house, took the greater part of a month. An entire season Mikhail laboured over the image of his father's face, sunken cheeks, grey eyes, white hair that stood on end over his ears. But both Mikhail and Araksya sighed when the painting was hung in the foyer. The brow was too heavy, the chin drooped, the lips were thick and wet, as if the oil in the paint weighed down the ferocity of their father's expression and softened his barbarity with grease.

As they appraised the painting, their mighty father lay in the back bedroom, smoking his last cigar. After he was buried, the air was cleared and the painting was hung. And Smoke House (Dunne Manor as was) started to break.

The cracks appeared first in the tiles on the back veranda. Stretching from the brick-coloured sphere down to the teal rectangle, the fractures morphed the floor mosaic until the ground sagged and weeds grew, despite Mikhail's mortar and Araksya's clippers.

Then the walls in the sun room started to break open. Araksya moved her office to the second-floor closet, which began to stretch and rip a week later. Mikhail's own bedroom was broken in half, the floor split down the middle, so that he had to hop to move from bureau to

book case. Still, he refused to leave it.

Araksya announced that they had to flee Smoke House. Whether their father's ghost was taking revenge on his ungracious children or the earth beneath their foundation was rotting, the simple reality that the house was crumbling to bits over their heads and beneath their feet was inescapable even in sleep. (The ceiling above Mikhail's bed shed bits of plaster in his hair during the night. But he would not sleep on the floor under any condition.)

Mikhail was as loyal to his house as he was to his room. He was born on the dining room table; he would take his last meal there. Araksya remarked that he would have to take his last meal on the floor, because each of the table legs had snapped in twain a few days before. Mikhail moved a throw pillow from the drawing room to the head of the table and ate a dinner of red beans and potatoes while Araksya dragged her trunk down the front walk and into the lane.

She was right. Years later, she stepped out onto the fire escape of her apartment building, oceans away from Smoke House, ran down the iron steps, through the rain, into the antique shop to drop off her hand-written job application. She stopped at the window. There was the false face of her father in blues and greys, with unkempt hair and eyes that weren't his. She didn't get the job, but she bought the painting, and hung it in her living room until she noticed, just one day later, that it started to warp. She threw it in the dumpster before the canvas could begin to tear.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ella Longpre.*