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The Hollow House

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The Hollow House

The night we got the call it was pressingly dark outside the house, the single distant streetlight and the pinprick of the moon the only relief. The blackness was not without movement: even though it was only the beginning of summer, the cicadas had begun their nightly chirping and the occasional car whooshed past the white clapboard church on the narrow road below our house. I locked myself in the bedroom after dinner, as I'd done for the past couple of weeks since moving into the house. Moving here, I had hoped that the Southern air would somehow release me from my sense of emptiness, from my inability to write. So far the move had no effect.

I sat on the bed, fingers poised over the keyboard, staring at my screen. I was unsure of how to start or what to write. The half-peeled wallpaper cast strange shadows on the walls in the lamplight. I was inspecting these shadows in my trancelike state, ignoring my work, when Laura, my wife, burst into the room. "Have you seen my phone? I know it's here somewhere. I heard it buzzing." She made a shooping motion with her hands and I swung my legs over the bed, letting her rifle through the sheets. Trying not to get in the way, I stood by the window, watching her frantic movements. After dismantling the bed, she stood up, her hand on her hip. "I know Ellen called. I can *feel* it. I know it was her." She was still talking to herself as she brushed her hair away from her face, and it was as though she finally realized I was in the room. "*Well*. Don't you want to find this phone so we can call our *daughter*?"

I could tell Laura knew my mind was elsewhere, but that night she wasn't up to putting on her forced act of consolation. Her mind was one-track, she was going to get ahold of Ellen whether or not it really was our daughter who called in the first place. "Sorry, yeah I was just..." I motioned to the computer but did not claim to be working. The buzzing started again and Laura threw up her hands in a way that was once so endearing to me, so full of energy. It now just made me feel tired, more empty.

She began digging under the bed. I wasn't aware of the buzzing earlier but when Laura stood up again she was holding the phone triumphantly to her ear. She smiled dimly at me as she turned back towards the doorframe. I knew that I was once again invisible when Laura heard the first sounds of our daughter's voice on the phone.

"What's that sweetie?" Laura's voice traveled through the hall to the kitchen, her feet crunching on the plastic covering the house's floor which protected the hardwood during the construction. The crunching stopped, and I followed Laura through the house into the kitchen, where she sat on a barstool at the half-finished island, our dog at her feet. Her face stony and white, "Well that's just - that's great, it's great," her mouth a thin hard line, "no, yes, it's everything we - no, no, baby I'm not upset. I'm just so *happy*." I watched my wife's face undergo a theater of emotion. The stone's surface broke with a harsh smile, which then melted into a genuine one. Leaning against the shadowy doorframe, I observed my wife become bubbly, overwhelmed, "I just - I'm just so *proud of you*. Oh, Ellen it's wonderful, wonderful news. I can't wait to tell your - oh here he is, let me hand him to you. No, no, just for - ok here he is." I was motioned over, and Laura thrust the phone into my hand. My daughter was on the other end. I pictured her sitting in her room at school,

choked up with excitement and youth and possibilities in the New England landscape, about to set flight, phone nestled into her collarbone. Dying to talk to her mother and not to me.

Ellen's voice came through the phone staticky and distant, cell towers few and far between here in the country. She told me she was moving to London. She had been offered a part in the corps of a West End show. It was everything she'd ever dreamed of. Yes, I was proud of her. No, I wouldn't pay for her plane ticket. Yes, I told her, her mother and I would discuss. I asked her if she was excited for graduation. I got a one-word response and an awkward silence. "I love you Dad." I told her I was proud of her once more, and handed the phone back to Laura, whose face had turned back to stone. The two talked for an hour, and I retreated into the living room with a bowl of popcorn and the dog.

That night Laura was quiet, cold. I knew then that she would leave, go to our daughter. I didn't want to acknowledge it; wanted to let it rot under the surface as so much had before. I tried to talk to Laura about plane reservations for Ellen, thinking that Laura loved any opportunity to talk about our daughter. She brushed me off, leaving me and the dog to both stare blankly at my computer screen, missing our best friend. My wife fell asleep that night on top of the sheets, on her stomach, rigid. Our alarm went off for our morning run, and Laura turned over and looked at me for a split second before rolling back over, "You go, I'm tired." I took the dog running instead.

We settled into our old habits we had in Boston: we began to exist in different spheres once more. We did our work remotely from one another and ate in near silence. It was as though we were getting used to being empty nesters again as we did four years prior when our daughter had left for college. Since we had heard Ellen's news, we had stopped talking about the repairs for the house. We hadn't had neighbors over for dinner or invited through-hikers to camp on our property. The house became still and silent. So different from how it had been, with contractors and architects and workmen tromping through the house, Laura in her element orchestrating it all.

I took to sleeping on the couch once more, just like weeknights in Boston, the dog at my feet. A few nights, I woke up in the early morning hours to hear Laura on the phone, presumably talking to Ellen. During these nights, I could not help thinking of Matthew, of how if I were in Boston, things would be different. If the world turned on its axis, I would slip out with him to meander through the bleary morning streets, going in and out of the smoky pubs hot with activity. Those streets could thaw the chill that had settled from the house into my bones. Instead, during these nights, I kicked a few pillows around on the couch and stroked Matthew's dog, knowing that he was probably thinking of Matthew too, feeling as displaced in the world without him as I did.

While I had been busy the weeks before, making plans for our daughter, helping her with her move from afar, Laura had been making her own plans.

I am standing alone in the house my wife and I had begun to renovate as a couple, with only the dog as company. I walk through the house looking for any sign of Laura, but all her things are gone.

There is an emptiness to the house, the old floorboards and frame have already settled into her absence. It's what drew me to the house in the first place: it seemed to know how to readjust to empty space. I call Laura's name but I already know where she's gone. I bought Ellen's plane tickets about a week ago, they were her graduation present.

She's skipping the graduation ceremony and going right to London to start work. It's better this way, we as a family don't do well with ceremonies, with closure. The deal was that Ellen had to find her own apartment to pay the rent herself: a one bedroom flat she found in some corner of the internet with a good price, no picture. Laura of course didn't like that there was no image, no way for her to picture Ellen exactly in her environment. My wife and I talked about Ellen's plans at length, it was the only subject that she would discuss with me.

I continue to walk through the house, my shoes crunching on the plastic, the dog behind me, his paws slipping every once in a while. Arlington Virginia goes on without us outside the windows. Neighbors greet each other, bikers rest on the church's steps, hikers make their way down the road under the brush to the Creeper trail. In this house, in this moment, time for me stands still.

Of course I knew she had left even before I stepped into the house after my run. She hadn't gone running with me all week. The past few days I had felt the eyes of our neighbors boring into my back as the dog and I made what had once been an endearing habit of husband and wife a one man and one dog affair. Little old ladies and spinster aunts came to stand on ancestral porches to look curiously at the new owner of the farmhouse down the street. Where was my other half? Where was the Laura who invited them to dinner, who spoke with importance all day on the phone to her boss in Boston in the back corner of the coffee shop?

Neighbors, noticing Laura's absence, come knocking on my door throughout the week. Ginny, the woman across the street, knocks on my door on Sunday morning. I open the door. She peers around me to glimpse the inside the house, even though she's been to dinner here at least a dozen times before per Laura's invitation. I know she's not checking up on the renovation or interested in how Laura has chosen to decorate. She's fact-checking, wants to see for herself that my wife and I aren't playing some childish game. It's as if she's waiting to see Laura pop out from behind the island and yell "Surprise!" We used to do that to Ellen when she was little. Back when we were a team, Laura and I. Ellen didn't like it, never showed any emotion except once when a single tear belied her stoicism. We never played the game after that. Satisfied with her observations, Ginny is standing in my doorway, looking me in the eyes. "So." A challenge. "Dinner tomorrow night? I'll cook. Our place." It isn't a question. I look across the street at her husband, Chris, who's setting up for Ginny's afternoon bridge club. I wave. He smiles weakly and waves back. "Why do you look so sad, Hugh? It's like the dog died."

"Best friend." I say it quietly.

"What?" It's not the response she's expecting. She wants it from the source – Laura is gone. But that's not what matters most.

I look up at Ginny, composing myself, "Thank you for the invitation but I just-" Ginny narrows her eyes and I agree to dinner. She claps her hands, and smiles her big red-lipsticked smile, "Wonderful, *wonderful*, so we'll see you at 6:00 tomorrow then!" I nod and bare my teeth in what can loosely be interpreted as a grin, and retreat into my hole of a house.

The first night we had our then-unknown neighbors to dinner, it was a rare and perfect spring night. I could practically feel the grass growing underneath my feet, the air was alive and warm with growth and promise. I didn't want to have them over, I was in a bad mood despite the idea weather. I had been out on the porch all day trying to write but instead ended up following the contractors around all day. Laura loved the commotion of renovating the house, loved getting her hands on granite samples, running her fingers over the plastic that covered seemingly everything. Sometimes she would catch me watching her, and she would beckon me over, like a child. Whether it was a knob, or a particular varnish chip for the flooring, or a paint board, she would *sell* it to me, saying something like "Hugh this varnish is just *spectacular*, I mean *look* at the inner *glow*." A few of these instances had occurred that day, and I resented that I could not seem to do my work, that I kept getting pulled into these discussions.

I meandered into the kitchen, where Laura was pouring over a stack of blueprints with the architect. "Well I mean if we knock down that wall here then – I mean I want it as airy as possible, we want to get it back to it's – " The architect was looking exasperated.

"Yes I know, to its original form, but I mean this was a *farmhouse*, one level. I just don't know if the structure can hold – " He saw me in the doorway. I was trapped. "Let's see what your husband has to say."

I brought up my hands, "Oh no, I'm staying out of this – I'm a writer, not an architect." I paused, "Nor am I my wife for that matter – you guys just do what you think is best."

The architect gave me a piercing glance and looked back at Laura, who clapped her hands dismissively, "Let's worry about this later, thank you." The architect nodded, and rolling up the blueprints, shuffled out of the kitchen.

"You're going to run these people into the ground."

Laura wrapped her arms around me, chuckling, "Oh but that's the *fun* of it." I rolled my eyes and picked up an apple, "Don't forget we're having people over for dinner tonight!" I had forgotten. "I invited Terry and Bill, and those neighbors from across the street that keep looking at us." I bent down and petted our dog, who had followed me into the kitchen.

"Whatever you want." Laura squatted down with me, put her head on my shoulder. This was her new thing, strange to both of us, but not unwelcome. She had been trying out new things, new ways of consolation. I continued to pet Matthew's dog when Laura got up to turn on the stove for company.

They arrived that night all smiles, tumbling through the door, wide eyed, curious of Alvarado's newest inhabitants. I was introduced to Laura's friends from the coffee shop, Terry and Bill, and exchanged names with our neighbors across the street. We all sat down to dinner and I found myself seated next to Bill. It was like we were in Boston again, Laura holding court, filling our silence with anonymous bodies, like extras in a movie grabbed off the street. Told what to wear. Sent to hair and makeup before being directed on set. Laura smiled at me, "Hugh, you know, Bill is the editor of the Alvarado Journal, I thought you two would have a lot to talk about."

Bill nodded forcefully, pointing his fork in my direction, frog's mouth full of food, "We'd love to have someone like you write for us, actually we're developing a series– "

I gave Laura a death glare, "Actually I'm working on something right – "

Laura interjected, "Hugh's working right now on a project, he won't even tell me what it is." She winked at me in some feigned act of intimacy, "He used to tell me all his

ideas," she was now turned to Terry, "back when we first got married, when I was more involved in the publishing house, now it's all hush hush." I refrained from kicking her under the table.

I cleared my throat, wanting to add some truth to the charade, "I'm actually having some trouble right now with writer's block – " Bill gave me a fraternal look and patted me on the back in some strange act of commissary.

Terry smiled sweetly, "Hugh, don't let my husband coerce you, he would try to drag your dog here into his paper if he could. We're just so *excited* to have y'all here! You should stop by the coffee shop sometime with Laura! I jus' love seeing her sunshine face." Terry turned to Ginny and Chris, who were silently picking at their food, left out of the conversation, "Now aren't *you* two lucky to have such *exciting* neighbors. Nothing ever happens in Alvarado!" Ginny flashed her lipstick smile and nods, patting Chris' hand, who followed her lead. There were enthused nods all around, praise for Laura's cooking, of her hospitality. We laughed at empty jokes, gave them a tour of the house, talked about the restoration, the renovation. Laura apologized for the plastic on the floor and the sawdust smell, and in a flurry of perfume and lipstick and bad striped ties, the neighbors left.

Another week passes and I consider texting Laura, consider calling Ellen, but do neither. I answer Laura's departure with my own silent stasis. I wake up on Tuesday and decide to run again. I take the dog with me. We begin at breakneck pace, tearing over the surrounding countryside, behind the little white church, pounding towards the river, past the campsite. We cut through private property and over fences to run in cow pastures, past tractors and over bridges that hang suspended in the treetops. We pass bikers, farmers, little girls with coiled hair. My mind is blissfully blank, and the dog's body is slick with sweat, heart pounding along with mine. When we return, my shirt hangs off my body dark and wet. I lay on the plastic-covered floor of our – my, half torn-up house.

Sweating on the plastic, face red and veins pumped up from my run, I imagine Laura and Ellen sitting in some shadowed apartment in London. I cannot get this image out of my head. I get up off the plastic floor to look out the living room window, half covered in cellophane, hoping I'll see my two girls, sitting on the porch. I can't text Laura or Ellen, but I reach for my phone anyway. It's not Ellen or Laura I want to talk to, but Matthew. He is the most unavailable of all. The dog and I share a tub of ice cream and look out at the river at the dogwood whose blossoms are beginning to wither with the summer humidity. That night, lying in bed, I listen to the wood and plastic settle in the house, the snoring of the dog, and the chirping cicadas. I recite Matthew's old phone number to myself in my mind, thinking somehow that I will, amongst these digits, discover some hidden message from my friend.

I wake up and try to write something, anything. I find myself instead climbing the stairs to the top floor, opening the closet to look at the blueprints, the only thing Laura has left. I sit on the floor of the empty guest room, no furniture yet upstairs, not until we finished the remodeling downstairs would we start up here. That had been Laura's plan. I look at the blueprints, at the thin precise black lines that mark each room, little boxes in boxes, neat rows marking stairs, angular outcroppings for appliances, for cabinets. I think it would be nice if everything could be put down neatly on coiled paper, could be drawn out by an architect or designer. The plots for my stories, the path for my run. A diagram of a marriage, of a life cut too short. Of the bond between a man and a dog, unmoored from he

whom they loved the most. But the renovation, despite these clean plans, had not gone smoothly, it had been tedious for Laura, but she had reveled in it. With her so far away, in London, I know I don't have the energy to continue with the plans for the house's restoration. I tuck these diagrams back into the musty closet. The dog follows me downstairs and we sit on the porch together.

In Boston in early summer there's still some bite to the air, but not in the South. Here, everything presses onto everything else: vowels are tenser, the tea is sweeter, the people closer knit, and the air wetter. Down here the mornings are the best part of the day - before the humidity sets in, before the mosquitoes come out, before the red clay has been upturned by through-hikers on the running path. I sit on the porch willing inspiration to strike, for the Greek muse to appear, for aliens to abduct me, for the ghost of my friend to appear like the father of Hamlet. No such thing happens and I sweat in the afternoon sun without typing a single word.

I decide that I cannot work in this house. Lately I have begun to feel as though I myself am trapped under the airless cellophane that covers everything in the house. I decide to get off the porch, to take up the habit that Laura had developed in her short time here, to work in the coffee shop. I put the leash on the dog and we walk together through the town.

Terry is happy to see us, she ushers the dog and I in, flapping a napkin and wearing a grin, "Aw Hugh I'm *so* happy to see you, sit sit. You know Bill and I," she motions over to Bill, who is sitting in some shadowy corner of the café glaring at nothing in particular and marking a mock-up of the paper with a big pen, "we've just *missed* your wife, but you, now *you're* here, and oh it is just fabulous fabulous." I nod, embarrassed, the few people in the coffee shop are looking at me, two bikers covered in mud and one young through-hiker with a pack bigger than she is. "Oh don't mind *them*." Terry notices the dog, hesitating, but allows him to come sit with me at a table in an opposing corner from Bill's. "Now tell me what you want to *eat*, or just set up shop and I'll come by later." She winks at me and pats my computer, a good luck omen, because that afternoon I crank out more than I've been able to in three months. I sleep well that night in my hollow house.

The seed is planted the moment I'm scrolling online through the listings of London shows as I have been doing obsessively during every lull of the day. I see an announcement for her show. August 17. It will be a little less than a year since Matthew has died when my daughter makes her debut on the London stage.

The plastic on the floorboards of the house is getting ragged, the dog's claws and my pacing wearing out the thin layer. It's not meant to stay on the floor this long. I consider texting Laura, but instead just open my phone and look at my texts with her a few times a day, fingers poised over my keyboard. I don't send anything, don't intend to tell my girls I'm coming for them.

A few days before I leave I tell Terry where I'm going. I'm sitting at a round table at the coffee shop with the dog by my feet. Terry loves him, and has been letting him sit at my table with me every morning for a few weeks now. Sometimes she reaches behind the counter and produces a treat for him. Today she has no treat for him, but slips out from behind the counter while the foot traffic is slow. I'm making travel arrangements, my brow furrowed. She puts her hands on the table and I look up, "You writing?"

I shrug and shake my head, “No, just...” I look at my screen and flip it around so she can see, “booking a flight.”

She smiles excitedly and bends down to pet the dog, looking up at me and squatting gracelessly on the checkered floor, “London! Well that’ll be just a beautiful time won’t it,” she squeezes the dog’s ears and pets his head, speaking not to me but to him now, “won’t London just be wonderful, wonderful wonderful.” She nuzzles his head and stands up, brushing her knees. “So whatcha going to London for?”

I pet the dog, “My daughter, she’s an actress, she’s going to be in a play.”

“An actress! That’s something, I didn’t know you had a daughter, Hugh.”

I shrug and smile meekly, “Yes, well I do. She’s in London.” I add needlessly.

Terry doesn’t notice my distant response, “Well you must just be so proud, a proud Papa, you know I wanted my kids to go into the arts but...you know Bill wanted our oldest to take over the newspaper here but,” She throws up her hands and walks back to the counter, “They never want to do what you want them to, do they? Never turn out like us.” I shrug and flip my computer back to finalize the arrangements. “Is she good?”

I look up again, “What?”

“Your daughter, she good at what she does and all? I mean she’s gotta be if she’s over there in London.”

I nod, “I suppose she must be.” I hadn’t seen her on stage since she was a sixth grader playing lead role in the middle school play. She threw a fit that night that she had seen me in the audience. That I had somehow jinxed her. Acting was hers and Laura’s thing, I was just the means to an end.

Terry understands and begins wiping down the back tables, “Never been to London. That’s where I wanted to go on our honeymoon, Bill and I, but he took me to some island.” She thinks for a minute, “We drank out of these plastic coconuts on that island, vile place.” She wrinkles her nose and chatters to herself as she gets farther and farther back in the shop. I book my flight and close my laptop. Terry bustles over to give the dog a treat. She’s bending down and I think of how I will have to leave him here when I go to my family overseas.

“Terry?”

“Hm?”

“Do you think you could, I mean I don’t want to be an inconvenience or anything and I know that Bill isn’t the *fond*est of dogs, but I’m only going to be away a few days and I really can’t leave him with Ginny and Chris – “

Terry holds up a hand, “Say no more – I won’t hear it. Of course I’ll take care of the dog while you’re gone. We’ll have so much fun!” She bends down to play with the dog’s ears again, “Won’t we baby, won’t we kiddo.” She pats me on the back as I smile and thank her, “Just drop him off the night before you leave because I’ll be out of the house early in the morning to get the rolls in the oven here, and Bill will be out early to get the delivery boys in order before their run.” I thank her and smile. I’m about to walk out the door when she calls me back, “You’re doing the right thing, Hugh. Those girls are waiting for you.” She waves and I walk out, feeling empty at even the thought of being without Matthew’s dog.

I call my editor as soon as I’m off the plane, safely across the ocean. He picks up almost immediately. “Hugh! I haven’t heard from you in *weeks*, I thought you said you’d send me updates from that rathole – “

"Virginia is hardly a rathole, Ben."

"Well whatever, I've *yet* to receive my updates, you can't just *disappear* on me like that, you've got *deadlines*."

"I know Ben, I gotcha." I pause. "Hey, I'm working on something right now, took a while to get it going, but it's going." I'm in the customs line, being jostled, "Hey Ben, I'm actually uh, I'm actually in London right now."

"You're *where*?"

"I'm in London. To see Ellen's first play."

"I thought Laura, like, didn't let you – " I imagine Ben in his office, in his swivel chair behind his desk hand running through his greying hair, looking out at the Boston skyline, above it all, tired of dealing with me.

I hand my passport to the clerk, she looks at my face, searches me, as if she can tell by the lines of my face, by the look in my eye whether or not it's safe to let me through. "They don't know I'm here, they don't know. Listen, I've got to run but it's fine, don't worry about it. I'll send you a draft this weekend." She stamps my passport.

"Alright Hugh, you know I was getting a little worried I hadn't heard, you know I hope you're ok."

"I'm fine Ben, I'm fine."

"The dog with you?"

"No, no, couldn't take him."

"Too bad, you know you should have stayed in Virginia with the dog and got down to work on that draft."

I laugh without humor, "I've got it covered, Ben, no worries, I'll check in later."

"See that you do." I hang up and pass through security, pick up my bags. I'm here, I'm here.

The evening of Ellen's performance, the night is balmy. The London fog hangs heavy over the streets and makes me feel as though in a dreamscape. I am a cloud man walking to my shadow family, leaving my best friend in the heavens across the Atlantic Ocean. I'm nervous going up to the box office to collect my tickets, thinking somebody will see me, thinking somebody will know me for what I am: an imposter, a half husband, a transparent father. I collect my tickets without disruption, and file in with the crowd. I look at the program and don't even recognize my own daughter's picture in the corps.

Always so ethereal and wispy when she was growing up, with thin gold hair and pale brown eyes, she seems to have turned to substance in her four years away, to have transformed in this headshot. I think of how when she was young, I was always so scared she would break, I wanted to shield her, to protect her, how Laura was always scolding me to let her fall off the monkey bars, to run with abandon, to let her break bones and grow into a strong woman: into this. Laura had been right to let her do this. The headshot proves it.

I find Ellen immediately when she steps on stage. She's magnified, her voice clearer, her eyes wider, skin paler, mannerisms exaggerated. I don't take my eyes off her. My yawning chest seems to knit itself up as I watch her. She's becoming who she's meant to be and I am happy.

When the curtain falls at the end of the play I cannot move. After throwing myself into motion for months, beating the earth at its spinning game, hurdling over states and

oceans and moving houses and fleeing hospital rooms, I managed to create an illusion of stasis in our Virginia home. It made me feel more stagnated than steady. I am tired. I don't know whether I should leave this theater before either Ellen or Laura sees me. Should I stay, talk to them? Or go back to where I come from? Before I can unglue myself from my chair, I see Ellen slipping out a side door and walking as a shadow into the aisle. She bends down to greet someone, Laura. They laugh furtively and hug. Their laugh is the same. Their shadows are merged.

I am a continent away yet still feel as I have always been in my own household, bulky, awkward, unfitting. I was never like that with Matthew. I am turning to walk out of the theater, to go back to the house I bought one chance day, to the dog who means so much to me, when I think that maybe I should be there for my daughter. I approach the two on unsteady feet, palms clammy. Ellen looks at me with the eyes of her old soul, "Hi Dad."

"Hi Ellen." I haven't seen my own daughter in two years. When I pull her in for a hug, she doesn't pull away, doesn't reach for her mother, but pulls me in deeper and holds me in a strong grip. Laura stands behind Ellen with eyes of steel, I hold her gaze. I catch a twinkle, a sign of softening. She puts her hand on my shoulder. A family joined. What has been in freefall since I lost my best friend comes crashing to the ground around us in that theater. I am no bereaved friend, I am no wordless writer nor trapped Southerner, I am no failed husband.

I am a father, and for now, that is enough.