

The Vanishing House

One morning when I was 7 years old, the house across the street from us disappeared.

(It never came back. Sometimes that's the first thing people ask.)

I remember it clearly, only because it was me who discovered it, missing, and because it shouldn't have been me. Like most 7 year olds, I had no reason to be leaving the house at 5:30am – I'd usually have woken with my brother and spent the two hours before school downstairs watching cartoons and eating chocoflakes from the box. But on this morning something woke me, maybe a nightmare, a noise somewhere in the house, and I left the bottom bunk and crept downstairs on my own. On any other morning I wouldn't have dreamed of opening the front door – Kevin and I didn't even usually bother opening the curtains, a daily bone of contention with our father. But on this morning there was a light that seemed to fill the house with a dusky orange glow. For moments I couldn't look away. I went into the hall and stood on tiptoes to get a look at where it was coming from, but wasn't tall enough to reach the window. I considered calling Mum and Dad for help, but thought better of it. They wouldn't appreciate the wake up call, especially if this turned out to be nothing. Which, it sort of did.

I unhooked the chain, clicked the latch and pulled open the door to find...nothing. Except the dawn. The sun was breaking over the horizon between 25 and 29 Oakview Rise, bursting through the gap between the two houses where before it had been hidden by the Larkhills' house, number 27. It took me a few moments to notice what I wasn't looking at. There was no remnant of the house, no sign that it had ever been there at all. Just a flat, empty patch of grass, surprisingly small given how enormous the house had seemed, backing onto a field where cows chewed listlessly, oblivious to anything ever having existed beside them. That was when I saw it, there in the centre of the plot. A small black cat, swishing its tail idly from side to side. It caught my eye for just a moment, then turned tail and skipped through the fence to leave me staring into space, wondering if I had imagined it.

A few minutes later I noticed two other families caught in a similar state of paralysis on their respective porches – watching, awestruck, the Larkhill house that wasn't. Eventually I must've gone back inside, because I remember speaking to my father as he hunched over the kettle in his dressing gown.

“James's house is gone.”

“Mmm...Eh?”

“Their house. Number 27. It's gone.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“Come and see.”

James was my best friend. We used to play in the street and at school, and sometimes we played videogames at my house, when Mum let us. I only went once to their house – we were wrestling in the living room and I knocked a drink on the carpet. His mother dragged him into the kitchen to get a cloth and clear it up, and when it was clean she dragged him to the ironing board, beat him over the head and ironed his hands. I mentioned it to my parents and I was never allowed to go back after that. He was always covered in bruises. He flinched at everything.

Local news arrived by breakfast. By late morning the road was a flurry of crews from all over the country. By the afternoon they had come from all over Europe. By the following morning it was so crowded with news vans that when it came time to drive to work Dad spent all of ten minutes firing curses at camera

operators, drivers, presenters (many of whom were probably just as familiar with English as he), only to be met with blank stares and shrugs of bemusement. He eventually abandoned the car on the pavement and came skulking back to our house to spend the remainder of the day watching them through the curtains, muttering to himself.

I'm not sure what they were expecting to find – maybe a sinkhole, a stargate, a mothership sitting just out of view behind a cloud. Did they think another house was going to vanish? Whatever they thought, they didn't think it for very long. Within thirty-six hours they were all gone and it was suddenly as if they'd never been there at all. The papers squeezed a few more columns out of it, some checking back weekly to see if the rest of the street had disappeared, the one-year-on op-ed *Larkhills – Supernatural Tragedy or Preternatural Escape Artists?*², and the inevitable shrieking tabloid accusations like *Benefits Couple Stage Elaborate Disappearance to Scam Taxpayers*, heedless to the fact that the Larkhills themselves had vanished.

But by and large, after those first few weeks the world went back to its collective cereal. A few years later the case started to gain honourable mentions in the *World's Greatest Unsolved Mysteries* and *Supernatural World* compendia that see some publishing houses through the leaner years, taking up half a page towards the back of the volume. I somehow forgot about it myself, until I reached high school and found that I had to fill my lunch- and breaktimes with *something*.

After weeks of trawling for a friend I started to take refuge alternately in the common rooms, libraries and teacher's offices throughout the school. On the logic that a moving target is, usually at least, harder to hit.

I tended to spend most of my lunch hour scouring books and the internet for other cases like the Larkhills'. Almost every day I went looking for anything that could explain how a house might vanish and ended up tangled in a thousand ghost stories, articles about missing persons, and, on the occasion I unthinkingly searched 'missing house' - tips for dealing with homesickness. Eventually I grew tired of the occult, the macabre and the insatiably miserable, and started reading up instead on theories of space, time, geometry, special relativity, cosmology, quantum mechanics and black holes. I made it my goal to find a real answer. Ultimately I found nothing that would satisfy me, but the added reading and writing time lifted my final grades to some of the best in the school, and my physics grade in particular, which that year was the third highest in the country.

It bought me a scholarship to study at Cambridge, which became a Masters in the Physics and Philosophy of Space and Time, and then a PhD exploring Anomalous Events in the Temporospatial Continuum of Domestic Structures.

Which is to say, I became the leading (only) authority on houses that go missing. It also means that, unfortunately, people come to me from all over the world with their questions and stories about the monsters under their bed. Poltergeists, haunted houses, goblins in the attic (just once), a 'stretched man' in the basement, stories of children appearing in the upstairs window, and all manner of things that could have been explained by any rational human functioning on a good night's sleep. I'd unwittingly become an agony aunt for supernaturalist tinhats.

It was a shame – if any of the events were legitimately anomalous I could have interviewed them, written up their stories and actually have had something to put in my first paper. Something beyond the Larkhills. My supervisor knew he'd picked a dud. I could feel it. In our Tuesday meetings he'd stopped asking about the lit review I was working on, instead just asking how I was doing, if I was okay, if I needed any help. The questions themselves weren't so bad, it was the pitying looks that came with them that made me want to drown myself.

I wasn't getting anywhere in the city, so last month I came back to stay with my father for the first time in eighteen years. He was suspicious, but I mumbled something about having run out of money and ideas (which was true), and he seemed to accept it. Every morning I found myself waking before dawn to see the sunrise as I had on that morning all those years ago. Naturally, there was still nothing there but for the long grasses, perennially windswept. No one had touched the plot. No one dared. New developments went up on every side of the town, carving swathes out of the country, but no developer would touch the Larkhills lot.

One morning I woke as usual and looked out across the street through the darkness. I watched for I don't know how long before I saw it. A movement in front of the swaying grass. Black on black. Swishing left and right. Impossible to say how long it had been watching me, the glow of its eyes piercing my own from across the street.

I threw on a coat and shoes and rushed outside. Carefully I crossed the road, not wanting to startle it, scanning the plot for any glint of those green eyes. Could it have been the same cat? Some lived to twenty and older, sure, but to my eye this cat had been the very same animal I saw all those years ago. Small, delicate, and playful - barely more than a kitten.

Assiduously I traced the perimeter, as I had done a thousand times as before, looking for any trace of a clue as to what could have happened. Then I started walking in rows as if mowing the lawn, and still could find nothing to say that a cat had ever been there. Until suddenly, a creak. I stopped, standing in the dead-centre of the plot. I stepped back onto the solid earth and forward again, testing for the creak, rolling back and forth on the balls of my feet until I was certain. There was something under me. I knelt and drew my fingers through the grass, mindful of the possibility that the cat may have left something unpleasant behind. Buried under earth and long grass, my fingertips came to find an edge which, after a few minutes of digging and scraping, revealed itself to be a square wooden hatch.

How had it not been found by the news crews, the insurance company, the council, the government agents? How had I not found it one of the thousand times I traced this exact route?

An answer niggled uncomfortably at the back of my mind.

It didn't want to be found.

I slipped my fingers under the hatch and pried it loose, while it made a sucking sound, and then a pop. I stared down into unrelenting black, searching for any sign of life, light, or cat. None were forthcoming. I crouched and lowered my arm into the pit, unwillingly conjuring the mental image of a hand swilling around in shark-infested waters as I did.

I pulled out and stood over the black hole, staring into the abyss. I had two choices. Although the moment I thought it, I truly only had one. I'd already spent the last eighteen years wondering what it was that I'd missed here and now was staring me in the face, daring me to find out. There were no choices. I stepped forward. And fell.

And fell. And fell. Wind rushed over me, nausea swimming into my throat and swamping my head, reaching out for anything to latch onto to break my fall.

I landed with both feet, fully expecting in the moment to be impaled on my own legs as each of my bones disintegrated milliseconds apart and left me as slush at the bottom of a pit that would remain black and closed until the incineration of the universe. The world dropped into focus around me. I was standing on the wall of a great, stone keep, looking out over battlements onto distant fields and hills. Something moved beside me.

“Andrew?” I turned to find the voice and saw him. Older, less bruised, his hairline retreated almost entirely. He looked well. Only a hint of the boy he had been; that same hesitant smile.

“...James?”

“The very same.”

“What...?”

“What... What am I doing here? I ought to ask you the same question! It’s been such a long time.”

“I saw your cat.”

“Oh yes – Neil. He’s something of a nuisance. Not one for rules or boundaries.”

“How did you get down here?”

“It’s quite easy when you know how. In any case, we’re not really *down* as such, here. More...out. I’ll show you one day.”

“Remember when we used to play as boys – the games we used to play?”

“Of course, but-” *But you never grew up. You couldn’t have.* He took my arm and walked me to a turret overlooking the valley below, casting an expansive hand over the landscape as if it were his, as if he were king of it all. It looked distantly familiar, a loose thread of a half-remembered dream.

“Remember *Conquerors of Ventaria*? That game. There used to be griffins, centaurs, hydra - all sorts of magical beasts here when I first came. Even *dragons*. But I can’t find them. The whole kingdom is mine, I won the game years ago but there’s no one left to fight and all the creatures have gone into hiding.” I watched him carefully for any sign that I was being toyed with. But there was no hint of irony. He was being desperately, painfully earnest.

“James. This place is incredible. How did you get here?”

“I told you. It’s really quite simple when you know how. Can’t be taught though. You have to, you know, figure it out for yourself.”

“But your house, it just...disappeared. The whole thing.”

“Thousand go missing every day and no one notices. I made quite a hash of it, actually.”

“What happened to your parents?”

He studied his shoes absently for a moment.

“I lost them. As I say, I made something of a hash of it. In my defence, I was very young when I started playing with the fabric of space.”

“So, why am I here?”

“Because you want to be,” he glanced up then, the glint in his eye eerily similar to the cat’s, “because *I* want you to be.” Something flickered in my periphery. I turned to see one of the towers flashing in and out of existence like a loose lightbulb. “It can get a bit quiet down here, now that the creatures are gone and there’s no one left to fight. Can you help me find them?”

“...of course.”

“James.” It came back to me then. The night before the house disappeared...the reason I’d woken at 5:30, the reason I barely slept that night. The scream that came through the bedroom window as I lay awake. Heart-stopping in its sorrow, unmistakably James’ mother’s.

The tower had stopped flashing now. There was only an emptiness, a void showing us the empty fields beyond. The world shook. The keep, the castle walls, the hills, the sun, the sky, were all glitching frenetically around us and I could see nothing but scattered shapes between the lightning-flashes as it all spun and fell around us.

“Andrew,” he winced, his voice pitifully small, plaintive, “help.”

We were in a mess of a child’s bedroom, a dim light from the street outside casting shadows over the toys spread across the floor. Boxes of stuffed animals, action figures and toy soldiers all lay on their sides, kicked, thrown, the sheets of the tiny single bed in the corner amber from repeated soiling. A slash of red cut through the carpet, spotting the wall at its end, running up the radiator to the windowsill. There beneath it, his body slumped. Part of his skull had broken away and lay on the floor next to him.

I turned away but felt something touch my arm. Little James Larkhill stood before me, gripping my wrists with fearsome strength, staring at me with eyes wide, tears streaming his cheeks with the blood that had dried from his open wound.

“It’s not my fault. I didn’t mean to. It wasn’t my fault.”

“I know. It’s okay – shhh, stop, it’s okay.” I knelt and held him to me as tides of fear and misery swept through his tiny frame. “It’s okay,” I kept repeating, his face soaking my neck as he convulsed, sobbing between my shoulders. “I won’t hurt you.” I held him there for what felt like eternity, long after both my arms were dead from keeping him steady, long after my knees felt eroded to stumps and the balls of my feet ached as if I might never move my toes again, until the flow of tears stopped, the convulsions settled and the whimpering died, and the boy slept peacefully on my shoulder.

I woke in the hours before dawn insinuates itself on the horizon, my shirt still wet, blood dried on my cheek, a tiny black cat tending my wounds.

“Off - Neil. Get off.”

I stood. There was a body-shaped divot where I had slept in the centre of the empty plot. I tested it with the toe of my boot, pushing my weight onto the ground. Nothing creaked. I tracked up and down where the hatch had been, pressing and jumping in the hopes of finding it again.

I wished I’d had the presence of mind to ask a few more questions around the ‘out’ place he’d taken me to, and how we’d got there. That would have covered my PhD, a Post Doctorate, and a seven-figure book deal, at the very least. Such are anomalous events in the temporospatial continuum of domestic structures, I suppose.

The incident which had held me in its sway for my entire life – the futility of everything I’d done to try and avoid it hit me in the pit of my stomach. Somewhere far away it was picking at the remains of a twenty-year feast, finishing the last of my friend’s mind with soul-crippling slowness. I would never be able to help him. Any hope that I could was more illusory than the toy castle he’d had barely the strength to conjure. Some corners of the universe are better left unexplored.