EMPTY ROOMS

For a time, the walls of the house were veined with fresh horsehair and fattened by shredded newspapers that spoke of electricity and fireless candles. These antique insulations had not yet crumbled to flakes, not yet begun failing at their job of protecting the house's people from the abusive New England cold.

The house was young then, its trusses strong, flexible, still bleeding the sap of the sky-tall pines they had been hewn from.

One night during this vibrant stretch, around the house, everything burned.

The people who lived within the house — two generations removed from those who had brought the house into creation — were celebrating what they called Independence Day. The couple leaned against a low swooping branch of an adolescent oak in the front yard and spoke to

other smiling strangers of how the year was progressing since their Civil War ended, all sipping from glasses of what they ordered from their footman as bourbon. As their palaver entered its alcohol-fueled crescendo, a dark harmony thrummed below it.

At first, each in the gathering took note of a smell not unlike a nascent fire struggling to burn green wood.

Then, the screaming.

Not just the screaming of people. No, the screaming of the other houses.

Houses scream. They scream like they talk, but instead of creaks, they bang, instead of hisses, they explode. Especially when the early summer is fevered and parched with no rain in weeks.

They explode.

The couple feared for their house. The agony of potential loss transformed their faces. It moistened them with tears. It reddened them with anger.

After all surrounding the house was reduced to blackened remains, its people could, unlike before, peer unhindered at the unyielding blue of the Northern Atlantic from the house's top floor. Together they were the only ones left perched on the hill.

#

In a more modern time, the house endured many visible symptoms of a grievous affliction — it was no longer a home, and it hadn't been one in some time.

Some symptoms were cosmetic, like the gutters. They were the first to be ignored, to cascade into disrepair. The shiftless parade of inhabitants of the house weren't invested enough to look into the gutters, to clean out the clogging flotsam, to peek over the metal edges and acknowledge decay.

Without that care, the gutters became like the teeth of an elderly couple the house had sheltered in a more focused part of its past — yellowed, warped with plaque, dangling at aged angles, and leaking rainwater like uncontrolled spittle.

Another manifestation of the house's homelessness was the state of the foundation. Cracks widened unforeseen like the movement of a clock's hour hand, bits of mortar flaking away from the granite slabs and dusting the earthen floor.

A doctor who had both lived and practiced within the walls of the house had once discussed with his patient a thing called cancer. The doctor did not use the word "rot" or "crumbling" as he would have when speaking of the house. He uttered the words *cancer* and *terminal* with sympathetic eyes, a quiet tone, and a soft hand placed on a knee. None of the people that had ever lived in the house had experienced cancer. Some of its people had emitted aberrant odors at disparate times, some had coughed blood, some had shrieked in mindless pain.

And some of its people had grown old and weak and died under its plaster ceilings. Those people could have experienced that certain deflating of body and soul — something akin to a crumbling foundation.

That could have been.

#

Periodically, the house made sounds. Some dismissed them as mere byproducts of the foundation settling further into the earth, relieving pressure on parts of the structure and shifting it to others. And that was all, they would say. Simple, explained.

But others made secretive faces and passed between themselves ideas that doors popping open of their own accord, or knick-knacks being turned to face walls instead of the open centers of rooms were the result of some other-worldly energy trapped within the walls of the house. They used words like ghost, spirit, and once even the foreign *poltergeist*. These people would say that, whatever it happened to be, it was clear the house was attempting conversation with them through its limited vocabulary of creaks, cracks, pops, hisses.

It had been generations since the house came to be, they surmised, why would it not attempt communion?

#

The house had three distinct series of hand carved notches in its doorways, climbing their way up from threshold to ceiling. The notches marked the growth of three children from three different families of the house's people.

The marks of Shamus Flannery reached three-foot four inches before he refused to stand for his parents to mark him, citing his

advanced age of five as making him too old for such nonsense. He left the house ten years later as a strong of heart, lean of muscle man, with dark, glossy hair. He died in that Civil War.

The notches of Ingrid Watts ceased at four-feet one inch. She had been born within the house. When she came to be she had cried for nights upon nights. Her notches did not have much separation from each other, as though she preferred to stay as small as she could. During the entire third year of her life, she could not be torn from a doll made of worn broom straw, rag cloth, and pipe cleaners. It was given to her by the cook who lodged in the carriage house. Ingrid existed for just under ten years before suffering a horrible, stinking fever in the summer of 1919. She fell asleep one dewy morning and never woke.

The marks of little Willard Miller disappeared after achieving a height of two-feet ten inches. He either succeeded or attempted to climb upon anything he could reach: drawers absently left open, bannisters brought to shiny attention by a fresh polish, any stair within his sightline. How he ended is a mystery. Neither of his parents ever spoke his name after he wandered off into a sparkling, clear, fall night in 1931. It was a Thursday.

#

There were the empty rooms, the most acute affirmation that the house was no longer a home. In truth, they were not completely empty. There were the bats who flitted through the attic; the ragged mice who

scuttled amidst the walls; the other non-people who crawled and crept and slithered within.

But they did not matter more than annoyance. They were not people. These creatures did not leave unseen parts of themselves within the house. People left their marks on the house when they suffered, when they grieved, when they howled like creatures, cackled like tickled toddlers.

Invisible notches, wooden flesh.

#

One couple never marked the growth of their children into the trim of the house's doorways. They had the emptiest rooms of all.

Julia and Francis Jenkowski became the house's people in the spring of 1951. They closed the ponderous oak entry door behind them on that crisp day — the front lawn smelling of earth previously decayed, now issuing life — and they embraced. They sat in each of the four bedrooms other than the one they were to sleep in, sharing a crystal glass of sparkling liquid between them. They guessed whether each room would be filled with a girl or boy, what their born names would be, each placing a bet on their prognostications, sealing their wagers with kisses.

That same night, naked in the soft darkness, each repeatedly whispering how much their love compared to oceans, moons, wells, amounts inexpressible, they moved in unison until there was nothing but the sound of their breathing filling the walls.

Moments like that left the house with a degree of warmth far superior to feeding a fireplace full of already searing coals one more seasoned, split log.

This accumulation of warmth was what had once caused visiting strangers to smile as they stepped inside the house without even realizing it.

To them, an invisible embrace. To it, the reason to be.

#

Francis Jenkowski arrived one evening at dusk, swiping a light dusting of snow from his narrow shoulders. Before he extracted his second arm from his woolen overcoat, Julia tattled that they were to have a child. Their first of many children, she said. Francis clapped his hands together three quick times and kissed her on her forehead. He called her his jewel.

Months later, on a moonless Tuesday night, Julia sat upright in bed and shoved Francis awake. He turned on the light. She was crying. She flipped back the duvet. The sheets were impossibly red. Francis spoke only one word: Jesus. He placed a trembling phone call.

Julia wanted to back away from the mass of red, she said so aloud. But then she said she was afraid to, she didn’t dare move. For the baby.

A doctor came. He looked her over, placing his hands in places that only Francis had. The doctor said they needed to go to the hospital.

They returned, not with a new squalling child, but with something else. Something heavy and unseen over them. Something that crushed their posture, muted their conversation.

On August 8th, 1952, Julia Jenkowski brewed a pot of tea, chilled it with three aching handfuls of ice cubes and squeezed in seven fresh lemon slices, swirling in the rinds when she finished. She climbed the stairs, went to the bathroom and extracted a petite, glass bottle. She uncorked it and swallowed all the contents along with a sweating glass of the tart tea. She then lay down on that same bed, noting aloud that it was no longer red.

She fell asleep, cradling her pillow. Like tiny Ingrid Watts, she never woke.

Francis arrive home late into that night as he had made his habit since the day the couple came home without their child, but instead with their shared extra gravity.

Without turning the light on, he slipped into bed beside his wife. Her coldness did not register with him.

At dawn, Francis woke and sat upright with a terrible and rattling inhale.

He turned to his wife.

He said, Jesus, as he had before. He called the doctor, as he had before. He carried his wife out the door, as he had before.

Neither of them ever came back to the house.

That was a mark on the house that was to never go away.

#

Time was relentless. The house struggled to retain the warmth of all its people as their stays were shorter, their warmth escaping through a door opened to the elements too many times.

Then the nameless man stepped within its walls.

He invited in strangers who were as strange to him as they were to the house. They measured and they took notes. They snapped pictures — frigid, gnashing flashing that bit at something deep within the house.

The nameless man gestured at the grand, central stairway, at each mantle that embraced the house's fireplaces.

#

In July of the year 1965, the house's people were Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Clayton. Mary and Joseph. They remarked on their names, telling each other they were destined to be one and together, according to the only book they kept, a thick one with translucent pages and a cover worn from its original black to ashen grey. They called it the Holy Scripture.

Joseph Clayton left Mary alone for long stretches, many times a few days length. While he was gone, she sat at a small, yellow table in an unlit kitchen. She flipped the pages in their Holy Scripture. She smoked cigarettes, lighting one off the still lit remains of the previous. She drank from a bottle of blackberry brandy that she hid in a half-empty tube of oats.

She muttered to herself, to the open air, hugging a thick shawl around her shoulders to keep her warm. Her husband had told her not to build fires and she did not. She mumbled of redemption, the cruelty of God, the forgiveness of God, the Holy Spirit filling a person until there was no more person, just Spirit.

The house had existed for over one hundred years. Its warmth had grown so much with all it had sheltered, all the notches that they had made in it, all the wonderful imperfections they had caused.

Over its absorbent years, people within the house had opened their books and read them for hours on end, just like Mary Clayton. People had popped open bottles whether to celebrate or to mourn. People had built fires to keep them warm, had lit stoves to sustain them.

When she left the kitchen to use the powder room, the love and grief of Julia Jenkowski, the curiosity of Willard, the shrieking of Ingrid, the loyalty of Shamus, all of the warmth it had absorbed of its people, all of it grew. It swelled within the house, multiplying and taking on a thickness that most air does not. The door to the walk-up attic popped open, jangling a tiny, superstitious bell placed around the doorknob eighty-five years before.

Then.

All the kitchen cabinet doors swung open like the opening of Mrs. Mary Clayton’s book. All the drawers shot out, their contents hissing like a fleet of popping bottle caps. The gas range snapped alit,

warming the gray kitchen for her return. Every bulb flicked on, giving her light enough to read a thousand years of the Scripture.

Mrs. Mary Clayton returned to the kitchen, saw what had transpired in her absence and held a hand to her chest. She grabbed up her Scripture, moaning of darkness that did not relate to daylight and snapped her hand from forehead to navel, shoulder to shoulder.

She left the house on that Wednesday morning, the day so foggy it sought to deceive about its own time passing. She returned with another woman, the day seeming no later or earlier than before Mrs. Clayton left.

This woman loomed over Mrs. Clayton, her neck bent in a crooked angle toward the top of Mary Clayton's head. She wore a black dress that dusted the floor and stretched all the way down her jangly arms to her knuckles. Her hands were gloved in black. Her eyes were as dark as her dress, her skin the opposite. The color of wet plaster.

She carried around her something absorbent, a cloud that sucked warmth as she walked through the house. She shrunk each room she entered. The house became less a home — more just an assembly of materials — from her mere presence as she slithered through it.

The woman spoke. Her words were icicles. Jagged, frozen. She spoke words older than had ever been expressed to the house. Words that started a trembling in the footings of the house. She spoke at it as no one had ever done.

When the house convulsed — a jarring implosion of charged ether

that popped the ears of both women — Mrs. Clayton closed her eyes and went to her knees in the middle of the living room. A painting of a lone boat amid an obsidian sea jumped off the wall, its walnut frame cracking at one corner. She crossed herself again. The strange woman crushed her eyelids together and spoke louder.

The house quaked uncontrollably. Plaster cracked from the ceiling and rained down on Mrs. Clayton, dusting her with an ash so fine it seemed as though she'd been turned to a pillar of salt.

Then.

The house was still. It was unable to embrace its people. Something left it, leaving it colder. Like a window had been left open over a winter that spanned generations.

#

Next to the house, Number Ninety-Three came into existence as the fall of 1971 was given its last rites, gasped, and gave in to a driftwood-gray, snowless winter.

Ninety-Three had three separate entrances. None connected, all with bare outside decks and steps made of a wood that was somehow different — it never splintered, it never cracked.

The people who came and went from Ninety-Three were different than any of the people the house had sheltered. They smelled of a brutal summer low tide, though stronger, concentrated. Or they reeked of the smoke that clung to the large trucks that increasingly rumbled past the house, rattling the age-rippling glass of its windows,

vibrating its ever-weakening foundation.

Through their separate entrances, the people from Ninety-Three were separate from each other, never looking each other directly in the eye, bent low as they left early in the morning and returned far beyond the accustomed dinner time.

When Ninety-Three had only existed for eighteen years, it was destroyed. Hulking yellow machines brought Ninety-Three to the ground in tangles of still-strong studs, shards of sparkling glass, chunks of lush shingles. They scooped its remains into other metal behemoths.

And then, impossibly fast, with skeletal bits of Ninety-Three still poking out of its roughshod grave, something else went up in its place.

Huge, gray, metal. Empty, with no windows. It stood in silence. It housed no people, had no rooms. Just one gaping maw facing the street where those same trucks came and went on a numbing, predictable schedule.

If that brute had replaced Ninety-Three, and Ninety-Three had sheltered so many people, where did that leave the house, when all of its rooms were just as empty now, serving no purpose, not even one as crudely modern as that next to it?

#

The nameless man led his swarming, ant-like men over the front threshold of the house. Unlike the men, the tools they carried had names, terrifying in their aptness. Relentless hammers, brutish

sledges, saws devilishly efficient in their bifurcating.

The house had experienced tools and the workers who wielded them. It had withstood the caring touch of maintenance. It had sustained — thrived on, even — the required surgery of modernization. It had evolved from candelabras to lightbulbs, from burning wood to coal to oil, from a carriage house and horse hitch to an asphalt drive and garage door that opened itself.

But this, with these men, this was not an upgrade, some repairs. This was not care.

This was ruthless transformation.

It began in the early summer of 1982, at the grand staircase. The place where everything connected. Where all rooms flowed to and from. The center of everything.

At the top of each flight of stairs, a heavier door, made of cold metal, replaced the original wooden ones. The first floor was no longer open, the stairs now blocked off and shooting straight through the house not like a system of architectural joints and tendons, but a hole. A tunnel of nothingness.

With their prying saws they cut at the house, forced invasive conduits into walls and floors, added inadequate and trembling stoves and refrigerators to rooms that used to house mewling newborns, grieving mothers. They inserted tiny bathrooms where there used to be closets of furs, dinner jackets, amusing holiday costumes — rooms that had smelled of cedar instead of carelessly vented dampness.

They stripped the house of its mantles, ripping them apart, skinning them from its walls. They blocked the fireplaces, covering over them with ashen, choking drywall.

They divided the house. Splitting floors and rooms into separate entities, imbibing them with distinct, disparate personalities.

Its people no longer belonged to the house. They did not care for the house as it had been cared for in the past. The house was just another *thing* in their lives — one more check to periodically write, one more key on their keyring.

They merely passed through the house without ever caressing the antique trim work, without ever attempting to repair a tiny scratch because it was in a favorite stretch of hardwood floor, without ever issuing aloud their future and how it belonged within the house's walls. They moved on without imparting any essence at all.

#

A dissected stretch of time passed. The house sheltered fewer and fewer of its transient people. Then one featureless couple carried their life out the door in six plastic convenience store bags.

No one replaced them. The postman stopped climbing the granite front steps. The tall tree in front of the house, the one with the low, swooping branch that children had climbed pretending to be pirates and couples had watched fireworks and shooting stars on — that wonderful branch surrendered to a random, windy, lightning-filled summer evening, split and fell to the ground. It went to rot within

six months, harboring only millipedes and slugs.

Passers-by gave the house pitying looks and remarked on the condition of the shingles, curling like scales on the decomposing body of an ancient reptile. They scolded an unknown caretaker for the lawn that grew wild in the spring and summer like some country pauper's field. They stepped into the street in the winter instead of braving the icy walk which was neglected storm after storm, the snow just layering and ever-hardening. The house suffered young men defiling its exterior with hissing cylinders, even carving their marks into its cracking flesh.

Ambivalent automobiles glided past the house, no longer slowing their pace to just have one more moment of observation. There had been a time of envious pointing fingers, of dreaming smiles — no longer.

Around the house more metal, blank, massive cubes appeared. Somehow, they seemed to blend together, the house and them. Different creation stories, contrasting histories, identical futures. Nothing but empty rooms.

#

And yet.

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A new man and a new woman. A new couple. They appeared on the house's porch in darkness on a Tuesday night, trying to open the front door just once, giving up and slumping against the door. They slept the remainder of the night on the rotting wood of the porch in each

others arms.

At sunrise they stumbled away, their only language a mixture of coughing, snorting, and spitting. The woman foraged in her pocket and extracted an already unwrapped candy on a stick. She offered it to the man, he declined. She put it in her mouth, her cheek puffing like a tumor.

They returned the next night to try the door again, with more vigor, but with the same failing result, the man falling over onto the porch floor, mumbling, the woman kicking at the door and missing.

Perhaps the house had something left of all that its people had bestowed upon it. All that was left of the grieving Mrs. Julia, the sadness of her husband, the conversation of all of its people, the fear of losing the house in the fire of 1866.

All of that warmth, that essence, all that was left in every corner — *any* corner — even after the cold woman with the ancient, emptying words and the nameless man and his army. It collected. It drew in. It filled — slowly, but it filled.

It released.

The walls popped, studs twisted, old plaster crumbled, newer drywall cracked, the porch slanted further toward the street. The house listed left and settled with a sigh-like thump of finality.

All of that for an inch.

The front door opened just that much. A creaking that echoed into the quiet night.

The couple mumbled to each other. The woman put her hands on the man's back and forced him toward the door.

He reached out and pushed the door with his palm. It creaked another inch. The man entered furtively, bowed, looking in every direction and pulling the woman behind him.

They stumbled out of the darkness of the night and into darkness of the house.

#

Those two, the most recent to the house, they smoked acrid concoctions out of glass pipes, they built small fires in the corner of rooms, not knowing of the grand old fireplaces that lay hidden. They excreted into plumbing that no longer drained.

And yet, the house had people again. They filled the house with life, albeit not like before, but there was the same dark pain mixed with spurts of manic joy. Their desperation, destituteness, their disconnection from each other, to anything outside of the house's walls — it didn't matter.

They did not care to leave. Only one of them left at a time, usually the man, but he was never gone long. He was called Baby. She was called Honey, but sometimes they reversed their names. That is how much they mingled together within the house.

They talked of colors and shapes and gods and demons. They saw and spoke to people or things that were not there. They sputtered about the texture of the walls, decrepit as they were. Of what must

have happened here where they pointed, there where they crawled on their knees and caressed with trembling, frail hands.

Sometimes they would dart up and down the stairs, visiting each room, chattering about its shape, its potential, sometimes both talking at the same time, layering unbelieved praise over each other, increasingly energetic, increasingly agitated.

Even though the rooms had been altered, the new couple acted as though the house had not devolved into the wreck that it was. They saw past what had been done there, only seeing what lie ahead of them, even though their vision of the future did not stretch beyond their next fragmented thought.

The house had people again. Its people.