Familiar Haunts

Tait Vigesaa

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The house goes for under market value because the previous owner thinks it’s haunted. She’s right. I grow up there playing Super Nintendo in an attic that for some reason locks from the outside. We adopt a Chow named Zakita that my dad calls Cujo. I never see anything too weird. Just a ball that rolls uphill against the slant of the house. Or shadows caught out of the corner of my eye. Or my younger brother walking through the kitchen outside of our bedroom and the silverware flying open and hitting him in the side. We both run upstairs yelling. We say it’s the ghosts. Dad says it’s the air-conditioning.

My parents drop me and my brothers off at our grandmother’s house on some weekends. We get ice cream at Softies and then she takes us to Barnes & Noble or the library. I find a bargain book with a black cover that’s just a door with a wispy hand peeking around to open it. It’s a book about urban legends and ghost stories. She won’t buy it for me. I beg and plead and promise that I’m old enough to read it. A rite of passage building to the point I’ll be able to look down the dark hallway to the room filled with antiques.

I’m sharing a bed with my younger brother but I can’t sleep. Spring-heeled Jack is waiting outside the cracked open door, peeking in with the light. The Mothman is probably peering in from the window. I want to turn on the light but I keep picturing the illustration of the Jersey Devil waiting in the dark by the light switch. In the morning my grandmother takes the book away.

The drummer in my band has spirits. His family has done their home-work (fucked around with a Ouija board). They find out there’s three of them. There’s the two good spirits who are little girls and they want to protect Colton’s dad, Dale. Then there’s one evil spirit. They call him The Tall Man. He’s older and has a smell. He wants to hurt Dale. Some of the other guys laugh and are skeptical. I tell him I believe him. That I’ve felt cold things in the basement.

My first home away from my parents is one I’m renting with several friends. I lied about an aunt so I didn’t have to stay in the dorms. Among my possessions is a human skull my great-grandfather found in a field. Robby asks to keep it in his room one night. He brings it to me at the kitchen table in the middle of the night. He’s shaking his head and looking at it with wide eyes. I can’t quite tell if he’s awake or not.

Zach’s girlfriend cheats on him so she’s out and off the lease. Jeff
sleeps with my girlfriend so he gets kicked out too. Rooms move around, Zach takes the larger room and we look for someone to take Jeff’s room. Sean moves in and he trashes the house over Christmas break. He goes home from college and Chris moves in. After two years the walls are caked with bad psychic energy, or at least that’s what Meredith says.

I’m home for a little bit, staying with my parents. My mom’s worse off after back surgery and dealing with her medication load for schizoaffective disorder. We’re sitting on the back porch smoking cigarettes. The backyard is a mess of snow and unraked leaves, dirty wet piles of interseasonal procrastination. My mom turns to me and asks, “What did he say to you?” and I ask her who and she responds and says, “The man whispering in your ear.” The little girl playing under the bed and the man who whispers used to scare me. Now they just make me worry.

There’re some phone calls where you just know somehow about the whirlwind of fuck on the other end before you even answer. The earth-quivering moments where you lose the ability to stand for a minute. Your knees buckle. And you don’t feel the sharp rocks in the gravel driveway cut holes in your jeans to slice at your legs. Everything will sound tiny and far away on the phone call. The sound of your father’s voice will sound like someone else with a pitch and tone like you’ve never heard your entire life. Someone will drive you somewhere and you won’t really remember where you were going. But you’ll remember the pine trees in the valley north of your home and the way they looked blurring together through tears and motion while you leave yourself because you know it’s the first time but won’t be the last.

“It’s really coming down out there, isn’t it?” The plate was already clean, but her soapy, cloth-covered hand kept circling it, slowly. It was the last dish. Once it was dry, she would be done. “Maybe we should head out now, before it gets worse.”

An inaudible sigh. She placed the dish on the drying towel beside the sink, then turned her back to it. He stood on the other side of the room before the window, a dark silhouette against the thick white snow that fell on the other side of the glass. The cold of it could be felt even over the heated room.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she finally said.

He turned his head in her direction, begging for an explanation. Brown eyes followed her fumbling hands as she dried the remaining droplets on her dark blue jeans, clumsily clambering for her cell phone in her back pocket.

“It’s only eight,” she said, glimpsing at her cracked screen. “There’s no need to rush. Besides,” she continued, “the snow’s supposed to stop soon, anyway.” She opened her weather app to confirm, but got lost in her lists of cities whose forecasts, as of now, did not matter.

When she looked up again, he was fully facing her, his back against the window, his arms crossed over his chest. He wanted to say something, she knew he did, but he wouldn’t. Jonah was notorious for that. There was something in his eyes that carefully bore into hers. Sadness, maybe frustration. Most likely both.

“Fine,” he answered after a while. He pushed off the wall and started across the room. “I’ll go take a shower, then.”

“Jonah—”

“It’s fine, El,” he continued, passing her. “We’ll head out after I get out. The snow should be done by then, right?”

“You hair will freeze again.” Her voice was becoming desperate. She wished she would have just agreed.

“I’ll wear a hat.” He said that every time.

The bathroom door shut loudly behind him, and while she tried to convince herself it was accidental, she wasn’t sure. The apartment was silent for a couple of long, dreadful moments, before the sound of the starting shower washed it away.

She exhaled.