

HOUSE AND PASSAGE

Ben Tufnell

The house had been empty for years. No one knew why. No one cared. Someone had lived there once upon a time, but no one could remember who.

In the summer holidays children from the village played in the woods. They climbed trees, built dens and battled for territory using sticks as swords and spears. When they discovered the house, which was hidden away and surrounded by tall evergreens, they thought it was spooky. Someone said it looked like it was haunted. Someone else said it looked like a skull. So, they threw stones at the windows and then fled back into the woods.

The house was made of red brick and silvery flint with a roof of dark slate. It was symmetrical – the front door in the centre, windows on either side, a pair of chimneys - like a child's drawing of a house. It must once have been a neat little home, quiet and secluded. But time had painted it with decay and moss and lichen and cracked its facade. Ivy had climbed all over it. It looked lost.

Heckel had been walking all day, trying to put as much distance between himself and the place where it had happened, when he saw the house. He had been keeping away from the main roads, sticking to lanes and farm tracks and avoiding the towns and villages. He did not dare risk public transport. If he saw anyone, he hid behind hedges or inside bushes. As the light began to fade, he was following a stony track down into a shallow valley filled with trees and there it was, almost hidden from view, hunkered down against the ground, it seemed. He knew immediately that it was empty. There was something abject, even melancholy about it. But he was exhausted and, reflecting that he needed somewhere to rest and think, and somewhere to *hide* while he rested and thought, he pushed through the gate and made his way up a gravel drive overgrown with weeds.

The front door was not locked, or even properly closed. He pushed it open and looked into a bare hallway. The stone floor was covered in drifts of crisp brown leaves. A mirror hung on the wall, and he looked at himself for the first time that day. He seemed to have aged, to have become an old man just like that. Moreover, the mirror was cracked (that's bad luck, he thought). A single jagged fissure ran horizontally across it, bisecting his face just below the eyes. Bad luck. Overcome with tiredness, he raised his hands to rub his eyes and was appalled to see that they were caked with dry blood, dark like dirt. How had he not noticed that? He had walked all day with blood on his hands, for anyone to see.

He followed the hall through to the back of the house, where he guessed the kitchen might be. It was bare, except for a chair and a coat stand in the corner by the back door. A filthy mug sat on the draining board. He tried the taps and was surprised and relieved that water flowed into the dusty sink. He drank deeply, realising just how profoundly thirsty and hungry he was. He scrubbed at his hands, trying to wash away the terrible stains.

He quickly checked through the rest of the house. There was little furniture left. The walls were covered in appalling wallpaper, writing with tendrils and vines, crowded with

leaves that seemed to make grinning faces. There were dark shapes on them where pictures had once hung. Upstairs, two bedrooms, a little box room and a bathroom. Downstairs, the kitchen, a sitting room and a dining room. In the gathering darkness, he piled leaves into the fireplace in the sitting room and then kicked the coat stand to pieces and threw the bits in too. In an alcove in the dining room were some shelves. He wrenched them off the wall and broke them over his knee. He had a single cigarette left and he lit it and then used his lighter to start the fire, which flared as the leaves caught and then the splinters of wood. He smoked, standing at the window and looking down the driveway towards the gate. No one would come. The sky still had some pale light, but the house seemed to gather shadows about it. For some reason the image of a monstrous mouth came to mind, a huge dark throat, into which he was falling. He shuddered and threw the butt onto the fire.

Tomorrow I must go south, thought Heckel, away from here. As far as possible.

There were some old sheets, which must once have been used to protect the furniture from dust. He wrapped them about himself and lay on the floor, which was hard and cold and dirty, before the fireplace. The flames painted rippling shapes – bat wings, horns, mouths – onto the walls and ceiling. He closed his eyes and the jaws snapped shut about him.

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‘It’s a surprise,’ Sean had said, smiling, and so Sophy had taken his hand in hers and they had walked across the fields, crossing the little stream (running so clear) at the footbridge and had then picked up the path that skirted the edge of the woods. It was late in the afternoon and the air was warm, the sky fading to lilac (she could already see the moon, faint, high, like a ghost) and it seemed to her that everything glowed with a kind of holy luminescence.

‘What’s in there?’ she asked, gesturing to his rucksack. ‘It’s a surprise,’ he repeated. At that moment, she would not have wanted to be anywhere else, with anyone else. They crossed a stile and Sean held out his hand for her to take, to steady her. She caught his eye and they both smiled, and she thought she might laugh out loud or scream or jump up and down.

They followed the track down a shallow valley and she saw the house and knew that was where he was taking her, and why. A moment of fear, of trepidation, that passed quickly. She had once come to the house, many years ago, with some friends from the village. They had not dared to go inside but had thrown stones at the windows, screaming and howling whenever they shattered.

At the gate, he told her wait. ‘Why?’ she asked. ‘It’s a surprise,’ he said again. ‘Wait, OK?’ She nodded and he jogged up the path, pushed against the front door and went in. She leaned against the gate post and waited, watching the swifts over the field on the other side of the track and listening to the rooks and crows calling from the tops of the trees.

Sean reappeared on the front step and called to her. As she walked up the driveway, so overgrown and tangled, she thought how odd it was that the sky was still light, but the house was in darkness, as if it somehow drew the shadows in to it, like a form of protection. But as soon as the thought came to her, she questioned it. How could darkness be a protection?

At the front door, Sean told her to close her eyes. She protested, briefly, happily, and then did as she was told. He took her hand and led her into the house. It smelt dry and dusty, powdery, cobwebby, and she was filled with a fleeting urge to turn tail and run, down the driveway, through the gate and back up the track towards the village, but then it was gone. She was with him and everything would be alright.

They walked down the hall and then turned to the left. Sean now moved behind her and with his hands on her shoulders guided her forward. ‘You can open your eyes now,’ he said.

They were in what had once been the sitting room. One wall was covered in an extraordinary wallpaper - buckled and peeling, depicting luxuriant foliage, twining and writhing in ecstasy – but the others held just strips of paper or were bare plaster, covered in carvings and graffiti, names and a numbers and symbols. The floor was bare floorboards, but swept clean – she had expected rubbish, filthy rags, old porn mags, cigarette butts, empty beer cans and bottles, for she knew that sometimes the kids from the village came here to smoke and drink and mess around – but it had been swept and hundreds of tea lights had been placed around the room, their small flames gently wavering and warming, making it seem less like a derelict house and more like a home. In the centre of the room Sean had laid out blankets. And he had unpacked from his rucksack paper plates and plastic glasses, sandwiches, a bottle of sparkling wine. It was all for her. ‘It’s beautiful,’ she said, and they kissed.

Later, when it was very dark and the candles were guttering and going out one by one, they woke, and Sean said they should be getting back. ‘It’s late,’ he said. ‘We don’t want to push our luck.’ He gathered their things and crammed them into his rucksack. ‘Shall we take your candles?’ she asked. ‘No, we can leave them,’ he replied. He blew them all out except one, which he used to light the way to the hall at the front door.

The full moon was bright, describing the earth with silvery light.

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Mooney bought some tins of soup, a packet of biscuits and a half-bottle of whiskey with the money he'd busked at the railway station and left the village. He didn't like to spend the nights around other people, even when it was cold and hard, not anymore. He liked to be alone. It was the only way.

He followed tracks and paths into the countryside, not really paying attention to which way he was going, and it started snowing. Just a few flakes at first, peppering the fading light, and then more steadily, so that the world quickly faded and whited.

At the bottom of a shallow valley, at the edge of thick woods of bare and black trees, was the house. It was a wreck. Its roof had pitched in at some point and there was no glass in any of the windows. There was not even a front door. Despite its gloomy demeanour, something drew him to it. It offered shelter, if nothing else. He went in carefully.

On the floor in the hall was a small heap of old candles. He lit one with a match and looked into the rooms on the ground floor. Someone had done a shit in what had once been the dining room and used old newspaper to clean themselves. He shook his head. Disgusting. The stairs had long since collapsed and the wood from the banisters burnt so he could not ascend to the first floor. And anyway, where the stairs had once been snowflakes drifted down through a hole in the roof into the flickering light of the candle flame.

Broken pieces of mirror were scattered across the floor and sent miniature points of light, the multiplication of his candle flame, dancing across the walls and ceiling. Good luck, he thought.

He set up his stove in what must once have been the sitting room and put a pot of soup on to warm while he examined the markings and writings on the bare walls. CND and anarchist symbols. *Sean Loves Sophy*. Names and initials scored into the soft plaster, a palimpsest of presences. Jumbled dates from many years before. Perhaps I should leave my mark too, he thought.

It was very cold. The coldest so far. Snow was drifting in from the darkness outside through the empty windows. In the kitchen (where the taps were dry and caked in dust) he found a pile of filthy old sheets and, carrying them back to where his soup was now bubbling, managed to hang them across the window to keep the weather out. He would have liked a fire to warm himself but while there was enough to get it started – old newspapers, magazines, cigarette packets – there was nothing substantial to burn on it. He wondered briefly about pulling up the floorboards and burning those, but something gave him pause. He did not like the idea of revealing whatever it was that might be *beneath* the house.

He drank the soup. Then he drank the whiskey.

He was shivering. It was bitterly cold.

He went to the front door and looked out. Snow was still falling. The world was white and dark. An animal called somewhere off in the trees, a melancholy sound that disturbed him somehow. He shrugged off the sense of threat. Despite everything, the world was beautiful.

‘It’s been a long life,’ he thought, happily. ‘Who knows if I’ll even wake up tomorrow.’

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When the roof completely caved in, taking some of the walls with it, no one came. Then it really was a ruin, no longer a house or home but just a pile of crumbling brick and stone, bookended by two stark gables, headstones amongst the trees. Ivy and brambles went all over it. But there were still nooks, shaded and well hidden, and animals used those for their dens. One winter, a fox, whose mate had been killed on the road, came and made her *earth* beneath

one of the gables. In the spring her cubs were born. They played, chasing each other and fighting, where there had once been a gravel drive.

Eventually the gables fell too. And the woods pushed forward and filled the empty space.

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Some time ago, I walked down the track. It was a fine day. I was just wandering, really, as I did not know that place well. At the bottom of a shallow valley, at the edge of a wood, something made me stop. I could not have said for sure that a house had once been there. Yet I felt something, a faint echo, a little shimmer across the surface of things. I imagine it is still there, whatever it is, though growing fainter with each passing year.

I waited, listening to the birds in the trees, wondering if something might manifest, but nothing did. Then, as I walked away, a story – something simple, just a few pages – slowly began to form in my mind.