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PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

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THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION  
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Highly Commended in the Open Division

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*Hole in the Wall*

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2021

Ron Schroer

*Hole in the Wall*

I'm alone in this old house, my only companion a hole in the wall. I used to wonder what might be inside it, or what might come through it.

I could've asked Alex to come fix it for me – there was enough left between us for that – but he'd have claimed eternal credit for *doing the ex-wife a favour*. One more reason to leave things as they were.

Sometimes I sit at the kitchen table and lose myself in the wallpaper. The house was built in the 1960s and somewhere between then and now, when taste lost its mind, someone saw fit to fix wallpaper to unused parts of the kitchen walls. Not just any wallpaper, but a gross brown with some baroque pattern, yellowed over time by nicotine. Even now, just looking at it makes me chuckle.

I'd left Dad alone here. I was just so tired of his drinking and smoking and his stubborn refusal to look after himself. It's still this persistent ache in my side, like penance. It wasn't that he didn't care – it wasn't that he didn't know what he was doing. He'd simply decided to live on his own terms, beholden to no one. I couldn't really call him selfish – I meant to do just the same.

Right now I choose to binge. I binge, therefore I am. On television, on demand; on chilled white wine, and on the weird comfort of loss. I'm functional, though, missing no shifts, the sleepwalker supreme. I could sit at home but the busy-ness does me good. People always need food; distractions count.

*I don't care if you're rude to me. Just keep your damn mask on.*

*Just keep me occupied.*

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When you're killing time – sorry, 'working in a service sector' – there's never much cash to splash. So while I knew it had to go I became accustomed to the hole. It was big, with coarse edges, and from it I could smell the musty air of interior walls. There was a vertical beam in there, off to one side, helping to hold things up, and

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plasterboard plains among the shadows. Anything else I saw was really up to me. Never a mouse, never a roach, never a spider.

As for the house, it wasn't dark or haunted or anything like that. Even Poe couldn't have done much with it. This was, in fact, a sunny place at odds with what had happened. It was summer, the days long and tinder-dry, and the curtains so parchment-thin that daylight streamed in and made the carpets warm as toast underfoot. I didn't care.

On the contrary – I needed to sweat, and this place was good for that at least. I wanted that one-eyed sunshine to flush out the toxins.

The nights were leaden and quiet, other than sounds of the ordinary: the guttural hissing of possums looking for food outside my bedroom window, flying foxes too, beating the air on strange wings, and in the distance the night-time beasts of the highway, the sounds of their compression-braking comforting in the smaller hours.

Mum was long gone, Dad was gone too, and the house was now mine, so I let myself go to seed and enjoyed the process. I still shaved my legs because I hated the itching and I trimmed just a little elsewhere, but I let my armpit hairs grow wild. I think it was the novelty of smelling myself, not a faint odour but a full-on summertime stink.

Freedom too from make-up. Not that I'd ever caked it on – a light foundation with a dash of lipstick before leaving the house. I'd spent more time agonising over the right earrings or which necklace to wear. Nowadays I'm not looking for anyone or even to make an impression. I'd rather make an *un*-impression; I want to be background.

(I've heard others complain about becoming invisible as they grow older. It doesn't seem so bad to me. I'd like to feel the presence of another – the press of warm flesh – but the rest I can do without.)

And I'm fascinated by my face now. I can stand at the bathroom mirror under white lights and watch myself for minutes at a time. *I'm inside this*, I think. I reside within this skin, its evolving wrinkles and creases, an imperfect frame that is nonetheless my own. I'm within these greying hairs, these unbecoming folds, this body that will follow its own course.

There are no kids to worry over. We'd never gone there – some people simply shouldn't breed. Alex and I had felt the same way, about each other.

I still bleed, just not as often, and everything feels less fecund these days. When I dry up altogether I think it will come as a quiet relief, though the getting there will be murder: the stops and starts, highs and lows. Thinking about the years ahead takes me again to that ragged hole – it's undeniable, after all, a statement of fact. I should love it for that.

It's not unlike loneliness, or loss; there's something joyous about lying naked on the living room floor at 2:00 am soaked in tears from I-don't-know-what-*exactly*. Fucked-up, to be sure, yet so joyous.

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Living with Dad was an adventure, I'll give him that. Like the night I came home from work and walked into a wall of rancid smoke. The cat, a soot-black dash, threw himself outside as soon as I'd opened the back door. Some alarm *he'd* turned out to be – no evidence he'd tried slapping Dad awake with paws or claws. No, Dad was fast asleep in his favourite armchair, floating serenely in a dense grey fog. The only light came from the stovetop, a glowing orange circle with a saucepan on it, pouring smoke from a black meat sacrifice.

He'd played that trick more than once, and every time there'd been an empty sherry bottle somewhere nearby. Cooking sherry, naturally.

How many days had it taken me to scrub this house clean, each time?

(Scrubbed clean, yes, but I can still sit here now and read the walls.)

I remember a conversation at this table, when an old friend of Dad's came to visit. His name was Pieter, a plain-talking Dutchman like Dad, and like Dad he'd migrated here after the war and worked as a bricklayer. Dad told us a story from the early days, when he'd been working alone at a building site in the middle of a harsh winter. He'd been desperate for a shit but the house was only half-built and the toilet was frozen solid, so he'd gone out into the backyard and laid down sheets of old newspaper. Once he'd finished and wiped himself clean with current affairs, he'd wrapped up his business and – looking around first to make sure he wasn't seen – hurled the parcel into the neighbour's yard. Out of sight, out of mind.

But he'd made two fundamental errors with his method of disposal: he hadn't done a good enough job with his wrapping, and he threw way too hard. The paper came undone mid-flight and what lay within splattered across the kitchen window of the house next door. Mortified, he'd ducked below the fence line and watched through a crack in the palings.

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At that same moment a passenger jet was flying low overhead. As its dull roar drowned out everything else, the little old woman living next door came storming outside and beheld with horror her shit-spattered window. She looked all around and, with no one else in sight, turned her gaze upward to the jet passing directly over her house. Dad, crouching behind the fence and with a hand to his mouth, watched as the old woman shook a fist at the jet and shouted something after it. He'd been saved by the miracle of flight.

I'd never heard this story before and we all laughed hard. It was weirdly bonding. Pieter had been around during my childhood but this was the first time that he, Dad and I had interacted as adults, and I'm sure it was Pieter – just his being there – who'd let the story out. Hearing it this way, together at this table, had felt somehow like an invitation into Dad's world. It was a world I'd never known. Right then I was more than just the dutiful daughter, making cups of tea as they'd smoked and reminisced. I'd been allowed to share. It felt like acceptance, though I've never figured out whose.

Yes. This hideous wallpaper. Infused with grease, smoke, and so many other things. A wonder it doesn't just peel off the walls with the weight of it all.

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Mum was a mystery, unresolved. Without a photo to guide me I can't even form her in my head anymore. The only thing that still resonates is an aimless guilt, gently vibrating inside me. I guess I could pay some suburban psychic to ask Mum what I'd love to know, but even then I'm not sure she'd have anything to say to me.

Strong enough to have me, and to raise me with love, but not to stay.

And then Dad.

I'd found him late in the day – an impromptu visit on my way to someplace else – with the afternoon sun illuminating him, lending his pale face a golden hue, here on this kitchen floor. He was barely conscious. I asked him if he was in pain. 'No,' he said, sounding surprised and waving a weak hand over his chest, 'just *numb*.' A relief, looking back.

The last thing he said to me was, 'Don't let them find my ciggies,' as if the paramedics were going to judge and berate him for being a smoker. No way – that was *my* job.

He passed out soon after and never came back.

*Aneurysm*

/'ænjə,rɪz(ə)m/

I suppose the word is graceful in its own way. Bleeding out, from within.

At the hospital, mysterious white kingdom, they'd kindly kept him breathing for me while a priest made his way to Emergency. Dad was Catholic, lapsed – seriously – but it still seemed like the thing to do. The priest was old and reminded me of Father Merrin from *The Exorcist*. Too late for all that, though – we'd have to make do with some Last Rites instead: some muttered, secretive words, and then an oxygen bag withdrawn.

It wasn't until later, when I came back to the house and switched on the hallway light, that I saw the hole at the other end, near the door to my old bedroom. A gaping mouth, wide open in shock, much like my own. The story was clear. I lay down before it, wept at it, and slept with it, and all this more than once. This hole, this breach, this face, this looking-glass.

I wasn't here, of course, to see Dad fall, how the weight of his displaced blood had pitched him forward like an old grey statue. I saw it now, though – how his head hit the plasterboard and went straight through it; how he'd somehow dragged himself to the kitchen and laid on the lino there, a cooler place to die.

Like an animal might, understanding at a base level that the end was close.

And the lino floor – it's mud-brown and patterned too, just like the fucking walls.

I've spent a lot of time with the hole. Sometimes I kneel and look inside it, and around it, and if I look closely enough I can see white wisps of his hair still stuck to its edges. How visceral, of him. I've never seriously thought of wiping them away.

There was a night when, drunk on something awful he'd left behind, I'd knelt at the hole and stared at it for a long time, willing his face to appear so that we could talk awhile and say our proper goodbyes, and wishing for Mum's face too, just so we could reacquaint ourselves. But no one came and I'd put myself to bed, exhausted.

I soon understood that the faces only came when I slept, and they were never quite right. As for this hole in the shape of a head – it remains, in the end, just a hole.

But I do think I'll miss it when it's gone.