

Whole in the Wall

Helen stood in front of the wall and dropped the paintbrush freshly dripping glossy jet-black paint. It seemed to shine with a pleased wink as if to tell her she'd done a good job. Her jaw quivered and her blue eyes upwelled with tears.

"I did it, baby," the tips of her finger tenderly stroked the cool wet surface like a musician greeting the strings of a guitar. "I did it," she cooed again before pressing her thin body against the wall in a motherly embrace.

"Helen? What're you doing?" A baritone voice sounded. She quickly stepped away from the wall, turned around, and looked up at her husband who was peering down at her from over the banister. His rounded face was framed by a thick set of sideburns and dark beard.

"Nothing, honey. Nothing. I was just —" She sputtered. The front half of her body was covered in wet paint, including the tips of her nose and chin.

"Just what?" He trudged down the stairs with hurried steps. "Jesus, Helen. Look at you." Worry wrote itself across his forehead in the form of a crease as he brought his fingers to her face to rub at the paint, "You're a mess." Unbothered, she released a wistful sigh, weaved her fingers through his, and looked into his brown eyes, "Eric, she's back. Our baby has found her way back to us. Aren't you happy?"

He considered her with an accusatory gaze that quickly softened with concern, "I agreed to letting you paint that wall because you promised this was it. You said you wouldn't do this anymore."

"Do what?" Her eyebrows knit in innocent bewilderment.

"Play pretend."

“Oh, honey,” she shook her head slowly and explained carefully as if he were a confused child, “I’m not pretending. Celeste *is* here.” She connected her fingertips to the wall. “Can’t you feel her energy? Can’t you hear it?”

“When I get back from work, I don’t want to hear any more of this. No more.” He pointed a hostile finger at her and retreated upstairs.

Once Eric left the house, Helen lingered in the foyer, reapplying paint to the areas she had disturbed before it was dry. She used soft, intentional strokes like a mother applying makeup to her daughter’s face. As she did so, she hummed an old lullaby she used to sing to Celeste and her twin when they were still tiny balls growing inside her stomach. When the wall light above her head flickered, Helen responded with a pleased smile, “You still remember that song after all these years?”

She set the paintbrush down on the plastic spread covering the floor and said, “I’ll be right back.” With eager steps, she approached the wood door embedded underneath the staircase and wrapped her hand around the handle. It opened with a soft creak and led down into a dark basement. Helen couldn’t remember the last time she or Eric had been down there but there was something she needed. That box that held Celeste’s memory.

She flicked on the light switch and carefully descended each step, using the rickety railings as support until she reached the ground floor. Helen stood in silence and searched the four corners of the cramped room with her eyes. “Now where was it?” She whispered to herself and planted her hands on her hips.

She began her search at the right side of the room, unstacking, and restacking various boxes labeled with words that seemed to summarize the last two decades of their lives: **ERIC’S**

**OLD WORK UNIFORMS, FOOTBALL TROPHIES, STARRFIELD HIGH 2001,
WEIGHT TRAINING STUFF, DAD'S MILITARY MEMORABILIA, OBITUARIES.**

**HELEN'S: ST. DOPPLER ACADEMY HIGH 2003, ROSEN COMMUNITY
COLLEGE, NURSING THINGS, MOM'S STUFF, COOKBOOKS, WEDDING STUFF
FALL '04, THE GIRLS.**

Helen's eye lit up at the sight of the last box in that corner and she began to open the flaps when a solemn feeling washed over her—she remembered that she wouldn't find Celeste's things there, only Hailey's. Her body deflated with a great sigh as she recalled that day. It was so many years ago, fourteen to be exact, but she could still hear the mixture of anger, sadness, and confusion in Eric's voice, feel his hands plucking the box away from her grasp, reminding her of another great loss. *'We're not keeping her things. Throw them out, give them away. I don't care—but I don't want them anywhere near Hailey's.'*

That's right. That week Celeste had passed away a few brief years after her twin sister did at only 3 years old. Even so, Eric didn't want to keep any of Celeste's things, so he'd gotten rid of them. At least, he tried. Helen had snuck out in the pouring rain while Eric slept and rescued them from the garbage bin. To her knowledge, he never did learn that she had tucked the items away inside an old shoebox she kept in the basement. She remembered leaving it in plain sight since he hardly ever went down there anyway but the shoebox was nowhere to be found.

Another twenty minutes passed before Helen discovered a black and white box wedged between the wall and behind a rusted dryer. She lowered to her knees and tugged at the box, carefully inching it out from where it had gotten stuck. When it was safely in her hands a lone tear crept out of her eye. How could their baby's existence be reduced to fitting inside such a small container, she thought.

Her sadness quickly receded when she remembered that Celeste had returned. She could make new memories with her daughter—*they* could make new memories. Beautiful ones too big and too joyous to fit inside a box made for a child's shoes. All she needed was to show Eric. He would understand. A sudden smile spread across her face and her gaze drifted as her mind traveled lightyears away far beyond the basement.

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Hours later Eric returned home to find Helen in the foyer with old photographs, blankets, and trinkets covering the wood floor as if a bag of long-gone memories exploded in the room. She was kneeling on a cushion sorting through them, chatting, and giggling to what seemed to be an invisible person. She didn't notice Eric until after he called her name for the third time in a row.

"You're back. How was work?" She attempted to climb to her feet but collapsed and he rushed to her side to help her up.

"These fumes are making you dizzy. Have you been in here all day?"

"I don't know," she waved a dismissive hand, "I was just catching up with Celeste. Showing her the photo album and her old things. Look, remember Trumpy?" Helen grabbed a floppy stuffed elephant off the floor and presented it to Eric proudly.

In response, he confiscated the toy from her and gave a disapproving look, "What is all this?"

"Honey don't be mad. They're our daughter's things. I kept them in a little box in the basement."

His chest heaved as he sighed, "I know. I never said anything because I know what they mean to you."

Helen reached for his free hand, “Don’t you mean us? What they mean to *us*.”

Eric didn’t respond. His eyes were glued to an item on the floor, a fifteen-year-old photograph. In it, a clean-shaven Eric was holding Celeste on his shoulders with a goofy smile. Her tiny hands were buried in his shaggy long hair, and she was smiling with an innocent grin, tiny teeth poking out of her gums. Her chubby legs dangled over each side of his shoulders.

Anyone looking at the photo could tell where Celeste got her large dark eyes and wavy oil black hair from. Eric’s fist tightened around the stuffed elephant the longer he observed the photo until Helen’s voice broke him from his trance.

“Stop that! You’re going to ruin him! You know he’s Celeste’s favorite.”

“Celeste is dead!” Flecks of spit flew from his mouth and landed on Helen’s face. Eric took a step back and released Trumpy from his grip and shown both of his palms in surrender, “I’m sorry. I...didn’t mean to yell.”

Helen returned a vacant gaze, her head crooked to one side, “That’s alright, honey. But you should stop saying things like that. It’s upsetting for her.”

He planted his hands firmly on her shoulders, looked her in the eye, and parsed his words carefully, “Listen...fourteen years ago when Celeste was three, we lost her. Remember?” He fought against the lump that was hardening in his throat.

“She’s gone,” he continued. “We made a choice. For her, for us, for everyone. And we’ll live with that for the rest of our lives. But whatever *this* is, it needs to stop. Celeste is gone and she’s never coming back.”

Suddenly a loud noise seemed to erupt from the side of Eric’s face and strike him on the cheek. He was stunned until he realized Helen had slapped him. Her hand trembled and remained suspended in the air stained with faded splotches that almost looked like bruises.

“Do *not* speak of our daughter that way,” her pupils were a dark cave. Eric closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He released it slowly and spoke calmly.

“Helen,” all the anger drained out of his voice and renewed with compassion, “Maybe you should talk to someone—a professional. Tim has a lot of contacts; I’ll ask him for a referral.” Tim was a physician and Eric’s younger brother. He’d purpose to give him a call once he returned from his cruise. Tim was the only other person who knew that the accidental drowning printed on Celeste’s death certificate was inaccurate. The truth of what really happened to her and why it had to happen was a bond that kept the trio suffocatingly close.

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Later that night Eric found himself sitting alone at the dining room table finishing a half glass of scotch that he’d lately been reintroducing to his palate on a nightly basis. His thoughts were glued to his wife and her peculiar behavior that had recently developed over the last few weeks. Why now, he wondered. After fourteen years what had triggered this sudden relapse of emotion? Had Helen’s guilt and grief finally expired and deteriorated into insanity? In the first week she’d only begun to make mere mention of their late daughter, something they deliberately refrained from doing for over the past decade. But now she was completely over the edge.

Initially, it provoked Eric, but his anger shifted into something dark and heavy—a lead-like feeling expanding in his gut as the days continued to pass and her delusions increased. Late at night he would catch Helen kissing the foyer wall, speaking to it, and even knocking against it with her fist, saying she was teaching it to communicate. And when she eventually presented the idea of painting it black, Eric downright refused, that is, until her nervous breakdown in the kitchen—plates were broken, chairs upturned, and a glowing red second-degree burn claimed the better part of Eric’s forearm. She apologized and promised that everything would be okay, that

all she needed was to paint the wall and she'd be happy. She'd finally have closure and would never mention Celeste again. Though apprehensive, Eric conceded. He believed her despite the seeming arbitrary nature of it all. But now he regretted it; Helen was living in another world, having grand delusions about Celeste being alive again and somehow existing within the foyer wall.

An ironic chuckle rumbled in Eric's throat at the sudden thought that crept into his head. He knew it was the liquor speaking but what if Helen was right. What if Celeste really did come back in the form of drywall in their modest two-story home. He wondered if it were truly possible, not that her mere existence was in the first place. Eric's polluted amusement was cut short when he realized what this theoretical reincarnation would mean. He swallowed and tiny beads of sweat dampened his face. He was suddenly sick to his stomach.

With a shaky sigh he hoisted himself up out of the chair and began to pass back through the foyer to join Helen in bed. He did so steadily to keep from knocking anything over and paused in place. It was near pitch black, but he didn't need to see the wall to know it was there. Not because he was familiar with his own home, but because he felt a presence—a threatening one like a predator impatiently waiting to approach its prey. He stood perfectly still in perfect silence, giving no heed to the goosebumps breaking across the surface of his skin telling him to run. A soft buzzing sound reverberated in his ears like static and gradually began to grow into a thunderous crescendo until Eric shouted. "Stop!" Quickly he fumbled for the light switch and his gaze bounced around the enclosed room wildly in stifled panic. Of course, no one was there. Just him and that wall exuding a profuse scent of paint like a sensorial malady. The noise had gone but that creeping feeling lingered. He ran a hand through his hair remembering what Helen had said earlier.

Can't you feel her energy? Can't you hear it? He shook his head and whispered to himself, "She's getting into my head. Don't let her. Don't let her." He attempted to ignore the fact that what he'd heard just seconds ago sounded like the utterance of words—a sort of wave of sonic morse code. But the sudden flickering of the light on the foyer wall didn't allow him to ignore it. It winked in intervals of three that seemed to be an intentional echo of the thunderous sound.

"D. A. D. Dad. Dad?" He realized aloud as an alien feeling crept into his heart. He shook his head in denial, sped upstairs, and made a mental note of changing the bulb first thing in the morning.

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Eric rose early the next day, forced awake by a pounding headache. He pressed his hands against his temples and shut his eyes tightly. It felt as if a million atom-sized jackhammers were drilling into his brain. He rolled out of bed with a loud groan and shuffled over to the bathroom with the mind to grab some ibuprofen but stopped in his tracks. It was what stared back at him in the mirror's reflection that arrested his attention. A trail of a coagulated ink black substance leaked from both his nostrils and slid down onto his white t-shirt. He thought it was somehow paint or a nosebleed until he realized he could smell it. He recoiled at the scent of burning metal and wiped the muck away, rolling it between his fingers. It was sticky and solid like thick jelly. It was not the first time he'd seen it, though the last time he did was fourteen years ago.

Eric's eyes stretched wide, and he backed away from his own image. "No," he repeated to himself in denial. "This isn't happening. This isn't real."

However, the black gel and his last night experience rebutted against his disbelief. He turned on his heels and ran out of the room and down the hall, shouting for Helen. He found her downstairs at the kitchen table, her back to him.

“Helen?” He approached her from behind with slowed footsteps and tapped her shoulder. He didn’t realize she was on the phone until she turned her head to him. Her eyes were bloodshot red, and her face was puffy and damp from tears. Eric looked between her and the crumpled-up tissue she held in her other hand. It was soiled with the same substance he had just wiped away from his own nose. An open bottle of Aspirin also sat on the table.

“Okay,” Helen’s voice came out small and weak as she spoke into the receiver, “Thank you for calling, bye.”

Eric sat down next to his wife and his eyes met hers with a knowing gaze, “Who did she take this time?” A question he thought he’d never have to ask again. But the black gel always appeared before a death, and he knew what it meant. They both did. It was a calling card of sorts.

Celeste’s calling card.

“Debby,” Helen managed to croak out before breaking down into a full-on sob and collapsing into her husband’s arms. In silence, Eric rocked her gently and wiped her tears. Debby was Helen’s baby sister and the latest sibling of four she’d long since lost.

Eric’s heart sunk as he fought to hold back his own tears. This was the official proof he needed. Somehow, Celeste was alive again, and though still a child, her abilities were much more potent than they once were. She was an ever-deepening abyss that no longer required her original human body and she seemed to no longer be bound by distance.

“You were right, Helen,” he sniffled. “She’s back. You know what this means...”

Helen pulled away from him and begged, “Please, Eric, no. Not our baby girl. This is our second chance. We can’t lose her again.”

“Don’t act as if Celeste is the only thing we’ve lost. Your parents, mine. Your brothers, my sister, and now Debby. We can’t keep letting our family die. I won’t!”

“And I won’t let you take my child away from me again.”

“Like Celeste took Hailey from us before we could even hold her?” His lips curled into a snarl, “You never talk about Hailey and how she was the first victim of that...That monster! That *thing* is the reason Hailey was stillborn.”

Helen refused to budge, “No. Celeste is not a monster. I won’t let you hurt her.”

“Even though she’s taken everything from you. Everything from us!” He pounded the table with his fist.

He continued, “You gave birth to evil, and it has consumed *everything* we loved. You are just as responsible to put an end to this as I am!”

“She was innocent. She didn’t know any better. She *doesn’t* know any better. We’re her parents. She won’t hurt us. It’s not in her nature to. She’ll stop once she’s done with everyone else. But still, you killed her, and you want to do it again.”

“Listen to yourself. Think about everyone she’s killed. Everyone she *will* kill. Is her life more valuable to you over everything? Helen, please. The more she swallows, the stronger she’ll get—she’ll swallow the world if we let her, and she’ll save us for last to witness it. I refuse to lose you to that.” He reached out his hand and stroked her cheek then pressed his lips to hers.

After pulling away, Helen shook her head sorrowfully and shut her eyes tight. She trembled and clenched her teeth as tears leaked down her cheeks, her face grew redder and redder as if she would explode from an invisible pressure welling up inside of her. Veins popped

at the side of her neck, and she moved her mouth slowly, requiring immense effort to utter five simple words, “Just let me say goodbye.”

He agreed. Helen’s shoulders sagged as she made her way to the foyer while Eric thought up a plan.

The first time was not a physically difficult task, but this time he was completely in the dark. How could he extinguish the life of something that had no body? How could he possibly kill the impossible? Eric thought of the black paint, the static, the presence he felt—the wall. The wall! Destroying it was the only thing that made sense. He rushed to the garage, hoping he’d find the best solution to do so.

Eric’s eyes rummaged through the tools on the wall and lingered on the fire axe from his firefighting days. With ease, he lifted it and held it securely with both hands. It was chipped and dulled, but it would do the job.

With haste he returned to the foyer and gently pried Helen, who was sobbing uncontrollably, away from the wall. He instructed her to go upstairs and placed a headset blaring loud music over her ears.

After she had gone, Eric took no hesitation in greeting the black wall with the blade of the axe. He swung in sideways and downward strokes, automatically, muscles moving by memory. Each time the axe met the wall, a loud thunderous echo assaulted his eardrums. Celeste was screaming out in pain, but the sound didn’t work to disturb Eric, rather it motivated him. He fought through the pressure of pain swelling in his own head as he worked to end his daughter for the second time.

He continued tirelessly until the drywall was reduced to chalky shreds on the floor with only a few skeletal beams exposed. He dropped the axe and fell to his knees, his large body convulsed with muted sobs as pure black tears rolled down his face.

Eventually, he climbed to his feet and headed upstairs to check on Helen. She was balled up on the floor, her back against the bed. She was rocking back and forth, and her own tears matched the color of his. He kneeled to her side, placed his hands on her shoulders and said solemnly, “Let’s go.”

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One week later, Helen awoke early in the morning in her husband’s arms in an unfamiliar room until she remembered they’d been staying at a hotel. She lifted her head off his bare chest and sat on the edge of the bed. Her mind and body felt slow and heavy. The only thoughts she could muster were about Celeste. Mourning her the second time somehow felt even harder. But why was it so hard she wondered. Why couldn’t she be stronger like Eric? Why was it that the culmination of her heart’s pain caused by Celeste was tantamount to the love and mercy she had for her? How could she hold the discordance of both these truths within her?

Helen’s anguish seemed to be an endless hole she was falling deeper and deeper into. She couldn’t help but feel there was no way out other than to give in. For all she had had taken away from the little that remained, this was true for both Eric and Celeste—both being her destroyers and her loves. She didn’t have the strength to fight her way out of the chasm, not anymore. Not again. She closed her eyes, remained still, and steadied her breath. With each inhale and exhale she began to feel lighter and lighter...despite that familiar burnt metallic smell and the black muck trickling down her nose.

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An hour later, Eric awakened in a groggy stupor and saw a blurry image of his wife sitting on the side of the bed. He reached his hand out and stroked her naked back. In that moment, he found its stark whiteness particularly beautiful, like a blank canvas waiting to be colored by his mouth. Her long hair rested below her shoulder blades like sandy brown curtains, and he parted the soft strands with his fingers.

“Helen?” He spoke her name tenderly.

Without turning around, she responded plainly, “Your niece called to let us know Tim died. They found him early this morning in his hotel room. She said his body was wrinkled like someone had sucked the life right out of him.”

“What?” Eric tossed the covers off him and sat up.

“You didn’t kill Celeste, after all.” she continued. Emotion was far from her voice as if she didn’t realize the weight of her words.

Eric’s hands trembled as he reached for his face and the tips of his fingers found the black muck under his nose. It was accompanied by that smell and a searing headache that hadn’t really left since he axed the wall.

Eric’s eyes remained obstinately dry as if they refused to give anymore tears. He placed his grief in the hands of the fiery anger building up inside of him and devised a final plan that he desperately hoped would end this once and for all.

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It wasn’t long before the two arrived back at the house. He had Helen wait in the car and he rushed into the foyer with orange earplugs pressed into his ears. He eyed the remnants of the black wall on the ground and shouted curses at the top of his lungs. He stood there for what felt like hours, his eyes wild as a bloodthirsty animal and chest heaving. It wasn’t until he calmed

that he noticed a shiny glob half the size of a fist peeking out from among the rubble. Eric nudged the gelatinous gray mass with his shoe and realized it was Celeste's heart. There was a large gash in the middle of it, almost severing it into two halves and it was weakly twitching in intervals of three accompanied by a soft wave of sound. She was calling out to her father in one final plea.

"I'm not your dad," Eric sneered spitefully, offering it one last look before turning his attention to the buckets of paint on the floor just a few short feet away from him. "Risk of fire. Highly flammable," he read the warning label aloud.

Within minutes the house was soaked with black paint that it looked like an oil spill occurred in the home—the furniture, curtains, rugs all claimed by liquid darkness. He lit multiple matches all throughout the house starting from the second floor down. It wasn't long before the blaze would consume the property along with what remained of Celeste. Eric made his way back to the car through the garage and upon approaching it he saw that it was empty. Helen was gone but there was a note in the passenger seat:

I never wanted this. It was always you who hated her. You who could only see her as a monstrosity. I will remain her mother. Do not worry. I'll be okay, for there is life on the other side.

Helen's guttural screams erupted from the inside of the house along with Celeste's cosmic voice in a thunderous cacophony that would forever sear itself into Eric by rupturing his eardrums, leaving only an incessant ringing in lieu of all other sound.

His heart and mind begged him to run back into the house, to save his wife. But his body wouldn't allow it. It wasn't until that moment that he realized Helen had always been Celeste's mother more than she'd been his wife. He'd lost before he had lost her, and that stark realization

spread and splintered itself throughout his body like an emotional illness. He thought the feeling would kill him and a greater part of him wished it did.

Nevertheless, he took a deep breath and did the only thing he could. He folded the note, slid it into his back pocket, and hoped Celeste had swallowed Helen before the flames completely did. He pressed his foot on the gas pedal until his surroundings were no longer familiar and until his blackened tears dried.

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Months later, Eric found himself under a particularly beautiful night sky on a cool day.

The distant stars scintillated like diamonds and a shining orb streaked across the sky, leaving a faint trail in its graceful wake. He'd learned from the locals that it was a rare comet that would appear again but only once in his lifetime. It made him think of Hailey and what she could've been, then Celeste and what she was. That tiny baby girl that by the unique nature of her kind suckled on the life forces of others like an all-consuming black hole. Eric wondered if she would come back in another 14 years like revisiting comets, and if she did, he'd be ready as always to do what a parent must for their child.

END