

Static Echoes

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Alan had always liked noise, the neighbours mowing their lawn in the early hours of the morning, the horns of traffic in his commute, the buzzing in his brain that never stopped. Noise didn't leave room for second thoughts; it filled all the gaps between regret and guilt.

Back home the silence was heavy, a dragging feeling pulling through the old crumbling drywall and carpet muffled steps. After his brother David left for college, the rooms seemed wider, all negative space he would never be big enough to fill. David never went back to that house, never completed the picture.

Alan's mother worked at the pharmacy a town over, long hours that seemed to stretch forever. The little room above the kitchen had been his but never felt quite right. Empty and sun-warmed, it tried to choke the youth from him. The dust in the ducts never wavered, and through endless sweltering summers, the sun would beat the tiny space into an oven, its grip tight on his airway. Alan wheezed with allergies, asthma and an ever-present heat that counted his days, stretched on carpeted floor, dissolving noiselessly into the atmosphere. Eventually, when he moved to the furthest city in the furthest state from home, a place that wasn't his brothers, or his mother's, he could breathe again.

The cafe had become Alan's favourite spot. A slice of the world that belonged solely to him. Him and the endless mill of teenagers laughing over whipped cream and businesspeople sipping overpriced foam looking over excel sheets. For all intents and purposes, the place was his. That is how he found himself sitting in the corner booth waiting for the call.

It started with the headaches he had ignored for months, or maybe years. Then fatigue and confusion and the ever-constant buzzing that he could no longer pretend was normal or a product of the city noise. He flew home when his mother died, but he found he couldn't remember his home address or the number for the cabs he had taken every weekend in his teens. Alan stood in the packed church, staring at the pictures all around that someone must have gotten from their living room, and found himself staring back at strangers. A mother and her two sons, one of which was sitting in his office in a faraway city like any other day.

Benign or malignant. Those were his options, and the solemn face of the nurse that relayed them did nothing for his hope. Eventually, memories would return, filling the gaps as if they never left at all, but the static remained. The cafe was his last constant. A place where no one knew his face or his diagnosis

or the gap in his brain where the guilt lived; images of his mother alone in that big echoing house, her last breaths ricocheting off the walls forever.

Like every day, the stout man in the apron steamed milk that screamed in the pitcher, the girl at the counter counted the minutes until her break, and the city spoke in whispers of footsteps and exhaust outside the front window. When the call came, the ringing blended with the tone in his ears. He caught the last vibration, shaking the tabletop, and his hands as he pressed it to his ear.

With all the noise of the city, the heaving bones of high-rises that never slept and interstates that lit the sky, the silence finally came. For the first time in years, he was the only man in the world, back in the echoing skeleton of his childhood home, so small and too big all at once. Alan's brain conjured images, a cacophony of chaos in silent frames dazed and fractured with age. When he was small, the house seemed so big, an endless stretch of blank rooms teetering on the unsteady foundation. Looking at it now, in the misplaced memories of quiet mornings and hushed conversations between David and his mother down the hall, it felt so small. Alan never wondered what happened to his brother, just that he was the ghost sleeping in the unmade twin bed down the hall, a perfectly preserved ecosystem their mother could never disrupt. Looking back, she probably waited for David alongside the rumpled sheets, counting seconds, then days, then years as he carved himself into the west coast. Did she wait the same way when he left?

A car horn honks outside, and the sound rushes back, breaking the stretching forever into a brief pause. In such a big city, Alan thought of months from now, alone with wheezing breaths and no mother to straighten the bedclothes after he's gone.