

The House

—S.L. Howard

NORMALLY EVA LET the dust lay still as a soft cushioning of the harsh reality inside. The windowsill sagged and mocked her. The ceiling laughed at her, dropping flecks of lead paint and plaster onto her head. The holes in the wall watched her suspiciously, following her every move.

A layer of thick dust coated the television and swirled around her when she blew on it. The cloud triggered a body-rattling sneeze from Eva's small frame, tossing her to the ground with its force. She cursed under her breath as she picked herself up.

She stared at the 27 inch television as she wiped the screen. As she eyes her handiwork, deep eyes, beneath crumbled alabaster skin, stared back. She switched the power on and the television glowed blue in anticipation.

Eva remembered they had been excited at first. They had been newlyweds, naive, and moving into their first home. Excited about their wedding money, and their new life, they had gone to a 24-hour store to buy the new television. Eva had skipped into the store, gushing a smile, holding George's hand.

It was midnight, and they walked the electronics department an hour

before deciding. They deliberated, starting to feel each other's nerves grating. Tempers were surmounting flames, waiting to spread their fury. Finally, they had agreed on a sale model, the model she would own until the end. It wasn't the best, but it was better than their old model. They paid for it and quietly made their way to the cold parking lot.

They had gotten it all the way out to the car only to realize that it wouldn't fit in. They had gotten frustrated, and started raising their voices. George had pulled the television out of the box. Then Eva had broken the box down and shoved both the styrofoam and the cardboard into the trunk aggressively. Together they shimmied the shiny new apparatus into the back seat, cursing each other when they had failed to work cohesively.

They had been silent on the drive home, and the silence felt thick in the air. George's anger penetrated Eva's flesh, making her skin crawl. She breathed deeply, and George's brow crunched as his eyes glowered. Both had refused to let it go; they refused to forgive.

The empty house had loomed above them as they struggled up the steps. It was oppressive, it's strong figure

against the street lights. George had grabbed the television, its cord swinging like an angry cat's tail.

He snapped in frustration at every attempt Eva had made to help him. She settled with trying to get the door, but even that upset George. He snapped, "Get the fuck out of the way!" and she did, after slamming the door in his face.

Eva jumped as the doorbell buzzed erratically. She quickly pulled out her favorite movie, and shoved it into the DVD player. She started towards the door. She picked her way through the clutter of the house. Broken picture frames sat on the floor staring at her with their empty eyes, laid to waste amongst the bits of drywall and decayed wood. She kicked a mouse to the side as she walked and dust spooled around her dainty foot. The mouse had once belonged to the, now dormant, computer in the den. No one had used the den in years. Not since George was killed.

Back when they were newly weds, and even before, George had been obsessed with computers. He had spent his days at work with them; he had been a computer programmer. His evenings were spent in the den under their effervescent glow.

He chatted on computer forums most of the time, giving and taking advice on computer languages. Sometimes he would look up silly

videos, and beg Eva to come in and watch them. He would nag her, plead with her, to get up and join him in the den. She always did eventually, even if she was in the midst of something. However, when Eva needed him, he was never there for her.

It had got to the point where Eva had become jealous of the humming beast. George was spending more time with his computer than her, and one day she had confronted him about it. Things had gotten heated, and in his anger he had thrown the keyboard across the room. It had hit the wall, and plaster had bled out from the gash. Eva refused to fix it, and so had George. There had been many nights like that.

She hurried down the hall, the doorbell continued to buzz. It would be her son, Mitchell. Only Mitchell visited her anymore. He never brought the grandchildren. There were five of them, but Eva only knew them through photographs. The same way she had known her son. Eva wasn't insane, she knew the house was no place for children. It was dying, all around her, everyday.

Wiping her brow, she slowly opened the door. Mitchell's face held a smile, weak and taunt, as if it were going to fall at any moment.

"Hey, mom." They hugged briefly.

She ushered him into the dining room; it was the safest room. The wood floor lay as it had when Eva had first come to the house. It was incomplete, missing planks here and there. Bits of glass crunched under their feet. A cool wind swept the room from the recently broken windows, disturbing the dust that had lain dormant for years; it formed a thick fog, which masked the sunlight that filtered in.

The windows were rickety, the wood rotted clear through in most places. A few large glass shards still hung haphazardly like teeth, gnashing and gnawing trying to break free from the frames. She had broken the windows only that morning, carefully picking up the old key board and swinging it by its tail at the glass.

When George was still around Eva had taken great care of the bay windows in the dining room. There used to be angels, colorful glass bottles on the sills, and faux flowers adorning the curtains. In winter they would staple plastic over the windows to keep the cool air out, the windows were never any good at that. They were one hundred years old after all, original to the house.

That first year Eva had labored away at the windows trying to keep the house warm. When her hand began aching after the first three sets of windows, she moaned and fought

back tears. George never looked up from the television, never offered to help, never asked if she was all right, and never said thank you. She never forgot that.

She went to the cupboard in the kitchen and removed two cups. The dishes were the only objects to escape the dust because they were tucked away safely in their dark chambers. She made tea and returned to Mitchell. She sat a cup in front of him.

She eyed him, knowing his true motives. She decided to delay the inevitable though. She hated arguing over tea. "How are the kids?"

"They're fine. Kyle's in high school now, so's Gwen," he continued to prattle, until his voice died down as the silence beckoned. They sipped their tea, waiting. The television was playing in the living room. They could see the screen from where they were. Neither of them paid it any mind. Mitchell's face contorted as he thought of how to approach the inevitable conversation. A new breeze climbed into the small room, eliciting a sneeze from Mitchell as a frail tendril of dust wiggled its way up to his nose. Eva's face was blank, staring at the peeling jade paint.

"Mom, are you listening?"

She shook her head, and looked at her son's face. He looked exactly like

HOWARD

George.

"I don't want to talk about this again." She waved a dismissive hand at him.

"I don't care. I am having this conversation." He looked even more like his father now, he even sounded like him. He continued, "You need to go to a nursing home. If I have to I can go through the courts."

It wasn't a threat; Eva could see that.

"I am not leaving. This," she waved her hand towards the dilapidated house, "is all I have left..."

He furrowed his brow and bit his lip, just like his father used to.

"Mom, I know that this is all you have," he leaned across the table and clasped her hand, "but *let it go*."

Eva prepared to say something, anything, but was stopped by a sneeze. The same wisp of dust that had found Mitchell had finally found it's way to her nose too.

She couldn't leave now, it was to late for that. She'd spent to long under the house's oppressive frame, so long in fact that she may as well be another dying fixture in the house.

She had almost left after the incident. After George died it would have

been easy to leave, but she didn't. She had so many dreams for her future, so many paths she had wanted to try, yet she never did anything with herself. She let it fall to rot, just like the house.

There had been a terrible storm. It had ripped trees from their roots, knocked power lines down, electric meters from houses, broken widows with flailing cords; a vast amount of damage, all in under a half hour. It was late, Eva had been detained at work for longer than she had expected. When she walked into the house she already knew what happened, she could smell death from the moment she had opened the door. Eva should have stopped in her tracks then and called the police, but she had kept moving, silently, through the house as a ghost.


As she made it to the den she put her hand to the door, and slowly turned the forlorn knob. The door creaked in it's familiar way and blood spilled out onto her feet. She threw up on the floor and watched her vomit, with a sick twisting and turning like a strange waltz, mingle with his vibrant blood.

Later the police would tell her it was some sort of freak accident, the storm had blown the window out and sent the shards flying through the air with enough velocity to do what they did. Eva wasn't sure she believed that though, she wasn't sure

what to believe, but she did know that she would never forget what she had seen in that den.

him, "It's as though you were bound to her in some way, as I am to you, as she was to Miller."

He had been impaled against the wall, keyboard still clutched in his hands. His eyes, his eyes were the worst; fixed in a frightened dying gaze. That gaze that she had seen so many times before, the same terrified pleading eyes he had given her every time she had tried to leave him. The realization sinking in had brought her to the floor with its force, her hands in the blood. She stared at her hands, blood saturating every pore, and knew her hands wouldn't ever come clean.

"As every human being is to something or other," he replied. 

She looked at her son. His eyes were sincere, and she knew he meant well; but he didn't understand.

"Mitchell, I am not going to leave here." His face flushed, ready to reiterate his plea, but she raised her hand to halt him, "I want to finish the rest of my days here. Don't interfere, please."

His face sprung tears, and he pleaded with her to change her mind, but Eva was a tall mountain refusing to bend to the wind. Finally he subsided; Eva suspected he was making plans for court, but she didn't care. She knew that she wasn't incompetent. She shifted her gaze to the television.

A man sat on a chair, while a woman watched him intensely. She said to