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# The Vanishing Room at Mercer House

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## Introduction

The first thing Claire Mercer noticed was how the house breathed. The wind off the gray Atlantic pressed against the clapboard and sighed back through the keyholes, a patient rhythm that made the old Victorian seem less abandoned than asleep. When she fit the brass key into the front door—the one her aunt had labeled with a strip of masking tape and tidy handwriting—it resisted for the length of a held breath, then turned with a yielding click. The scent that exhaled was layered: salt and damp wood, lemon oil from furniture nobody had polished in months, a thread of old perfume caught in the velvet curtains. Mercer House received her the way a long memory does, without hurry and without forgiveness.

Light spilled through the stained-glass transom in bruised colors—plum, sea-green, a tired gold—and laid them across the foyer tiles. Floorboards announced her steps with the honest groan of age. In the parlor, the wallpaper lifted at the seams like pages beginning to turn. Radiators ticked as if they were catching themselves mid-thought. Somewhere up in the bones of the rafters, a loose length of copper pipe answered the wind with a soft clink. It was not a haunted house in the theatrical sense; there were no obvious chills or slamming doors. But there was a watchfulness to it, an attentive pause in the corners, the sense of past inhabitants leaning in from the periphery and waiting to hear what she would do.

Hours earlier, at the will reading, the lawyer's voice had been smooth as the bottom of a worn river stone. Claire had kept her face still while he said the words she already knew: Mercer House and its contents were hers. Across the glossy conference table, Jonah Mercer's jaw worked as if he were grinding down a shard of glass. He said little, and what he didn't say poured into the room like weather. Among the documents slid toward her was an old household inventory—a practical list, rooms and furnishings scrawled in her aunt's looping hand. Parlor. Conservatory. East bedroom. Hall closet. And then, halfway down the second page, a line that tightened Claire's grip on the paper: "room that no one remembers." No location. No description. Only that peculiar phrase and a question mark, as if the house itself had muttered it and her aunt had written it down.

Now, inside Mercer House with the tide pushing dusk against the windows, Claire followed the logic of the rooms and found the places where that logic failed. The hallway narrowed and then widened again for no good reason. A section of banister ended three balusters too soon and resumed as though embarrassed. On the second-floor landing, plaster that should have been flush held a faint seam under the paint, a hairline the color of old milk that curved toward a corner and stopped. She pressed her fingertips there. The wall felt cool and steady under her skin, the way a calm pulse

hides in a wrist.

The town had greeted her with politeness that refused to make eye contact. Mara at the café had given her a cinnamon roll and a hug and a warning glance all at once. People asked about her drive, about her son, about the weather and the house, and then, as if stepping neatly around a puddle, they veered from a name everyone knew and no one spoke. Lily Hargrove hung in the space between sentences, a chord never struck. Even the Mayor had sent a note on thick cream paper offering condolences and “privacy while you settle in,” words that read like kindness and landed like a caution. In a place this small, silence isn’t absence. It’s choreography.

Claire dropped her bag by the hall tree and listened for her son’s steady breathing from upstairs. The boy slept hard after the long ferry ride, his small body curled under a quilt that smelled faintly of cedar. She felt the old ache of protectiveness spread through her chest, the one that had steered her out of her marriage and back into this weathered town, the one that throbbed now at the idea of secrets with edges sharp enough to cut. The house, for all its grandeur, was made up of narrow places—closets within closets, cupboards with double backs, stair treads that rang hollow in two different keys. It was a structure built to keep and to contain.

She found the inventory again and read the line a dozen times until the words lost their shape. Room that no one remembers. Her aunt had been meticulous, not prone to whimsy. If she’d written it, it meant something. Claire pictured the older woman at a small desk in the back parlor, glasses low on her nose, noting the ordinary: two wingback chairs, one chipped jardinière, six teaspoons tarnished to the color of dusk. And then that strangeness, slipped in like a dare. On the margin, a faint crease smudged by an eraser trailed off toward a penciled arrow that had been rubbed nearly clean. The paper crackled when Claire turned it, as if relieved to be handled.

Beyond the tall windows, the ocean kept up its necessary work. The house answered with small, companionable noises. A sash rattled. A hinge settled. In the dining room, a patch of afternoon lingered in the glass-front cabinet, honeying the china into something almost warm. Claire waited for the surge of grief for her aunt that hadn’t yet come, and when it didn’t, she felt something like guilt braid itself with resolve. If Mercer House had held the family together, it had also been a place where certain stories were told so often they hardened, and others were folded and placed out of sight.

She stood on the second-floor landing again, at the seam in the wall, at the place where the house’s math didn’t add up. The town’s choreography pressed at the windows; the sea pressed at the eaves; her own history pressed at her sternum. Claire pressed her palm to the paint and said, quietly, to no one and to the house itself, “I remember you.” The wind shifted, drawing the scent of rain through the hallway. Somewhere beyond the plaster, something as small as a flake of gypsum let go and

fell.

The house had learned to swallow sound, but it had not learned to forget. Tomorrow, she would begin measuring, knocking, mapping what was here and what was missing. Tonight, she listened to Mercer House breathe and thought of a girl whose name the town refused to speak, a girl whose absence had become part of the architecture. In the hush between the wind and the radiators, there was the faintest rasp—like a breath taken and held—waiting for someone to ask the right question.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Arrival

The morning after her arrival, Claire awoke to the specific, persistent cry of a gull circling just beyond her bedroom window. It was a sound that had been the soundtrack of her childhood summers, a raw, insistent call that scraped against the edges of memory. She lay for a moment, listening, the unfamiliar weight of her aunt's feather duvet pressing her into the antique mattress. The room itself was a study in faded floral wallpaper and dark mahogany, the air cool with the lingering scent of old linen and sea salt. It wasn't her room, not yet, but already the house was claiming her, seeping into her bones.

Her son, Leo, was still asleep in the twin bed she'd pulled into the room for the night. His small hand was tucked under his cheek, his brow furrowed even in slumber, as if wrestling with dreams too large for his five years. Claire brushed a stray lock of dark hair from his face, a tender gesture that settled the flutter in her own chest. Moving back to Havenwood had been for him, primarily. A quieter life, a place with roots, far from the concrete demands and fractured schedules of the city. She wanted him to know the smell of pine and ocean, the rhythm of tides, things that had anchored her own tumultuous youth before she'd bolted for college and never looked back.

Downstairs, the kitchen was a bright, airy space despite its age, a surprising contrast to the darker, more formal parlor. Sunlight poured through a bank of paned windows, illuminating dust motes dancing in the air and warming the checkered linoleum floor. The copper pots hanging above the island gleamed softly, and the scent of yeast from yesterday's baking still clung faintly to the air. Claire put on a kettle for tea, the whistling sound momentarily cutting through the pervasive quiet of the house. It was a different kind of quiet than the city's, not an absence of noise but a hum of ancient settling, of timbers shifting and glass expanding, a conversation between the house and the elements.

As the water boiled, she retrieved the old inventory list from where she'd left it on the kitchen table. The paper felt fragile under her fingers, a relic. "Room that no one remembers." The words still snagged at her, a pebble in a shoe. She traced the faint, smudged arrow on the margin, trying to decipher where it pointed. Her aunt, Evelyn, had been a woman of precise habits, a librarian by trade, who categorized and cataloged everything from rare books to her spice rack. Such an ambiguous entry was entirely out of character. It was as if Evelyn had wrestled with the description and given up, defeated by a space that defied definition.

After a quick breakfast of toast and jam with a sleepy Leo, Claire decided to tackle the second floor first. She needed to get a sense of the layout, map out the rooms, start

making plans for repairs and renovations. Her interior design background kicked in, already mentally stripping wallpaper, envisioning lighter paint colors, updating fixtures. It was a comfortable, familiar process, a way to impose order on the unknown. Leo, armed with a toy car, trundled behind her, making engine noises that echoed strangely in the high-ceilinged hallway.

The second floor held three bedrooms, a bathroom, and a small linen closet. Everything was as expected, if a little dated. The master bedroom, Evelyn's, overlooked the ocean, its bay window a perfect perch for watching the waves. The two guest rooms were smaller, both still holding the ghost of past visitors in their pressed bedspreads and unread books on nightstands. But then she came to the back of the house, where the main hallway narrowed. And there it was, the faint seam in the plaster she'd noticed last night. It ran along the wall, almost imperceptible, a hairline crack painted over countless times but never truly disappearing.

She ran her hand along it, the plaster cool and smooth. It felt solid, though. No give, no hollow sound. But the architectural impossibility of it nagged at her. The exterior of the house was a simple rectangle, with a small bump-out for the conservatory on the ground floor. Looking at the back wall from the outside, there should have been a window, a bedroom, something. Instead, it was just... unbroken wall. Inside, where the seam was, there should logically be a room. But there wasn't.

"Mommy, what's in here?" Leo asked, his voice small, pointing a stubby finger at the wall. He had a child's unerring instinct for the unusual.

"Nothing, sweetie," Claire said, perhaps a little too quickly. "Just a wall."

Leo wasn't convinced. He pressed his ear to it. "I hear something."

Claire knelt, putting her own ear to the spot. Nothing. Just the faint thrum of the house itself. She gave him a reassuring smile, then stood, her gaze lingering on the anomaly. It wasn't just a crack; it was an outline, a ghost of an old doorway, perhaps. Or something else entirely. The thought sent a prickle of unease up her spine.

Later, while Leo was absorbed in constructing a block tower in the sunny conservatory, Claire returned to the second floor. She tapped along the seam again, more deliberately this time. It really was solid. No hollow sound to suggest a hidden cavity. Yet the exterior of the house contradicted the interior. She tried to think like her aunt, methodically. If there was a room, where would its entrance be?

She moved slowly, checking every wall, every closet, every nook and cranny on that side of the house. She pulled down old boxes from the attic access panel, scattering dust motes into the air. Nothing. It was as if the house had simply swallowed the space whole.

Frustrated, she went back to the old inventory list. She spread it out on the dusty floorboards, tracing the words again. Room that no one remembers. What if it wasn't a physical room? What if it was a metaphorical space, a memory her aunt had tried to categorize but couldn't? But the practical nature of the list argued against such poetic interpretation.

She decided to check the exterior again. Stepping out onto the overgrown back lawn, she looked up at the second story. The clapboard siding was weathered, but intact. No sign of a filled-in window, no obvious patching where a door might have been bricked up. The house looked perfectly normal, a sturdy, if slightly neglected, Victorian. Yet the interior architectural puzzle persisted.

Her gaze drifted lower, to the foundation of the house. Ivy clung thickly to the stone, a verdant blanket. As she moved closer to inspect it, a glimmer of something caught her eye beneath a loose piece of siding near the ground. She knelt, tugging at the resistant vine. Behind a warped baseboard, half-buried in the damp earth and fallen leaves, was a small, worn child's shoe. It was a simple canvas sneaker, faded blue, with a single untied shoelace. It was too small for Leo, too old to be recent. And as Claire picked it up, a sense of cold dread, sharp and sudden, pierced through her. It was a child's shoe, tucked away as if forgotten, or perhaps hidden, and she knew, with a certainty that chilled her to the bone, that it did not belong.

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