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Andrew Cominelli
University of New Orleans

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Hovel
By Andrew Cominelli

The mother and the daughter sit at the same table they've been sitting at since the daughter was a child, a table scarred, and cheap in the first place, but made magisterial by its years of silent witness to their family's shared life.

The daughter picks at the border of a quarter-sized divot worn into the table's surface. The daughter comes to the mother's house on this date, every year. They never make a plan beforehand; the daughter just comes. The kitchen is always lit by the same harsh light and oppressed by the same greasy old appliances. Decades-old dirt lies impacted in the dimples of the floor's linoleum.

The daughter is tired of doing this every year, of coming here on the anniversary of her brother's death and sitting over an unsugared Tetley tea and not talking about it, not even referring to the calendar's date or the reason for her visit, both of them knowing full well but saying nothing about it. The visit is always the same. An hour or two hours of a vigil that consists of talking about anything but him, as the table groans softly under their elbows and the generations of dirt stare up from the floor. The daughter believes he did it in the bathroom of this house, but she was so young that she does not remember, and not once in forty years has she ever felt able to ask.

The daughter picks at the divot and watches her mother's finger growing like a tree root through the handle of a floral teacup.

Over the years there have been people and events about which the mother has said, "We don't talk about that." But then there is *this*, a subject which the daughter does not need to be warded away from. There is not even a language for this lack of talk, not even a settled-upon way of talking about not talking about it. They never say his name.

The mother holds her tea with both hands and describes a neighbor's new car with thinly veiled scorn. The daughter picks at the divot's edges and nods her head.

The daughter does not remember anything. Instead, she has had to conjure her own images from that day, but they are false images. It is maddening to have only this privately made-up version, bloody tubwater and unseen screaming, and it is maddening how it can slip into the daughter's mind and convince her. A false cinematic that plays and replays, decades-old now. It is maddening each time she catches herself believing it.

The mother cups both hands around the teacup and the appliances hum.

Maybe, the daughter now thinks, and not for the first time, maybe it did happen as she imagines it. Maybe bloody water did slosh over the tub's lip and weep down the sides like the tub itself was having a good cry. But most likely it did not. She does not even remember him. He is woven into the falseness, lost in it: a false version of him haunts her false memory.

The mother is saying how they've changed the layout at Stop 'n' Shop, how they've put the produce on the other side of the store. The daughter, though she has barely been listening, agrees with the mother that this makes very little sense, that they should put the produce back where it's always been.

In the daughter's false cinematic, her mother's shocked face is the face of another woman entirely, a woman of different capacities than the one that sits here yearly with her finger sprouting through the teacup's handle. In the daughter's mind, it is a completely different woman who collapses beside the tub, trying to shriek away the horror as the ability to face it ever again starts already to slip away from her.

Each year her mother's finger is the same and each year the questions locked inside the daughter are the same and each year the daughter fails to find the will to ask. To just ask. Each year the dirt pressed into the floor is a year older than it was the year before.

The appliances hum softly. The blood weeps down the sides of the tub in the daughter's mind's eye and a face she only knows from old photographs lolls in shadow while all along the woman across the table holds the real version deep within herself. The mother talks and the daughter picks at the table's divot and nods along until finally, without thinking, the daughter interrupts with a remark about the state of the kitchen floor, the awful state of this dirt-impacted floor. She uses the word *filthy*. She asks the mother how she can live in such a *hovel*. The daughter's voice rises, and shakes. She declares that the floor is enough to make *anybody* half-decent sick to their *stomach*. The mother nods along, not wanting to fight about it. And the daughter, sick of coming here every year to drink tea and pick the divot and not ask, sick of not knowing and not being able to ask, now expresses her total shock at the family's plan to gather here for Thanksgiving, here in this *hovel*, because that's what it is, a *hovel*, a *hovel* that would demoralize and depress any self-respecting family. Which is something, the daughter now muses, that maybe after all they aren't: a self-respecting family.

And as the daughter proceeds to revise the holiday plans for a new location, as she considers aloud the calls that will have to be made and the

logistics in need of speedy correction, the mother nods along, in complete agreement, remaining silent except to say softly, “Whatever you want to do,” and looks at her own fingers spread carefully on the table like antiques displayed for auction, heirlooms drained of memory, already become secondhand.