

Echo

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I. Alexandra

The echo phenomenon lasted for three years. It didn't occur everywhere—it was primarily an event in the western hemisphere, and was isolated to random regions. We called them "echoes" because we were afraid to admit what they were.

For the first several months, society was hit with intermittent waves of panic. There were reports on social media that eventually became stories in the news, but the stories were difficult to corroborate since the echoes appeared impervious to photography and video. They were complete people, translucent in bright light, incapable of making a sound. They walked through walls, waded to us, climbed into our cars, and appeared suddenly in our homes. The most striking thing about them was how happy they were—they were thrilled to be noticed. Many of them were astonishingly polite, demurely turning away when we dressed or stepping outside in our intimate moments.

After the first year, they became part of our daily rhythms. The old saying is true—you can get used to anything. Echo tourism became a big thing, and travelers came from Japan and India just to see them. The Internet filled with stories of them, ranging from the erotic to the tender. We grew to expect them, and even be mildly annoyed by them.

I first became aware of her at work. It was one of those hectic days where the phone rang constantly and my inbox seemed to fill itself as quickly as I cleared it. I was anxious to go to lunch, sit in the park, and read. I went to the restroom with a copy of *Swann's Way* tucked under my arm, and that's where I saw her. At first it was startling—she was a dark-featured woman in her thirties who happened to be in the men's room. Her hair was tied neatly back, and she wore a simple dress with a sash at the waist. She stood next to the sink, repeatedly waving her hand beneath the soap dispenser, a frustrated look on her face.

She noticed me as I approached her, and suddenly looked shy. "What are you doing?" I said, but she couldn't hear me. She said something I couldn't hear, but after many gestures and pantomimes, I realized she was asking how the soap dispenser worked. I took a receipt from my pocket, turned it over on the sink counter, and drew a little diagram. Beam of light. Sensor. Circuit. Timer. She looked at me with a kind of blank wonder, and silently shrugged. I passed my hand under the soap dispenser as she watched, fascinated. I never looked at soap dispensers the same way after that.

For weeks, she joined me for lunch and read over my shoulder. It was strangely comforting to have her there, as enrapt by Proust as I was, smiling when I smiled, sharing my quizzical look when a passage was dense or confusing. One afternoon, she was gone. I worried that something had happened to her or that she had lost interest, but when I got home that evening, she was there waiting for me.

Sign language was her idea. At first I thought she knew it already—she motioned her hands in ways that I understood as signing. When I found a visual tutorial online, I realized that she knew nothing about sign language and was aping it to give me the idea. Together, we learned the alphabet and simple words—man, woman, cat, sleep, alive, dead, sky, earth, alone. That's how I learned her name: Alexandra Marks. She sat with me as I searched the Internet for her, finding first her biography (born 1894, died 1918), then a photo of her, then her history as a pianist. She was a child prodigy, adept with piano, guitar, and violin, and a promising composer. *Music*, I signed to her.

I miss it, she replied.

John and Vivian, my next-door neighbors, were plagued by the echoes of a middle-aged couple who appeared to have died naked. They were large people, and the apparitions of their bodies seemed to consist of a variety of circles and flaps that all moved independently. They smiled

constantly, and had a habit of turning up for each meal. Toast and coffee with a side of naked balding man who seems so happy to see you. Chicken salad sandwich with a side of naked woman with an odd-looking perm and frighteningly large breasts. I told my neighbors about sign language, and after some effort, the echo-couple introduced themselves as the Applebaums from Eau Claire, Wisconsin. They weren't terribly interested in discussing their lives or their shared fate as naked phantoms, but they were interested in milk. It was one of the first words they wanted to learn (a pumping of the fist, like milking a cow), and whenever milk appeared in the house, they became strangely excited. John once told me in confidence that he would sometimes go to the kitchen late at night, take out the carton of milk, and drink straight from it, slowly and with great relish, while the Applebaums watched.

I couldn't give music back to Alexandra. We were separated by some invisible wall that didn't permit the passage of sound or sense. Sometimes she'd mention a piece of music, and I'd find a YouTube video where the musicians' movements were clear enough to follow. She loved Itzhak Perlman, and her entire body would move as she watched his fingers and bow working the violin.

Is music what you miss the most? I asked.

Yes, she said. And the body. And oranges.

I love oranges, I said.

Will you eat an orange for me? she asked.

It won't make you sad?

No, not sad. It's like watching you hold a fire in your hands, then take it apart and eat it.

This became a regular ritual for us. I'd dig my thumbs into the skin of an orange, and slowly pull the peel away. If the orange had a thick pith, I'd take a pocket knife and trim it away to reveal the vibrant flesh beneath. I'd pry the orange in half, separating segments and eating them slowly. Sometimes while watching me, she'd close her eyes and raise her arms to play an invisible violin.

One morning, I woke to her sitting on the bed and looking sadly down at me. *What's wrong?* I asked. She used a sign I didn't know, gathering her hands at her chest and drawing them apart

like opening a shirt. I got out of bed, opened my laptop, and looked it up.

Fading away.

What do you mean?

Fading away. She repeated.

Are you OK?

She raised a hand and squeezed it in front of her face. *Orange.* The morning sun was streaming through the window, streaming through her hair, dress, hands, face.

I existed, she said, and then she was gone.

It has been four years since the echo phenomenon ended. No one knows if they're still here with us, or if they've disappeared completely. No one is entirely sure why it happened at all, or why it ceased to happen. We only know that it happened, like a riddle whose answer is unknowable. For a time, we were all alive together. Now it's something we don't talk about, unless it's to make some off-color joke or tell a salacious story. But our therapists and poets and priests all know this secret gravity that pulls at us, how we had the past again and lost it again. For three years, we were never lonely, and now we are relentlessly alone.

I go to work, and sit outside and read, alone. I lie in bed alone, and the bed is the size of a great savannah. I sleep alone and wake up alone. When I'm lonely, I turn to oranges. I peel them open with great care and eat them slowly, segment by segment, letting them fill and lighten my body, in case she can see me.

II. Martin

I chose my death. I was middle-aged with no hope of marriage, no children, not much income to speak of, just the house. And I hated the house. It was my mother's, and when she died in her sleep, it became my mine. My world and my cage.

I'm not sure when I made the plan, but I remember the moment I knew I'd see it through. It was when the dentist told me I needed dentures, and even if I couldn't afford them, he'd have to pull all my teeth. That was the moment I knew there was no hope for me. I was destined to grow old rapidly and without grace. Not long after, I

lined the bottom of the oven with towels, turned on the gas, and laid across the door.

It didn't take long. I looked down to see my body plank-straight, face streaked with hollow tears. Well before neighbors burst in to kill the gas and found my bare feet splayed across the kitchen floor, I had stepped out of my body and walked to the window to see a cardinal land in a mulberry branch, call out to some imagined love, and disappear in a red emanation. I realized I was free, finally free of expectations, free of lust and hunger, free of the lonely body.

But not of the house.

All at once, I was stripped from every room. With no one to claim my remains, the city carried my body away. I said goodbye to my bad teeth, my long yellow fingers, and those flat black eyes. After that, others came to haul off my mother's furniture, the simple bed, the absurdly ornate desk and dresser. I wished they would turn on the radio one last time, so I could see its dial light up like a private moon. I tried to climb into the wardrobe to see if they would carry me out with it, and then on the sofa, and then the kitchen table. In the end, nothing was left but the cruft of my life — an old ticket stub, empty cigarette packs, some bottle caps. Sunlight streamed in through the shadeless windows, but I couldn't feel it. Boys played jacks on the sidewalk, but I couldn't hear them. A neighbor lady stopped and looked at me, and I waved eagerly. But she was looking through me, into the abruptly cavernous house.

It remained cavernous for eight years.

The first family to move into the house was young. The husband and wife weren't yet thirty, and their three children, two boys and a girl, were small and inexhaustible. They shouted, jumped, sang, and ran so fiercely that I could see pictures shaking on the walls. I couldn't feel it or hear it, but I could see it. The children were streaks of green and yellow light, their voices rising out of them in multi-colored balloons.

The husband drank too much and often fell asleep in front of the television. Televisions were new when I died, and I spent hours sitting with him on the couch, fascinated by the imagery and

movement. *Gunsmoke* was my favorite, and on Saturday nights we'd sit watching it, me transfixed by the action, and him drinking beer after beer.

In their second year in the house, the youngest boy fell ill and died suddenly. He took to bed, grew weak and feverish, and was gone within a matter of days. The mother was inconsolable, and went to bed and stayed there for over a month. The father drank and drank, slept next to his wife when he could, but over time slept mostly on the couch. I stood over the boy and watched him fade, that light diminishing and turning brown. When he was gone, he suddenly appeared next to me. I looked at him, surprised and overjoyed at some company, someone who could see me and know me. But he stretched his little arms as though he'd just awakened, and vanished in a mist.

They moved out a few months later. The mother and children left first, and the father stayed in the house alone for several weeks. I'm not sure why he was there, but he stayed after the electricity had been shut off, sitting on the living room floor and drinking in the dark. The day he finally left, he placed a greeting card on the floor of the boy's bedroom. It was sealed in an envelope with the name "Joey" written on it. I tried to follow him out of the house, but again, the walls held me. I stared at that card for a long time, trying to will it open, desperate to know what it said.

So it went, year after year, decade to decade. No one stayed longer than a few years. I often wondered if they could sense me, if the dark cloud of my life had become the dark cloud of the house. Color television and electric percolators. Thick glossy magazines and strange fabrics that shimmered and wouldn't wrinkle. Wars and rumors of wars. Everything I learned about the world came to me through newspapers, and I'd often sit at a kitchen table with the resident family and read over someone's shoulder.

World-destroying bombs and a man on the moon. Presidents and leaders, riots and assassinations. Plagues and miraculous cures. The fall of a wall that I didn't even know was built.

And then nothing. The old man who lived in the house in the late eighties moved out, and it stood empty for years. Occasionally someone would come through—appraisers, I think, or realtors—

but it steadily gathered dust. It was—literally—a haunted place, full of nothing but roaches, dust, and me. It was maddening to know nothing more about the world than what I could see through the windows—cars getting bigger or smaller, the wild clothes of children, some occasional commotion.

All at once, a demolition crew came in. Everything happened with a blinding swiftness—they tore out the walls and floors, put in new wiring and insulation, rebuilt the interior, and painted everything. It looked like an entirely different house, the kitchen less dank, the living room seemingly more spacious. During the renovation, one of my mother's old brooches fell out of a hollow in a bedroom wall. From the same hollow, a tiny army figure that must have belonged to the boy tumbled out. I scarcely had time to wonder how they got in the wall before they were swept up with other debris.

A couple moved in, young and beautiful. They had computers, which looked like a kind of magic to me. It took me some time to get over how fantastic those machines were and finally understand even a little of their capabilities. I followed them through the house day after day, grateful for the company but mystified by their habits. They would often sit in the same room together and not talk or look at each other, spending hours staring at these little windows of light. They had strange exercise routines. Every morning, the woman would place vegetables into a machine and they would come out as a drink. The man appeared to be having an affair with another man, but the woman appeared to know about it. They seemed altogether unstable to me, and I gave them two years before they moved out.

I was sitting on their coffee table contemplating their strangeness when it happened. The man leapt up with a look of abject terror and ran out of the room, while the woman sat staring at me. They could see me.

Their names were Sean and Hailey. Once we all recovered from our shock and surprise, we learned a great deal about each other. In the early days, I could only answer yes or no questions—they would write these questions on paper and I would nod or shake my head. One day, Hailey came home with magnetic letters and numbers that she stuck on the icebox. From then on, they'd ask me a

question and I'd spell out the answer by pointing at letters. Even then, my answers were brief. Death makes you deaf and laconic.

When did you die? *1950*

How did you die? *OVEN*

Where are you buried? *DONT NO*

Why can't you leave the house? *DONT NO*

What is your name? *MARTIN*

The letters made the kitchen hauntable again. I hadn't been there in years and had a superstitious fear of it, but now it was a place of communication. There was such joy in having a name again. In the morning, Sean developed the comical habit of coming downstairs, throwing his arms wide, and mouthing *Martin!* Soon, Hailey did the same. Pat, Sean's apparent lover, would do a strange little dance as he mouthed my name. It was disconcerting but endearing.

Pat was especially obsessed with why I couldn't leave the house. He showed me stories of others like me wandering streets and flying in airplanes. The three of them had several seemingly passionate conversations about me, and I eventually understood that Sean didn't want Pat telling me things that might hurt my feelings.

Pat thought it was all in my head.

I became obsessed with leaving the house. Pat consulted every head shrinker and witch doctor he could find, but there was no definitive key to my prison. I conducted a methodical survey of the walls, floors, and ceilings, pushing and pressing. There were a few moments where I thought I might be pushing through, but nothing came of it. I began to suspect that Pat was right—the barrier between the world and me felt like complete terror, like my mother screaming. When I pressed against a wall, all the weight and sadness and empty stupidity of my lost life pressed back.

Meanwhile, Hailey became pregnant and Sean got some sort of promotion that required him to wear a suit and tie. Their clothes and food became nicer. They were always welcoming to me, but we slowly spent less time together. The wonder of talking to the dead had become pedestrian, and I was surprised to discover that I missed being

alone. One night, as I was contemplating this, I pressed my hand against the back door and it passed through. I stared in amazement as I moved the hand in and out, unable to push any farther. My desire to be alone was stronger than my fear of whatever was beyond the house. I had escaped the body, and soon I would escape this place.

Not long after that, I began to fade.

The dead knew it well before the living. When I was visible, I felt different. There was a vibration to me, like the warm hum of vacuum tubes in a radio. And there was also a kind of raw thirst, a dim sensation not entirely unpleasant. (How I loved to watch the living drink milk and imagine that I was drinking it, that it could somehow soothe and calm this barren, burning feeling.) When the fading began, it was like the light slowly going out of a room. Like a cloud passing over, and then darkening. I knew something was changing, and then I knew something was wrong. And then I could no longer press a hand through the door.

Hailey took a deepening interest in me. I think it was the sadness etched on my face. She sat with me on the couch, running a hand over her round belly, regarding me carefully. She brought me into the kitchen, and on the message board, wrote:

What do you want more than anything?

I looked at her, and pointed at the letters. *LEAVE HOUSE*

She gave a slow, grave nod, and looked at me with a sense of definite purpose. I looked at her curiously, and she nodded again.

I faded while they were sleeping. Pat was on the couch, sleeping with his mouth open, and I tried in vain to wake him. A wall of gray ice slowly grew between us, and I sat on the arm of the couch, stricken. That raw sensation disappeared, and the hum of the living grew distant and vanished altogether. In the morning, the three of them went room to room looking for me. They searched for over an hour, then finally sat at the kitchen table with a pot of coffee. Hailey said something—I think she suggested that maybe I'd just found my way out of the house. All at once, Sean began to cry.

They moved out not long after the baby was born. They spent their remaining time in the house acting as though I could see them, which of course I could. They removed everything from the house but the television, which they left turned on for me. "I love you," I whispered in each of their ears in my silent voice.

A week after they'd left, Sean came back. He pinned a large note to the living room wall that read:

Dear Martin:

We have decided to tear down this house. You are free.

Your friends,

Hailey and Sean and Pat (and Elizabeth)

Alongside the note, he posted a photograph of a cemetery plot. It included a small headstone with my name and the dates of my birth and death. "I existed," I whispered in Sean's ear in my silent voice.

The demolition was methodical. The crew came early in the mornings and stayed late, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes as they disassembled my mother's house brick by brick. Here is the room where my mother died, and where Joey died. Here is the room where Elizabeth was conceived. Here is where I watched television with that man as he drank himself into the dark. Here is the window where I watched the world go on without me. Here is the room where I died.

Here is the sky.

The doors are gone now. The front wall and most of the back wall are gone. I'm standing by the ghost of the front door and looking up at the stars. There are fewer than I remember, but the sky is dotted with airplanes flashing like meteors, like omens. Maybe I can leave this place. Maybe I can find Sean and Hailey. Maybe I am more than this house, more than I was.

Here I go.