

The Empty House

By

K. J. Walston

219 Altamonte Bay Club Cir APT
202
Altamonte Springs, FL 32701
kwema87@gmail.com
703-217-2182

FADE IN:

INT. FARM HOUSE - ALTON'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

ALTON (6), awake in the dark, stares unblinking toward the door, his breaths shallow.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Alton, cautious, leans out of his room and looks down the hall toward the open doorway at the end.

He tiptoes toward it across the hardwood floor.

INT. PARENTS' BEDROOM - NIGHT

MOTHER sleeps with her back to the door. FATHER, bathed in moonlight, sleeps on his back.

Alton leans in close to Father's face.

ALTON
There's a white man in Marlene's
room.

Father's eyes fly open. He leaps out of bed to the closet where he grabs a shotgun from the high shelf.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Father surges toward the darkened bedroom across from Alton's.

INT. MARLENE'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Father flips on the light and raises the gun to his shoulder.

The light wakes MARLENE (3) curled up under her yellow blanket. She stirs awake, whimpers.

Father searches behind the low dresser. Opens the closet: some toys in boxes sit on the floor and an older girl's Sunday dress hangs neglected in the back.

Mother hurries to Marlene, soothes her, while Father throws the stiff curtains aside and shoves the window pane up.

He leans over the sill, stares hard across the field.

Alton stands in the doorway. Picks at the flaked paint of the jamb.

EXT. FARM HOUSE - SAME

A full moon reveals a bare yard save for several scattered stumps of once large trees and the cold, charred shell of a burned-down tool shed.

EXT. FARM HOUSE - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

The trees still stand.

Father in a disheveled black suit takes a torch to the shed while Mother and Alton watch from the back porch.

Father's face is contorted with wild anger.

Mother, broken, clutches Alton to her side, comforts him.

MOTHER

He's casting out demons, baby. Just casting out demons.

Alton's eyes fill with Father's figure and the rising flames.

END FLASHBACK

Father sees no intruders hidden behind the small cluster of headstones on the yard's edge, nor in the distant forest clumped like a scab on the property line.

He pulls his head back in the window and shuts the clattering frame.

INT. FARM HOUSE - NIGHT

HALLWAY

The gun hangs down in Father's fingers as he leads Alton back across to his room, one large, gentle hand on Alton's shoulder.

ALTON'S BEDROOM

Father helps his son into bed, pulls the covers up.

FATHER

Just a dream, boy. Bad dream.

Father kisses Alton goodnight and joins Mother in the

HALLWAY

Mother presses her hand to her chest, tense.

MOTHER

Them Wickett boys?

Father shakes his head. He moves past her to check the bathroom, then Mother follows him downstairs.

ALTON'S BEDROOM

Alton lies on his side in the dark facing the door, listens to his father open and shut the whining hinges of every closet door.

The floorboards squeal with each step.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY - FLASHBACK

Father kneels on the floor, digs the claw-end of a hammer into a board and pulls out one nail. He moves to the next board, does the same. Each loosened board squeaks under his weight.

Alton watches from the breakfast table.

END FLASHBACK

The light down the hallway clicks off, and Alton hears the bed springs in his parents' room creak and settle.

Silence.

The WHITE MAN crawls from Marlene's room on his belly, elbows pointed up like an alligator.

The skin of his naked body is cracked and flaked in the creases of his joints like old paint. The black of his empty eye sockets dwarfs the menace of the shadows.

The white man sniffs the floor with his large, hooked nose, and drags his long tongue over the boards, follows a flavor soaked in the wood.

He tilts his bald head and slithers out of sight down the hall, drags his limp legs behind him.

Alton pulls his blanket over his face.

INT. FARM HOUSE - DAY - DREAM SEQUENCE

Alton stands in the doorway of Marlene's room. Neither Marlene, nor her things are there, but rather the decorations of an older girl.

He stares at the bed with unmade, yellow linen sheets and pink pillows that stretches out from the far corner beside the opened window.

Alton shivers.

The soft curtains billow, let in the sun and glimpses of the

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY

A LARGE OAK reaches up to the bedroom window with broad boughs strong enough to hold the weight of a man.

Mother clips laundry to a clothes line. The breeze pulls a bed sheet free and carries it across the grass toward the tool shed.

INT. FARM HOUSE - SAME

GIRL'S ROOM

Alton hears a younger Marlene down the hallway in their

PARENTS' ROOM

Marlene hammers the side of her crib with a toy.

MARLENE

No! No!

GIRL'S ROOM

Alton hears his father's boots shuffle on the floorboards in the

KITCHEN

Father hums deep and warm as a cello as he tacks another nail, connects a final table leg to a table top. Sand paper scratches. He shifts the whole piece upright.

GIRL'S ROOM

Alton gauges another sound: soft at first, a shrill whistle through the curtains. It cuts across the distance between the back yard and Alton.

He wrenches forward to the windowsill as the shrill whistle swells to a scream.

EXT. BACKYARD - SAME

Mother drops the flyaway bed sheet, falls to her knees as she screams in horror at what lies beyond the tool shed.

INT. FARM HOUSE - SAME

GIRL'S ROOM

At the windowsill, Alton squeezes his eyes shut. A thick crack like splitting bone wakes him.

END DREAM SEQUENCE

INT. ALTON'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Alton jumps to his feet. The floorboards announce his weight like the trumpet blasts of startled heralds.

Mattress coils creak down the hallway. The light clicks on.

Father appears, trigger-ready soon after. He checks Marlene's room first, then sees Alton who stands straight as a soldier, eyes wide.

Father enters. Sits Alton down. Rocks him.

EXT. FARM HOUSE - DAY

Alton sits on the back porch, watches every move Father makes.

Father sets a block of wood on the stump of the once large oak. He lifts the axe and brings it down hard. The block splits.

Alton jumps up, races to the pieces, hefts one on his shoulder, drags the other to a pile that lines the length of the house.

The wood pile is as tall as Alton in some places. His eyes travel over the pieces, some chopped from the felled trees, others carved and sanded. Broken furniture.

Alton tosses the wooden logs as best he can, then returns to his place on the porch.

Father wipes his sweaty brow. Alton does the same.

Father sets another block on the stump. Brings down the axe.
Thwock.

Alton retrieves the pieces. They clatter onto the pile. Alton's gaze follows the grain of the chopped wood into the grain of the boards on the house. He turns.

The axe comes down again.

ALTON

Dad?

Thwock.

FATHER

Boy.

ALTON

Will you build my house, too, when
I'm grown?

Father palms and leans his weight on the next block of wood. Contemplates it. He stands straight and raises the axe.

FATHER

You'll get this house...

The axe falls. *Thwock.*

FATHER

When you're grown.

Alton walks over and shrugs another log onto his shoulder. They work on in silence.

INT. FARM HOUSE - DAY

KITCHEN

Alton sits at the table, slurps soup and kicks his feet.

The table wobbles on a mended leg with a crack still visible through the lacquer where it had been snapped in two.

Mother leans over the sink, washes pots.

ALTON
Momma? D'you ever worry?

The swirling motion of her shoulder slows, then resumes.

MOTHER
Every mother has at least one
reason to worry. I have...two.

ALTON
Why? Does it help?

She turns on the water, runs the pots under, and stacks them on the drying rack.

MOTHER
If you're finished, bring your bowl
here.

As he gets up and hands her his dish, a thump from upstairs stops them both. They look at the ceiling.

Mother wipes her hands on her apron.

MOTHER
Go help your sister come eat
something.

STAIRWAY

Alton leaps up the steps two at a time to the

HALLWAY

He skips around the corner, hits all the loudest joints along the way.

INT. MARLENE'S ROOM - DAY

Marlene sits against the wall on the floor across from the window. Her legs stretch out in a V. Her groggy stare rolls away from the door as Alton enters.

ALTON
Come on, little bit.

He bends to pick her up. She pulls away, slumps.

MARLENE
No. Too cold.

ALTON
 What are you doing on the floor,
 then?

He reaches a hand under her arm. She shrugs him off.

MARLENE
 I'm tired.

ALTON
 You've been up here all morning.

MARLENE
 Can't wake up.

ALTON
 You are awake.

MARLENE
 (sways)
 Can't sleep...

ALTON
 Well, which is it? Can't sleep or
 can't wake up?

Alton pulls Marlene up to him, her sweaty forehead presses to his chin. She goes limp, her head and eyes roll back.

ALTON
 Marlene?

She crumples, unconscious. Alton feels her forehead.

ALTON
 Momma!

As if she'd accompanied him upstairs, Mother is by his side in an instant. She scoops up Marlene and spins to the hall.

MOTHER
 JOSHUA!

EXT. FARM HOUSE - DAY

Alton sits on the oak stump with his chin in his right hand.

Through the open window above him Mother hums a hymn to Marlene, tries and fails to get her to eat.

ALTON'S DAYDREAM - HALLWAY - DAY

Alton stands in the doorway of Marlene's room. The white man crawls past him down the stairs and around to the open

CELLAR DOOR

and disappears into the darkness.

END DAYDREAM

Alton on the tree stump switches his chin to his left hand.

ALTON'S DAYDREAM - GRAVEYARD - NIGHT

The white man claws up through the dirt of one of the graves in the back corner of the yard and crawls toward the house.

END DAYDREAM

Alton stands up. Contemplative.

A flock of blackbirds flies overhead. One bird branches off and settles on a sapling behind the charred tool shed.

Alton paces. A cricket chirrups somewhere in the tall grass next to him. He stops, stares hard as if to catch sight of it in the tangled green.

Alton unsheathes a branch from the wood pile, draws a line in the earth.

INT. ALTON'S BEDROOM - DAY

Alton sweeps his feet across the floor from his bed to his dresser, then to the hallway.

With every step he tests the boards, stops and scratches a chalk mark on the wood.

INT. FARM HOUSE - NIGHT

KITCHEN

Father, Mother, and Alton eat in silence at the dinner table.

Alton watches Mother sip her tea and Father spear another bite of food. Gazes unmet, conversation absent.

LATER

Mother prepares a bowl of broth, then takes it upstairs while Father and Alton clear the dinner table.

Father then steers Alton by the shoulders upstairs to bed.

HALLWAY

They turn the corner.

ALTON

Dad? Do you ever worry?

Father's large, calloused hands guide his son.

FATHER

More than some, less than others.

ALTON

Should I worry more?

ALTON'S BEDROOM

Father helps Alton into bed and sits on the edge.

FATHER

I worry about only what I can
change, what I can control. If it's
out of my hands, then I shouldn't
bother to worry about it.

Father pulls the blankets over Alton and rises. Crosses the hallway to Marlene's room.

Alton listens to his parents murmur. Observes Mother emerge behind Father with the bowl of broth.

They head down the hall and the light cuts out.

The squeak of mattress coils settles, then quiet.

Alton throws off his blankets and opens his curtains.

Moonlight spills across the floor, illuminates the pale chalk marks on the boards.

He steps onto the closest one, eases his weight onto it.

Silence.

He steps onto the next mark. No creaks. He crosses his room this way and climbs on top of his dresser.

Waits.

The moon slips through the sky past his window. Its light casts a cross on the floor that shifts until the shadow lies on the wall next to Alton's drooping head.

The sound of a soft drag wakes him. He straightens.

A wet slurp accompanies the soft drag. The white man pulls itself from the shadows of Marlene's room. Its gnarled, yellowed fingernails scrape over the floorboards.

Alton atop the dresser watches it pass. Leans into the hallway to see its lifeless legs slither into his parents' room out of sight.

Alton follows the chalk dashes back to his bed. Pulls his cover up just as Marlene wakes in a coughing fit.

The light flicks on. Mother comes down the creaky hall.

Alton closes the curtain.

EXT. FARM HOUSE - DAY

Alton pilfers through the wood pile. Searches for the right piece. Tosses the rejects aside.

Then he finds it: a thick branch nearly his height.

Alton sits next to his father's workbench with sand paper and sets to sand the staff smooth.

INT. FARM HOUSE - NIGHT

ALTON'S BEDROOM

Alton sits atop his dresser in the dark, the sanded staff held upright in his hand. He stares out the window.

He closes his left eye. The moon perches on the top of the staff. He opens his left eye and closes his right. The moon shifts off the staff.

He switches back to his left eye and holds the moon on the staff until he hears Marlene whimper in her sleep.

The white man emerges from the black of her room. Its long, lean arms clutch at the floor.

It sniffs the air, slides its tongue once over the floorboards, then swivels to the right.

Alton dips a toe into the dark. Brings the staff to his shoulder, wrings the wood in his hands.

He steps to the next chalk dash in the

HALLWAY

Immersed in shadow, Alton hears the thing's naked legs drag across the floor.

Alton raises his staff over his head, faces the black corner in front of his parents' closed door. The thing hunkers there, tastes the floor, turns its gaping eye sockets to him.

Sweat drips down Alton's temples, he holds the staff up ready to bring it down on the thing's head, when it flattens and slithers under the parents' door.

Alton lowers the staff, reaches for the door knob.

INT. PARENTS' BEDROOM - NIGHT

The door eases open. Alton steps in.

Everything is awash in moonlight.

The white man lies on its belly on the bed, a cold corpse. One arm dangles off the side.

Alton approaches it. Holds the staff ready.

Bedside, he squints down at it. Sweat beads glitter on its neck and bald skull. The cheekbones and brow cast shadows over the eyes, makes them dark pits.

Alton lowers the staff, leans on it. He closes his left eye. Opens it, then closes his right. Watches the face on the pillow shift from paler to darker.

Alton sets the staff against the nightstand. Holds his hand over the sleeping form to block the moonlight. The face there is Father's.

Alton breathes out. He kneels down over the old man's ear.

ALTON

(whispers)

I worry more than some and less
than others. But I will build my
house when I'm grown.

Alton stands up. The old man sleeps on.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Alton ambles over the chalk marks, lingers at Marlene's doorway.

She sleeps. Looks so small in a bigger girl's bed.

He moves away from her door.

INT. ALTON'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Marlene wakes in another coughing fit as Alton pulls up his covers.

The light doesn't come on as tired Father shuffles down the hall into her room. The mattress creaks as he sits next to her.

Alton listens to his father hum to Marlene.

Alton rolls over, looks out the window across the fields at the company of tree stumps that stand in squat attention, frozen in time.

One long breath fogs the glass. As it fades Marlene's coughing ceases.

The floorboards moan with Father as the reanimated moon slips away from the window.

FADE OUT.