

This piece has an accompanying audio file.

ANNOUNCER: *The Empty House* by Richard J. Hand

THE ESTATE AGENT IS IN THE LOFT OF AN EMPTY HOUSE. THERE IS BIRDSONG AND TRAFFIC IN BACKGROUND

ESTATE AGENT: I've been an estate agent for twenty-five years. Sold all kinds of houses. And other properties. Hidden gems and no hoppers – I've got them on, then swiftly off, the books. I know the language you see, it's all in the language. I can call a complete dump an opportunity and a punter will buy it – literally. I've helped vendors make a mint like that. At the same time, despite my best efforts I've seen others let emotion get the better of them and let a place go for a snip.

In my experience, empty houses have a sadness to them – a melancholia. Others can brim full of sweet memories. Some almost bleed with lost opportunities or unfounded dreams. I can't tell you how many times I've taken a key and opened the door to an empty house. Stepping over the threshold. An empty house is always lifeless. Didn't someone once talk of the breathlessness of empty houses? It's true. Until I went to one particular house. This house. The house I am in now.

I'd just gone to measure up. Done it a thousand times. And I always like to talk my way through it. Dictaphone in one hand, tape measure in the other. Type it up later. Used to have cute little cassette tapes. All digital now. And I was measuring up and I heard a noise. Well, hear for yourself.

SFX BEEP

'Passing from the hallway into the dining room. Approximately 16 feet, that's 5 meters. By 12 feet, 3.6 meters. High ceiling with original coving. Central pendant chandelier...'

SFX SCRATCHING NOISE ON PLATE

It was the noise of cutlery on plates. A bone-handled knife and fork on porcelain. Like a person was eating. And I could hear it was just one person. Slow and painful. Cutting on an empty plate. There was nothing there, no one there. There was a bare table, and I looked beneath it. Nothing. It was a noise like this...

SFX SCRATCHING NOISE ON PLATE DISTORTS

Empty houses are lifeless. Sole residents, a spider or some other bug, if you're lucky. One of those flies that goes around the lampshade in circles. Like a satellite in orbit but I think it's something to do with excrement. It usually is with flies, isn't it? Occasionally there's vermin – mice, rats even. Not pleasant. But this wasn't a rodent in the cavity. No I heard the cutlery scratching on the plate, although there was no plate, nothing. Never been unnerved before but this did bother me. Empty houses are breathless, lifeless but that's not to say you don't hear noises. But you get used to it: if we started worrying about sounds in an empty house where would we be? There are creaks and bumps: wood contracting in the heat or the damp. There is no such thing as silence. Sounds are an interception, an interruption of a universal silence that cannot possibly exist.

So I wrapped up the job as quick as I could, my heart beating in my ears. Went back to the office, typed up. Hoping that someone else would take the photos and show prospective buyers around. Tried not to dwell on it. But that night I dreamed of the house. I dreamed I was in the living room.

There was an old lady living there. Surrounded by dolls and other toys. Old stuff, Victorian probably. Never had a family, just saved the toys from her childhood. Long ago. Seriously long ago. I stood in the room with my Dictaphone and tape measure. She didn't see me. She became uneasy and wanted some help. I just watched her. And then she picked up a long stick from beside the skirting board. She stretched the stick to the window and she knocked, rat-tat-tat, on the glass. Like this...

SFX STICK TAPS ON WINDOW

A maddening sound. Why did she do it? To attract the attention of someone in the garden? To frighten something away? To let her presence be known? So the next morning, I don't know what possessed me, but my anxieties had gone to be replaced by a furious desire to go back to the house and see it again. I pretended a client had called, desperate to see it. I grabbed the keys

and drove over. I hurried inside and went straight into the lounge. No toys, obviously. Long scattered. Antique shops or landfill. I waited. And waited. And eventually it happened...

SFX BEEP

'I'm waiting. I'm waiting. I can wait as long as it takes...'

SFX STICK TAPS ON WINDOW DISTORTS

'I hope that has been received on the recording. The sound of a stick tapping on the window. I'm looking out the window now – no-one there. I am pressing my ear to the glass...'

SFX STICK TAPS ON WINDOW DISTORTS

SFX BEEP

Definitely someone, something, tapping on the window. The old woman from the dream. Yet there was nothing there.

Do you believe in ghosts? Of course, you don't. No more than I do. But I cannot deny the sounds I heard – you've heard my Dictaphone! I could show you photographs but I swear there is nothing to see. Just boring estate agent photography. Treat a property with a wide-angle lens. Nothing of substance to see.

But what are ghosts, really? Someone from a dream? Traumatic memories captured in the walls? Someone unwilling to leave regardless of life and death or any other tenancy agreements. But I sometimes think such things would be a comfort. That sounds strange. There is a terrible tragedy in empty spaces. That breathlessness of empty houses. When you've seen as many empty places as I have. Dead air. Stale like a mausoleum. Open a curtain: you get dust-light, motes floating like something under the sea or a universe in motion.

After the lounge experience I went back to the office but that evening I smuggled the keys out. I decided to spend the night there. Stake it out once and for all. From what I could hear, the lady had little food, she struggled to eat off of an empty plate. She used a stick to tap on a window in distress. Maybe I could help her.

So I parked a distance away and let myself in to the house. I stayed in the dark – I didn't want to frighten or trouble the neighbours. I lay in wait in a bedroom. Eventually, a voice came through...

SFX BEEP

Who are you?

No-one... I mean, an estate agent. I'm here to sell the house.

Are you what the future holds?

I'm not the future, I am the here and now. You are in the past.

The house is not for sale.

But it's time for you to go.

Perhaps it's time for you to STAY...

What... what do you mean?

SFX BEEP

And that was that. That was all she had to say. She hasn't spoken to me again. She sang to me once though. I was lying on the floor of the bedroom and I couldn't sleep and it was a ghostly lullaby. Listen...

SFX BEEP

SFX DISTORTED SONG

SFX BEEP

Not unpleasant, is it? But I've had no more chats, no more songs. I don't think I will. I've waited and waited... I've reached the conclusion that ghosts are very shy. But she's got to let go. I'm not leaving until she does. I've had standoffs with difficult vendors before. I always

win in the end. I've locked and bolted all the doors. Most of the time I'm up here in the loft. Keeping out the way. I get to hear birds singing on the roof and can hear traffic roll by below. When I get hungry I go down to the dining room and pretend to eat. I imagine a plate of food and cut on it with a knife and fork. I'm not giving her the satisfaction of going out for a takeaway. No, I pretend to eat. I pass the time by singing. I don't want to be interrupted so I've turned my phone off but if things get bad I'll switch it on and make a couple of calls. I've also found a long stick and I can come down from the loft and tap on the window – that'll get someone's attention for sure.

SFX CACOPHONY

I like it here. It is a nice house. You should think about buying it.

SFX CACOPHONY

It's a gem, this house. You can get trapped in here, trapped in a very happy life. The house is empty. No chain. You could move straight in if you're in a position to proceed. Some unimaginative people would not give it a second glance. But this will be a future home. Your future happy home.

SFX CACOPHONY

The old lady? Don't worry about her. Anyway, they are as shy as anything, ghosts. Never seen, rarely heard. Antisocial. In a bad mood. Well, they died, didn't they? I've decided she was probably just a figment of a dream.

SFX CACOPHONY

What? You're more worried about me? Don't worry yourself about me. I have no name, I am not even a memory. I cannot prove that I existed, no more than a make-believe entity constructed in a nightmare. I am sounds that just seem like a voice.

I am a sound between your ears. A sound inhabiting your space.

I cannot even hold a hand towards you.

I'm hungry now...

SFX SCRATCHING NOISE ON PLATE DISTORTS

Time for a song...

SFX SONG

I may need help...

SFX STICK TAPS ON WINDOW DISTORTS

It's a bargain.

Sleep on it.

Any questions, let me know.

I'll be here, always here.

SFX CACOPHONY

ANNOUNCER: You have listened to *The Empty House*, written and produced by Richard J. Hand, starring James Langham as the Estate Agent.