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LIFE AT THE YELLOW HOUSE
by A.V. Eichenbaum

*This story was featured in the audio fiction podcast *The Ugly Radio*.*

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I sat in my favorite spot on the old brick porch, strumming the same guitar I'd strummed for a decade. I was 19.

"The witches down the road say this sun's gonna last at least another month." Nadia tossed her dark, curly hair behind her. "It doesn't feel right." She handed me the bottle of wine.

75 degrees in the middle of February. Drought weather.

I stubbed out my clove and tossed it in the coffee can we all used as an ash tray. It was nearly full. Mostly my fault. I was 19.

"That one witch, man," said Nadia, "she knows what she's talking about. She talks to the ghosts around here, I think."

"Marie?" I set my guitar down.

"Yeah, her. She's... different somehow. From the rest of them, I mean. The coven."

"We're all a little different here." A crooked smile made its way across my face.

Nadia just shrugged and looked out into the woods that surrounded our slice of nowhere.

The Yellow House sat in the hills just down from the Santa Cruz mountains. In a lot of ways, it was a lot like other places around. Faded yellow paint. Three stories. Ancient. College kids, grad students, dropouts, anarchists, and misfits all finding their way to one big house in the middle of nowhere where the rent wasn't too high and there wasn't any air conditioning. Can't remember where I saw the ad, though.

We had rats. Endangered rats. Kangaroo rats. And they were cute, except for when they rattled through the walls at night, long tails whipping up against the plaster.

We had broken musical instruments and an out-of-tune piano. Sometimes you'd walk into the Big Room because you heard music and no one'd be there.

We had artists and philosophers and gardeners and people just trying to make their way.

And we had witches.

They were just like anyone else around, really. Except that sometimes they'd be talking to no one out in the garden, or down by the creek. Or howling at the full moon. Sometimes I'd join them doing that. They threw the best parties.

Nadia took another swig from the bottle. Two Buck Chuck, naturally. "You believe in ghosts, Anne?"

I looked at her for a long time.

Probably too long. She looked a little nervous. That happens to folks when I look at them, I guess.

Finally, I made up my mind. "I'm not sure."

She sighed and handed me the bottle. Her watch caught the late afternoon light. "I've seen some around here."

I lit up another cigarette and offered her one. She declined and reached into her bag to roll her own.

"You ever walk down to the cemetery?" She gestured in its general direction.

I did. I had to walk through it to get to school, had to walk through it to get to work. Sometimes I'd just stay there for hours. Still don't know why. It was comfortable, I guess.

"Well, I think sometimes the ghosts down there get tired of walking around there and come for a visit. Just the other day, I was thinking to myself how nice it'd be to have a cozy sweater so I could curl up at night and look at the stars. The next day, there was one at my door." Nadia lived on the second floor with most of the others.

I told her I'd had a similar experience with my favorite leather jacket. Last winter, just when I needed it most, it showed up.

"That's not ghosts. That's just the House looking out for us." Willow appeared, like they usually did, long, tangled hair hiding their eyes. They'd been here longer than any of us, living up in the tree house out back. I think they'd lost track of how long. They stretched and sat. "The House provides, man. Ask, and you shall receive."

They held out their open palm. I gave them a cigarette. Lighting it, they said, "The ghosts here ain't that friendly."

Nadia and I exchanged a look.

"I'm serious, man. Just ask Eddie the Greek. He almost died cuz of a ghost."

"Wish he'd died," I muttered. Our landlord hired Eddie the Greek to fix up the place from time to time. Mostly he just leered at the fresh meat, sang songs off-key, and argued with his ex-wife on the phone.

Nadia's eyes went wide. "Don't put that shit out into the universe, Anne! It might happen."

I shrugged and went back into my Cave.

I was the only one on the ground floor who lived inside. Everyone else down here had a courtyard room out back. Must've been about fifteen of us at The Yellow House, give or take. Not counting the witches down the way. Or the screamer in the attic. He didn't come down much, though.

My Cave didn't get a lot of natural light. I'd painted the room a dark blue to compliment the orange tiles. The best part about it, though, was the bookshelf. Twelve feet long, five feet high, and built directly into the wall. It almost had enough room for all my books. I plucked an old favorite off the shelf and nestled into my moldy old leather reading chair. Some people read Harry Potter or old fairy tales or the Bible for comfort. I read passages from the secondhand copy of the Necronomicon I'd had forever.

I'd found it at an old bookstore that's not around anymore when I was in high school. Performed a few small protection rituals here and there, but nothing major. Whoever'd had it before me had written, in big blue block letters, "THIS BOOK BINDS YOU TO THE ELDER

GODS OR THE ANCIENT ONES! BEWARE! DO SPELLS AT YOUR OWN RISK!" Page 101. Some sort of summoning ritual.

At the bottom of the same page, in green ink, someone else had written, "Risk is worth it. Belief is key. Intention important." The cursive was messy and thin, like spiders attacking each other.

I found myself staring at that page a lot back then. I must've been staring at it for a while, because the knock at my door made me jump.

It was Trent. He wanted to kick my ass at chess again.

Trent only came out at night.

I blew out the incense I hadn't realized I'd lit and joined him in the kitchen.

Trent talked about math like other people talked about poetry or religion. Setting up the pieces, he started off on a tangent I couldn't quite follow. Quantum cubes and the fourth dimension.

Trent had had my room before I'd moved in, and the equations he'd scratched into the walls were still visible under the paint. I bought a poster with sayings by the Dalai Lama to cover them up. I was 19.

Nate and Trent usually played chess around this time of night, and Nate could usually keep up. But Nate had gone surfing last week and hadn't come back, so here I was. String theory and advanced calculus and getting my ass kicked at chess. One of the pawns on my side had been replaced with a spent bullet.

Trent had my king in nine moves, and the raccoon that had snuck in through the sliding glass door sat to watch our rematch.

"Better than usual, dude." Trent could be painfully positive.

He had my king in five moves. I decided to make some tea and sit out on the porch.

It was still warm out, this February evening, and I listened for the coyotes and crickets to start their symphony. The stars above always seemed to swirl if you stared at them too long. They danced to remind us how little it all meant, and how little we all knew. I felt a hot wind on my face, but the windchimes above me didn't move.

Marie was dancing down the long dirt path that led to the coven's place in the old barn.

She was beautiful, in her baggy black hoodie, ragged skirt, and wild brown hair. The fire behind her eyes never went out, and you could make out its light even on a moonless night like that one.

She danced slowly, waving her arms like a tree in a light breeze. She disappeared from view for a second, then danced back, doubled over, still flailing.

She began to sing, guttural and low.

One long, slow note.

One impossibly long, slow moan.

She stood up sharply and turned to face me. Her eyes met mine. She smiled, crooked and wild, and looked past me.

Then she sprinted back up the path toward the barn.

I lit a cigarette.

One of the House cats, a cream calico named Persephone, came up and rubbed against me. Our landlord had gotten about nine or ten of them in response to the rat problem. She dropped a dead rat at my feet and purred, kneading her bloody paws against my jeans. I scratched her behind the ears and she purred louder.

Eventually Persephone fell asleep, and I rested up against the House. Closed my eyes. Heard the whispers again.

After you live at The Yellow House for a while, you start to dream about it. You see it in all your dreams, looming over you from on top of a hill or swallowing you up in a labyrinth of almost familiar hallways. Nadia'd told me that when I'd gotten there. I didn't believe her then, but now it's the only thing I really believe.

I dreamt that night that I was in the creek. Waist deep and naked, I felt no cold or pain. Just the comfort of the House watching over me as I became the creek. My body melted into the water and we were one. I felt horror and pleasure because I knew I was safe and I knew the House wanted me.

I woke up in my own bed the next morning. It was really a mattress on the ground, but it got the job done. Especially when I had guests.

I wiped the blood from my nose and went to make myself a cup of coffee.

Sipping my coffee, I sorted through the mail. My ex-girlfriend had sent me a letter saying she was worried, Anne, so worried about you, Anne. I burned it and changed into a beat-up Screaming Females t-shirt I'd gotten when they played the Rickshaw Stop. Felt longer ago than I knew it was. I wore the same jeans. They covered the scars.

It was 85 degrees that morning, and it was only 11 am.

I shivered.

On the porch Willow was doing yoga, barefoot and sweating. I tried not to stare for too long. They made my eyes hurt when I stared too long. Sipped my coffee and lit another clove. Put my sandy hair up and sat down.

"You alright, Annie? You look a little, uh. Tired." Willow went into child pose as they spoke.

"I'm fine."

"You ever try yoga? It's real good for you."

"Uh, nah. I'm good. Thanks, though."

"Cool, cool." They lay on the ground like that for twenty minutes or so. I left.

The water at The Yellow House was clear and cool when it came out of the tap. I could never quite get over the taste, though, like rotting meat and rusty pipes. I splashed some on my face and looked at myself in the mirror, all cheekbones and freckles. The dark circles under my eyes had always been there. They'd always been there. I know they'd always been there. And I wasn't tired.

A walk in the woods was all I needed. Commune with nature. The acreage behind the House was wild except for a foot path. I started the climb. One of the House cats joined me about halfway up the hill. He was orange, with a tail like a question mark. He trotted along beside me until we came to the greenhouse.

The greenhouse was abandoned, sitting up there. Overgrown with weeds and blackberries. The original owner of the House was buried next to it. You could see the tombstone peeking out from behind the tall grass. You could see stains on the inside of the glass. You could hear things inside.

The orange cat hissed and ran.

I kept walking until I found the faces carved in the rocks. Willow had shown them to me when I'd first moved in. About a quarter mile from the House, further back on the property, someone had carved eight faces in eight large boulders and placed them in a circle.

I sat on the biggest one and took off my top. I wanted the sun to bake me alive. I wanted to burn more than anything. I don't remember when I started crying.

I went back to my Cave when the sun started to sink.

Curled up with a book until the power went out. I must have dozed off, but I didn't dream.

My window creaked open. It was nearer to the ceiling than a window should've been. Someone was staring at me.

I tried to shout at the shadowy figure, but I couldn't. I couldn't move, there in my mattress.

The shadow reached its long arm into my room. Then its other arm. It slowly pulled itself in through my window, never taking its gaze off me.

The lamp flickered back on. The shadow remained, climbing down my wall and over my writing desk. It crept onto the floor and stood in the middle of the room. The heat was unbearable. I started to blister.

It took a step toward me, towering over me as I tried to scream. It tilted its head and opened its mouth. Its jaw stretched.

And stretched.

And stretched.

Ask and you shall receive.

My stay at the hospital was fine. Quiet. They asked where the burns and cuts had come from, and I said me, and they changed my medication.

I moved away from The Yellow House in spring. I can't even find it anymore.

But The Yellow House still watches over me in my dreams.

And it loves me.