

402: Day Three

[Click; rattle]

Ash: Notes for day three, after forgetting to do them for day two. It wasn't a big day anyway, so I'll sum up while I drive over to the house. It's a quarter to seven; I'm just pouring this coffee into a travel mug and then I'm in the truck and gone. Navidson Arms is nice, a little frou-frou for me, but the woman who runs it leaves a pretty good breakfast out for us, even though we leave early. I need to stop and get cigarettes. Geri and Tony are already over there, and Jack is picking up doughnuts or something so we can have our mid-morning carb fix.

[We hear her heading out the door and getting in the truck during this last speech.

The truck starts up. She drives.]

So yesterday we got the generator set up and ran extension cords to the rooms on the first floor, where we're going to start. It gets better light, and we're hoping Ray gets the lights on before we start on the upstairs.

We did some cleanup in the foyer, and actually got that grandfather clock working. Or, maybe it's more accurate to say it was always working. We just started the pendulum and it took off like it had never stopped. I cleaned it up a little, but it's in really good shape. I'm surprised the high school kids haven't smashed it.

That's the other thing we found once we got some light in there. There's graffiti in most of the rooms, and the remains of a couple of other campfires, which in at least one place has damaged the hardwood pretty badly. The graffiti is all heavy metal bullshit—lots of "Hail Satan" and Ozzy and Slayer. Some of it is pretty creative; there's a big "and the blood shall fall like rain" scrawled over the fireplace in the living room, with a pentagram under it. Geri has dubbed

them the Junior Satan Club. I haven't seen any evidence that they've been here recently, but we'll need to keep an eye out. We're having new locks put on the front door tomorrow, but until we get the windows all replaced, the place is open to whoever. We're putting up the caution signs and everything today, but my guess is the Junior Satan Club aren't big on rules.

[She pulls into a parking lot and turns the truck off]

I'm gonna run in and grab these Lucky Strikes. Be right back.

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[Click; rattle. Theme music, credits]

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[Click; rattle]

[Ash is back in the truck, driving.]

Ash: I'm kind of glad I've got that photo of Grandpa Bob in front of the house. I was looking at it again last night. It's only the front, but it shows the whole thing, grass to roof. It at least gives a clearer idea of what Hawthorne House looked like in its heyday. For instance the posts holding up the porch have been changed out at some point. In the photo they're beautiful hand-turned things. What's there now are basically 4X4 posts. I bet Tony can reproduce the originals. It's got some real potential. We just need to listen to what it wants, as Grandpa Bob used to say.

Grandpa Bob was a real practical guy, but when he was talking about carpentry he could get almost mystical. So yeah, he used to talk about listening to the house. Hearing what the space wanted and then drawing it out. He'd be holding my hands on a planer or a handsaw—I was all of ten when he started teaching me—and he'd say, "The wood knows what it wants, Ashley. You just got to listen and do what it tells you." It sounded like holy gospel to me at that age, though I

still don't know exactly what he meant. He's definitely the only person who ever got away with using my full name.

[She pulls up in the yard; the truck turns off; she gets out while speaking]

Okay, here we are. Looks like they're already getting to it. We mapped out the ground floor yesterday as well as we could on the inside. We're measuring everything today and hopefully will have some working plans by this afternoon.

[Louder] Jack, hi! Give me a doughnut, man!

[Click; rattle]

[Click; rattle]

[Eats intermittently during next speech]

Midmorning break. I'm having a second doughnut and I will not be judged. I checked out the basement, and we're thinking now the foundation issues might not be as bad as it looked. There's still some patching to be done, and I'd ideally like to shore up the southwest corner, where it looks like things are shaky because of the gravel parking area that was added on the west side. But I don't think we're going to have to call Allen's crew to come out and dig it all out and install the big foundation screws. That saves thirty grand right there, and that in itself warrants another jelly glazed. The basement runs under the whole house, and there's junk down there too, but nothing crazy. Looks like the Junior Satan Club hasn't gone down there. So *they're* a bunch of wimps, like I figured.

I got Tony and Jack started clearing out the dining room and the ground floor back bedroom while Geri and I measured the ground floor. After this doughnut we're heading upstairs to do the same, and then hopefully after lunch we'll have a couple of rooms downstairs cleared out enough to start some renovation recon. I've already seen some spots on the staircase that

need attention. What looks like a bullet hole on the wall and some cuts or scratches on the landing. Oh, and there's a weird little painting, like an oil painting in a frame and everything, in the west bedroom upstairs. We can possibly save that.

Okay. Sugar rush achieved. I'm gonna find Geri and head upstairs.

[Click; rattle]

[Click; rattle]

So, already things that ought to be easy are not adding up. Geri and I measured the upstairs, and as a side note tried again, unsuccessfully, to open the trap door into the attic. As much as I hate to say it, we're gonna have to send Tony up. Sometimes brawn is the only option.

Anyway, we came out after lunch to measure the outside, and that's where things aren't lining up. We've done it twice now, and Geri's inside remeasuring the back bedroom and the ground floor bathroom.

It's not off by much, but it's consistently off, and that doesn't seem right. Like, if we were mismeasuring, then we'd get different results. And this is nineteen and a half inches off every time. So I sent Geri in to remeasure that part of the house. We must have screwed it up on the inside. I'm taking a smoke break on the porch steps while we wait.

[She lights a cigarette and smokes while talking]

I want to smoke something a little stronger than Lucky Strikes, but that'll have to wait til I get back to the bed and breakfast. Everything seems to be going smoothly so far. I can't figure out why I'm so anxious.

I mean, of course I know why I'm anxious. After what happened last year with that house in Maysville, it looked like Mobley Building and Renovation was a done deal. It only takes one "death by negligence" decision to pretty much tank a reputation. And I wondered maybe if it

wasn't for the best—I still think about Steve, about what happened, about whether I could have done anything differently. Maybe I wasn't cut out for this after all.

But then this call came, and the chance to work on this house—especially *this* house—was something I couldn't turn down. Actually, you know, it was more than that. It was the single thing that could have resparked my love and excitement for this work.

So here we are. I'm talking to a handheld tape recorder like it's my best friend, hoping we can not fuck up a basic reno project. So yeah, I might have a toke back at the hotel. Nothing stronger. Not anymore. But I can't be expected to just drift through life as it comes, can I?

[Front door opens]

Oh, there's Geri.

[Louder, to Geri]

Well?

Geri: Same as before!

Ash: Damn it. Okay. Thanks. Go see if Tony and Jack need help in the kitchen, and I'll be in to see what's next in a minute.

Geri: Gotcha!

[The door closes behind them]

Ash: Welp, I have not a clue what's up with that. It's not like we don't know how to work a tape measure. It's gonna piss me off if we have to get a surveyor out here just to blueprint the house. I wonder if there are plans in the town records?

[She crushes out her cigarette and stands up]

Either way, it's not today's problem. Let's see what Tony and Jack have gotten done.

[Click; rattle]

[Click; rattle]

[Ash is in the foyer, and walks through other rooms as she talks]

It makes a huge difference just having most of the shit cleared out of here. That spongy carpet was nasty as hell. The hardwood underneath has a large irregular stain discoloring the wood. It's big, stretching out from the center of the floor, and then sort of splashing out in little drops towards the living room door. Weird little blotches, like footprints. I have no idea what caused it and I have no desire to find out. We'll be refinishing all the floors, so fingers crossed it's surfacy.

The coolest thing, though! I'm so excited about this! I'm walking into the living room and then down through the door towards the back of the house. There's a little bathroom back here, and then a bedroom all the way at the back. Basement access is also back here, through a door that opens onto some rickety-ass stairs.

But that's not the cool part. Between the big living room and the bedroom is a narrow hallway—weirdly narrow for the house, actually. All of the other hallways in the house are half again as wide. So anyway, Tony and Jack were carrying an old bed frame out, and they bumped the wall in here. Bumped it pretty badly, really, and a big chunk of plaster popped off. More than that, though, it thumped hollow, like there was something behind the wall.

And sure enough! When I took the claw end of a hammer and pulled on the edge of the hole they made, the plaster pulled away like pie crust. Well, like stale pie crust, I guess. Really fucking easy is the point. And what did we find?

Bookshelves. Floor-to-ceiling finished with intricate woodwork that looks hand-carved. Built out of some very dark wood, oak or cherry probably. I've only uncovered a section roughly two feet by three, but it thumps hollow all the way down. If I had to guess, I'd say the whole

hallway is lined with built-in bookshelves. I'm gonna work on pulling as much plaster down as I can before we close up for the day.

[She takes a whack with the hammer; a chunk of plaster falls away]

It comes down pretty easy. This is exactly the reason I love this job. These old houses have all kinds of secrets, like pirate treasure. Sometimes it's sitting out in the open, like that gorgeous staircase out there, but more often it's been hidden behind a wall, or under carpet, repurposed into something else. You have to peel away the layers, like a palimpsest or an archeological dig, revealing the treasure underneath.

Okay, that sounds all wide-eyed and pollyanna, but damn it I love this part!

[A few more hammer blows]

I'm widening the hole now—I'm pretty confident they're floor-to-ceiling, and I want to see if it runs the whole hall or just part of it. I've widened it to about five feet, and it's still going back there. Actually, it's wide enough now that I may be able to see with the flashlight.

[She peers into the hole, aided by the flashlight]

It goes as far as I can see with this, which admittedly isn't very far. But wow. Why would you plaster over something like this? I guess maybe some folks who weren't big readers loved here at some point? Seems a shame, man.

Holy shit, it's cold in here. I'm going to need to move a space heater in here to finish. We didn't expect to be doing much work in the hallway this week. It's freezing in here, and the air coming out of this hole is even colder.

Which sort of makes sense, even though...

Huh. Looks like there's something down there. Hold on a minute.

[More hammering, plaster coming off in a fall of debris]

There's books in here! Not many, but like four or five I can see. They literally plastered over this gorgeous bookcase with books still on it. Huh. What's the hurry, bub? Weird.

Smells funny, too, sort of like mildew, but something else too. Like maybe a rat or a squirrel got in here a while ago and never made it out. Won't be the worst thing I've found in a wall.

That's all I'm going to do for today, I think. It's too damn cold to keep going, and it's too close to quitting time to move a heater and actually set up to work here. Tomorrow, then. Maybe I'll find some new reading material.

[A little further away from the recorder]

Geri! Tony! Where are you guys? Let's start shutting things down!

[Click; rattle]

[Theme music; credits]

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