

—THE HAVEN

by John Palisano

Hugh ran two fingers across the flesh-covered wall. It pulsed underneath his touch, releasing warm, wheat-scented moisture. He hadn't expected his mother's response. *She's everywhere now*, he thought. The creepy Kudzu-like flesh slowly ate away Hugh's past.

On his way into the bathroom he spotted a nick halfway down the wall near the corner—years ago his brother had caused the blemish while rushing a guitar amp around the corner. Dennis had long since abandoned them in favor of living a West Coast fantasy life with his tall European actress girlfriend. That left Hugh by himself nursing their mother.

Her government checks come through the mail. Deposit them in the ATM. Buy her food. Make sure there's a hat to wear—no one can see me this way. I'm supposed to have added up to something, after all. Not doing anything but wasting away.

Hugh opened the bathroom door and found she'd trespassed there, as well. He lifted the toilet seat with the side of his foot. A puffy fleshy mound covered the back toilet well, preventing the seat from fully rising. A thin skin layer covered its top. That'll need fixing, he supposed.

Where's Pop? He rests across his cot in the attic watching shows. Never comes down. Doesn't know what's happening down here. He doesn't care about me anymore.

While he emptied his bladder, Hugh saw her brown strands of skin bleed over and into the bowl, spiraling together near the bottom. *She's watching me. Even in here.* Her flesh had reached too far—Hugh needed privacy and normalcy.

She's left nothing alone, he thought. *My room's the only place I can still escape. How long until she gets inside there?* He flushed and watched the soiled water twirl away. He smelled his own acrid stench and held back his gag. The lingering smell mixed with the smoky, mealy odor given off by her flesh.

Remember when we were kids? We were all so close. We did everything together. Now we're far apart. The house should be condemned. There's filth everywhere. Greasy dirt piles line the corners. Huge holes crater our sheetrock. Clothes stacked high inside our tub. Black bile fills our toilet. Cigarettes and ash.

Turning toward the sink, Hugh was relieved to see it had not been overtaken. He grasped the cool, hard metal handle. At least there was something steel remaining. The water felt clean. He washed his face and drank a double handful. As he wiped his hands, the hanging towel stuck against the wall. Peeling it from its hanging loop, Hugh saw her creeping, fleshy fingers.

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He leaned down and rubbed his face with the towel until he was dry. Then he straightened up, wiped his hands across his pants and went back into the hallway. To his left was Dennis's room. It was exactly as his brother had kept it years ago, after moving away for college.

The last time Hugh remembered Dennis visiting their childhood home, he had remarked at how shocking it was seeing so much disrepair and neglect. But that was before her flesh escaped her room. Before the house had turned into Hugh's prison.

It's where we grew up. We have endless memories here. Mom always said this place was a haven against the meanness of the world. She's buried herself here with stacks of magazines against the windows and plastic bags stuck inside every nook, Dennis. I can help her if I stay. She won't let any fresh air inside. Everything left here smells like smoke. Everything in here's been ruined and left to rot. But I can help her. I can clean and I can help her.

"There's something weird here," his brother said. "This isn't the same place I grew up in." Hugh hung his head while watching his brother pack. Dennis moved into a hotel for the remainder of their vacation. That had been the last time Dennis set foot inside his childhood home.

Hello? Dennis? This is your brother. Are you there? Can you give me a call back? Why don't you ever call me back? Why are you always too busy to talk to me anymore? Can't we be close again like we were when we were kids? Where are you? Remember when you would stand between me and those fucking bullies at school? Remember how you kept your fists up and told me to run home while you took care of them? Remember that? I do.

As Hugh hurried down the hall, he heard something hit the windows. *Oh, no. They're back again.*

"Freak!" someone yelled from outside. "Come on out and play with us!"

"What are you doing in there with her?" He heard a second voice.

Hugh put his hands over his ears. How had they found out where he lived? During high school, discovering his address would have been simple enough. But they'd graduated years ago. Why had they remembered him? Had they Googled their old classmates and come across his name? Had they wanted to pick up where they left off, with their jokes and punches? What did they want from him? Why couldn't they just go away and leave him alone with his bloated, rotten life? Hadn't they already taken enough?

Why can't I just start over somehow? How come Momma's turning into this thing? What happened to her? I thought she was supposed to protect me and love me. How is she sick like this? I can't get her help. No one can help her. Not even me anymore. Why won't you pick up the phone, Dennis?

His nerves buzzed. Hugh didn't want to be like *her* and hide inside his bedroom amid stacks of second-hand magazines and mounds of thrift store clothes, did he? He wouldn't peer out, afraid of seeing them strolling up the hill or even standing inside his front yard. Oh, no. Not him. He couldn't let himself become devoured by fear.

"Pervert!" someone yelled. "What're you doing? Fucking your mom again?"

The mall. Hugh could almost smell his favorite squishy red fish. I need to get up there. Get a game or a magazine. Remember how much we used to love to go to the mall, Dennis? You'd go into the record store, I'd go into the game store, and we'd be so happy. Everything was perfect. I still have all those old games, you know, if you want to play, we can look at them when you come.

Safe within his own room and free from the taunts and ever-invading flesh, Hugh sank into his bed with his favorite deck of cards. He thumbed through them