

House of the Living



Nick Hayden

The House of the Living

By [Nick Hayden](#)

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*“The T-Rex corpse you discovered?” asked Gunn.*

*“Yes. I found it in a cave lined with a strange element that’s been giving my mineralogist friends a heyday. It was completely unlike anything on Earth, so we concluded it was extraterrestrial in origin....” –[Destroyer](#)*

This short story is inspired by an incident from the novella [Destroyer](#), written by [Nathan Marchand](#), [Natasha Hayden](#), and [Timothy Deal](#). Though you do not need to have read that book to understand what follows, there are allusions to the events of that book.

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My grandmother had this room she sealed off from the rest of the house. I saw it only once or twice. The furniture was covered in plastic. There were mothballs in the drawers. And I remember a faint layer of dust, like a powdering of snow, so ancient that it still held footprints from years before.

“Get away from that door!” she scolded the first time I peeked in. I was too young and frightened to ask why.

I remember how it smelled when I first stepped into the chamber—like grandmother’s house. We had on our gear, and we swept our lights through the newly unearthed expanse, deep in the cave.

I remember watching the beam of my light pass over the carcass without really understanding what I was seeing. Even after I saw, I did not believe. A few splinter-sized shards of crystal unknown to the scientific community had come to us, delivered by the strange chances that mark so many discoveries. We hoped to locate more.

We did not expect to find the body of a T-Rex.

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An intact skeleton is unheard of in paleontology. This was not a skeleton. It was a corpse, flesh still flushed with blood. We approached in fear and disbelief, believing it might wake. But, of course, it had to be dead.

We were rational men; we still feared, irrationally, the unknown.

I remember the night before I married, I sensed a gulf about to open before me. I lay in bed, unable to sleep, feeling as if a pit were swallowing me. I told myself it was my imagination. It was cold feet. Becky loved me, and I thought it fine to spend my life with her.

Life was ending, in a way. That's how I explained it to myself. I had felt my freedom slowly slipping from me. Becky wanted to watch a movie on Saturday night or she wanted to play a game of Monopoly on Thursday. It wasn't much. I loved her. That was just how life was going to be now, a new sort of life.

I sank into the pit in my dreams, and woke disconcerted, as if something had been chasing me.

The dinosaur was dead, but preserved as if alive. Perfectly preserved. Better preserved than the Declaration of Independence, and millions of years older.

Dorian, as the T-Rex was named, was studied as a whole and then chopped into pieces, like that story in the Bible. No one ever talks about that story. After a woman is raped and killed, her master, who had not lifted a finger to help her

avoid her fate, cuts her into twelve pieces and sends a body part to each tribe of Israel to decry that such evil existed in the Holy Land.

Perhaps there was evil in Dorian; Moscow certainly thought so by the time our war with the Russo-Chinese Coalition ended so strangely. It was none of my concern. My studies did not relate to the T-Rex.

Others claimed the crystals were evil, but that was later.

I attended Dr. Kiefer Steiner's memorial service, the one they held in the States after all the hubbub concerning the Apollyon Incident died down. Dr. Steiner was a respected colleague, if not exactly a friend.

There was no body. I like it best that way. A corpse is worse than a skeleton; a skeleton is bereft of something tangible, a corpse of something essential but elusive. Death is more palpable without the body. You can pretend the person has simply disappeared, like a character on a show that's been canceled, stuck in an eternal present you'll revisit someday.

I remember one of our mutual acquaintances complaining afterwards, as we professionals gathered to chat outside the funeral home. "You hear what people say. They say he deserved his end because he tried to play God."

We created God in the first place, I thought. He's the image we created for ourselves, the aspiration of intelligent man, the goal of evolution. I said, "Of course he played God. What else are we supposed to do? Play monkey?"

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I remember the exact moment—it was at Angelo's. I had the ziti al forno. Becky was talking about her day. I added comments about my own. I remember mentioning an incident that had happened during lunch, how the electricity went off for a moment and ruined Greg's computations. I don't remember what she said.

Somewhere beneath her words was an unspoken emotion. I sensed it first when we ordered. It lurked beneath our meal, silent. I think if I would have asked, she would have come out with it, whatever it was.

I pressed on, talking now of politics.

The crystals were not terrestrial in origin. That was obvious from the start. They emitted an energy that had preserved a T-Rex for millions of years. The applications of such a process, if harnessed, were innumerable.

Such a process should also be impossible.

Entropy is the central truth of the universe. Everything runs down to darkness and chaos and nothing. Everything decays and dies. The T-Rex had not; though dead, it remained as if breath had just left it.

I remember Becky crying over the phone. I didn't understand what she was saying at first. She had stopped her pills without telling me, conceived without telling me, and now what might have been life was gone. She was convinced she had lost it, though she couldn't have been more than 6 or 7 weeks.

“Why? Why did it happen?”

She needed something, someone to blame so she could make sense of it. I understood that. But my brain would not absorb what had happened. She seemed a different person than I had left that morning, as if she'd lived a whole life in the hours of my absence. I spoke like a scientist: “Some abnormality must have affected the fetus. The body rejected it.” There was no one to blame.

She hung up, and I could not help but feel relief.

When I first examined the lattice of the crystals, I stared and tried to comprehend.

There is an order in nature, in the arrangement of atoms and the structure of matter. But I did not see the regular, geometric pattern I expected; I saw a jungle.

Filaments—fibrous vines—interwoven and splayed and twisted, forming a mass of tangles. Somehow, on the macro level, the structure resembled crystal, the convolutions resolving into order just as in those posters where a thousand distinct pictures form a single large design. Except this was like taking a thousand paint splattered canvases and constructing the ceiling of Sistine Chapel.

In the early days, we wore containment suits when studying the crystals. I remember the hassle of putting the thing on. We laughed; we looked like aliens

ourselves, and we took such pains to protect ourselves from what had preserved almost-life for millions of years.

We exposed mice to the crystals. We found no change in them until death. Then they remained as if in stasis. We had one cage where live specimens routinely tried to interact with a mouse that had died three years previously beneath the gaze of the crystals.

When I was twenty-one, I got the call that my mother had been in an accident. I hadn't more than that to go on, but I knew immediately that she had died. It was 9:24pm when I received the call. I remember looking at my phone just before answering.

It seems that the mind isn't designed to accept death. For months afterward, when I called home, I expected her voice instead of Dad's. I discovered the newest book by her favorite author and wanted to tell her. Even twenty years later, I found myself looking at the date on the calendar and remembering, suddenly, that this was the day she died.

We never found another crystal deposit. The NASA people determined the size and date of the meteor that had brought them to earth, even calculated the patch of sky it originated from. They never discovered a life-sustaining planet in that direction, but they kept looking.

Eventually, researchers in every major country managed to get a hold of a few shards of the original collection. My own access was limited. I had been privy to their discovery, and I was respected in my circles, but my circles were small. And then after the Apollyon Incident, I didn't care to be in the spotlight.

I remember reading, some time after those early days, the journal that put forth the first solid hypothesis on the structure and purpose of the crystals.

"I don't understand." She was trying to, but I was talking fast and she had been engaged in one of her books moments before. "Brain tissue?"

She looked old and tired. I remember thinking that when I paused. We had never had children, and she read voraciously, three or four books a week despite work. And I let her be.

"No, not exactly. I'm not explaining it correctly. You know how DNA works?"

"A double helix or something, right?"

"A twisted strand of information. Compact. Remarkably efficient. Just like a computer stores information in ones and zeroes. It's data. If we begin to examine it with information theory—"

"I still don't understand. Everyone's known that. You told me something like that before."

"I said it had order, that it had to mean something. Of course it has to mean something. It looks random, but it couldn't be. The researcher who wrote

the paper is a neurologist. He points out very convincing points of similarities between the brain's make-up and the crystal's internal structure. Not the shape, but the arrangement and the way the energy pulses through the lattice—like brain waves.”

She wasn't impressed. It was alien; she expected anything, and so the revelation seemed anticlimactic. She read books, and everything did happen in books. But in real life, not everything was possible.

Was it an alien brain we had carved up and scattered across the globe? Was it a collective of minds? A backup of some consciousness long dead? An artificial lifeform?

Whatever it was, it was immeasurably complex and oddly powerful. The energy it gave off was a byproduct of what we now considered a thought process or a simulation of thought. Perhaps the energy was a sort of telepathy or speech we could not understand.

I never saw a picture or the footage, but I imagined it vividly. Dr. Lily Chen, mid-40s, sitting unprotected beneath the crystals, leaning her head against the sharp surface of one. Waiting, willing, summoning—nothing. I don't know how often she had tried to communicate in this way; I don't know what motivated her. Afterward, many tried to extrapolate from earlier records.

That day, she'd added something special. Some sort of antiemetic plus pentobarbital. In a bit, she begins to become drowsy. She leans her head against the crystal, as always. Her eyes close, willing, summoning....

When her lab assistant finds her, she looks asleep. A dribble of blood hangs on her forehead where the pressure against a shard has cut her. She is dead, but not quite. She is stuck in the moment of death.

They do not move her. For a week, they run tests, until they can no longer keep her death a secret.

I see her still, asleep, red blood upon her forehead.

I think my wife knows I sometimes see other women. I suspect she sees other men, if not in real life, then in her books. I cannot compete with her bookmen. And though they are fictional, I sometimes think they are more real to her than I am. She peeks in at their seeming lives, returning again and again to re-read the same dead words that hold the verisimilitude of life.

We create our realities. We choose what to allow and what to ignore. The brain that processes concrete surroundings processes the abstractions of imagination. All great art began within and was ushered out into the physical world by artists. Was their art less real before it was created? Let there be light—and there was.

I do not blame her for her incorporeal world. Myself, maybe, but not her.

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I remember when I first made contact. I was speaking to it. It was a habit I had formed from the beginning, like when one talks to a dog or a baby not expecting it to understand. After discovering what it might be, I talked more deliberately, hoping the mind (or minds) within would hear and, over time, come to understand.

For years, nothing happened. Even as I continued with more pressing research, I made time each week to visit. It was a nearly religious experience for me—a ritual cleansing to prepare myself, then a prayer in the confessional booth. Whenever I began to grow self-conscious of my time with the crystals, I reminded myself of my scientific purpose.

It had been a hard week. My father had called and told me he'd been diagnosed with prostate cancer. I'd feared, irrationally, something like this for the last 25 years, ever since my mom died. I told the crystals what I felt, how I was afraid of death.

And they spoke to me.

My dad reacted badly to the news of cancer; he became a Christian. He threw himself into it wholeheartedly, and I always thought of it as an act of desperation.

One day when we met for supper he tried to convert me. He looked horrible. The chemo had ravaged him. He had not lived a particularly clean life—alcohol, gambling, maybe drugs, all at one time or another. I don't know what all.

I didn't ask. It went in phases like everything with him. For seven months, he went vegan.

“Do you remember when you were nine,” he said after he tried to explain the wonders of the Godhead, “and you woke up screaming? Do you remember that?”

I did.

“You'd had a nightmare about the end of the universe. Darkness, you kept saying between tears. Darkness and nothingness forever. It really affected you. I remember it because it affected me, too. You always had a mind that fixated on the big things. Small things, at least if they were small to you, didn't matter.”

I thought he was going to try the “small things do matter” route. It wouldn't be the first time.

“Do you know what the Bible says?” he continued. He was completely earnest. “I am making everything new.’ And somewhere, I forget where, it talks about the indestructible life of Jesus. There's this sense of life bubbling up, unstoppable, and I thought of your nightmare and decided I needed to tell you. Life everlasting.”

There was nothing to say to that. It was another story, a variation of what occupied the hours of Becky's life, one of a million realities created and traded every day. Not my reality. I tried to smile and said, “Thank you, Dad.”

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When they spoke to me, they did not use words. It was a vision. It passed through my mind like a nightmare—a deep purple sky, cracked swollen land, a touch upon me like a finger of fire; deep, twisting caverns; rough, reverent motion deep in the earth; and fear, fear so thick and dull it made me want to vomit.

It is hard for me to detail my experience in better terms. An alien mind touched me and what little I could fathom were like snapshots strung haphazardly together.

I do not think it meant to communicate with me, that it had any true interest in my being. I think this because I understood its fear—the gnawing anxiety of a life slipping away to no purpose, to no end, to dust and darkness. We shared this fear, and when it sensed it in me, it searched me out, so that it wasn't alone.

I kissed my wife that night and tried to talk to her, but I was out of practice and she had long ago hidden her self from me. I sat up, restless, useless, late into the night, like Scrooge visited by his ghosts and unable to act on his newfound convictions.

And what were my convictions? Nothing, just emotion, a deep unsettledness, a desperate need to connect with someone else who understood.

It frightened me that I had made contact with an alien life, and it held no answers. It was as lost as I was.

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I sought out Dr. Phillip Snyder, who had made recent advances in understanding the crystals' energy signal. I flew to California to have dinner with him, saying I wished to share research.

He was a tall, thick man, built like an athlete. He had piercing, calculating eyes. After small talk and appetizers, I told him of my experience.

I remember his stern, thoughtful face. I felt compelled to add: "It's the truth."

"What do they want?" He did not seem to be mocking me.

"I don't know. I don't understand most of what I saw. But I know it's not a computer, not an artificial intelligence. They are in there. I don't think they know where they are or even that something exists outside of their...surroundings."

"Try contacting them again. I need more information."

"It was an accident. I've tried again. I don't think they want to communicate."

"So, you can guess what they don't want? You connected with it, it seems. If what you say happened is true, it is likely you understand them subconsciously. Don't think. Just answer. What do they want?"

"Not to die."

A hotel room is a lonely place. When it is dark and the streets below are full of cars and unknown faces, when the room is too cold and your few belongings are splayed around your carry-on, you live in an island of reality. You can imagine

all sorts of petty fantasies or mope in vague anxieties. The TV whitters away, munching down time. You want to call someone; you hope for a knock at the door and a smile; you raid the vending machine for encouragement.

This is life.

Dr. Snyder invited me back, this time to his lab. He shook my hand with his strong grip and explained what he planned to do and my role in it.

So I sat in a chair, strapped in case I lost consciousness, and tried to feel out the alien mind. It was useless, I knew, and I could not speak to them without embarrassment because he was observing me. But he ran his tests, recording my brainwaves alongside the crystals' energy readings.

Then he began to smash the crystals to powder.

He had a machine that did it, and I knew he used it reluctantly, but he was convinced that if I was right, if the aliens didn't want to die, then threatening the safety of their consciousness was the best way to make them show themselves.

I remember that first blow, the crack. I began to cry. I didn't want to, but the emotion hit me powerfully. We were murdering them, or what was left of them. They were terrified of the emptiness beyond.

"Stop!" I cried out. Tears streamed down my face. "Stop!" Deep terror assailed me; my vision darkened. I don't know how much of it was my doing, how much was theirs.

When I recovered, Dr. Snyder was reviewing the data. "Fascinating."

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“I am the resurrection and the life.”

I tried not to cry at my father’s funeral. It had been expected. It was the way of all life. Everyone lost their father eventually.

I didn’t miss him yet; I hadn’t time for that. But his body in the coffin was a shell; he had gone. Had he gone to heaven—as he had believed at the end?

I knew he was gone. And he wasn’t coming back. “He’s in a better place,” they tried to tell me.

I wanted to believe what the preacher preached. But I couldn’t. I wouldn’t. I don’t know why. Sometimes I wonder: is it because I would have to give up my fear, give up everything? To believe, I’d have to choose a story that wasn’t mine.

Everyone believes some story, but my faith in entropy was stronger than my faith in God.

Somehow, I didn’t hear about it until it was in the regular media. In journals, researchers had begun to apply the crystals’ energy in experimental ways, but this went way beyond laboratory fiddling. In Washington state, the first House of the Living opened. An alternate to assisted suicide, terminally ill patients could be preserved until such a time as a cure might be found. All they need do is sit near the crystals, let themselves be injected with a lethal substance and let the preserving power of the crystals do its work. The humane alternative, the news declared.

Years later, I toured one of these facilities. It had dozens of rooms filled with hundreds of bodies, a city of people frozen in time, their bodies full of almost-vitality—a building of living cadavers.

I studied Dr. Snyder’s analysis obsessively. He was onto something. His recording of the energy signatures were filtered through the latest advances in neurobiology. They bore the signs of dream-state thought, but with such noise that it was nearly indistinguishable, like a picture glimpsed through a snowstorm or a melody drowned in static.

I suggested running Dr. Lily Chen’s crystals through his scheme. That was my contribution. He gave me a copy of the results, but he discovered the vital piece before I did and so his name is known and mine is not.

“Invasion of the Brain Snatchers” became the Internet headline, but the truth was far more encouraging. We found Dr. Chen’s brainwave in the noise of the crystals. It still existed within. And the noise—the thoughts of thousands of aliens dreaming.

I never worried about my wife leaving me; she had abandoned the marriage long before, but we were both too afraid to end it. We grew old together. She had a stroke. She never recovered.

I had never been so lonely.

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I had made the decision years before. Once she was gone, nothing held me back but my own fear. I made my appointment and arrived at the local House of the Living fifteen minutes early.

“Reason for stasis?” the Life Counselor asked.

“Genetic predisposition to prostate cancer.” They could (and would) verify this against my genetic profile.

The requirements had lessened considerably over the years, but technically, it was against policy to let a young, healthy person into stasis. Cost was the greater limiter, though a surge of religious fundamentalism also discouraged a percentage of the population. But I had the money. I’d made monthly deposits against this day.

I signed the paperwork and went through the legally required video warnings. “This way please.”

The room she led me to was already occupied. A young man, no older than 30, sat in the provided recliner. It was extended nearly horizontal. A patch of crystal rested against his forehead. His face was almost serene, but there was a tension about the eyes, a slackness about the jaw....

“I apologize, sir. This room is in use.” My nurse was angry. Someone would get a lecture. “We’ll use Room 5B.”

She explained the process briskly, reiterating what I had already read and watched. “Is there anything you would like? Our in-house restaurant comes high-

ly recommended, and we offer other services as well. We only ask you be done in two hours, or else we will ask you to leave, no refunds.”

“I’m fine. Thank you.”

“Sweet dreams.” She closed the door.

I sat in the chair and tried not to consider too deeply her final words. This wasn’t dying—but what was it exactly? We still didn’t know. They dream, people claimed. Eternal dreams, like happily ever after. But I wondered sometimes. The aliens had been full of fear. If the brain was absorbed into the lattice, how did it exist? Did it continue to create and ponder, or was it static, simply a copy of what existed at the time of transfer, a series of memories jumbled together, vividly remembered and eternally relived?

I closed my eyes and reclined the chair. With one press of the button, the crystal would lower until its cool surface touched my head. This was the end—no, not the end. Death was the end. This—it wasn’t death. It was something else.

I pressed the button. I felt the sharp edges through my thin hair. The room began to fill with gas (my choice), silently, edging me to death’s door.

And I began to remember....

(End)

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