

Hollow

(3000 words)

Before my best friend died we used to leave messages for each other in the hollows of the acoustic guitars that lined the walls of Henderson's Music, a backstreet instrument warehouse that clanged and buzzed with the sounds of drums and amp feedback and strings being wound and unwound. I remember the first message I got. It was scrawled on a piece of yellow scrap paper and folded into a tight square. I shook it out of the body of a Gibson jumbo and it dropped at my feet like a plectrum. It said: "I can (almost) play the pentatonic scale in five positions. And who do you think has the best legs in school? I reckon Jess B."

Me and Noah worked at the shop on different days. It was an after-school job. We had to vacuum floors, rip up boxes, sort rubbish and wipe instruments clean of dust and finger grime. For doing this the boss, whose name was Hal Trimmings but everyone called Trim (he was large but had a way of bouncing lightly on his toes like a ballerina), paid us \$12. My parents said this wasn't exactly legal but me and Noah never cared much.

We liked cleaning the guitars. Doing this meant getting our hands on the best guitars in the shop, something Trim didn't like us doing most of the time. And you couldn't clean a guitar without playing it before you put it back. I would usually try something Noah had shown me. He was much better than me, like it came naturally to him somehow. I just hung around him and hoped some of his talent would rub off on me. That if I watched his fingers closely enough, eventually my fingers would do the same.

Henderson's was known for its electric guitars. That's why people came in – usually teenagers dragging parents behind them, or lonely middle-aged dads who wanted to be teenagers again. The shop's acoustic guitars seemed mostly for show. They hung on the wall, gathered dust and made a cool backdrop to the real action on the shop floor.

There was one acoustic guitar that sat high on the shop's back wall. You couldn't reach it without a step-ladder. It was old and beat-up, but not in a way that gave it credibility or made it appealing in any way. Even looking at this thing you could tell it wouldn't stay in tune five seconds. Noah called it "The Shitar" and the name stuck.

The last message Noah sent me was still in the body of The Shitar. I could hear it bouncing around inside when I took the instrument down off the wall. I hadn't read the message, even though it had been there seven months. I still cleaned the guitars, but I didn't play them anymore. I hadn't been able to play at all since Noah died, not even my guitar at home. The few times I'd tried I felt like I couldn't breathe and when I blinked I saw flashes of red like blood being thrown.

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The messages me and Noah sent each other were mostly about the same few subjects. Guitars and music. Guitar gear we wanted. Bands and songs we liked. Girls we had crushes on. Homework and assignments and whether we had done them or not.

Noah went on a lot about Jess. In one message he said how there was a particular pair of long white socks she wore, and how when she wore them, and particularly when the socks bunched around her tanned ankles, he couldn't concentrate on anything else at school all day. "I want her to wear the socks, but also in some ways I don't," he wrote.

The messages went between us for months, so that it became rare to come to work and not find one. Sometimes the note was inside the first guitar I cleaned, and other times I wouldn't find it until my shift was nearly over. When there was no message, I'd wonder if I'd missed it somehow, and backtrack, picking up each guitar along the line and giving it a shake, listening for the familiar rattle.

Me and Noah never talked about the messages at school. Not what was in them or even that they existed. Because the notes we sent each other, particularly in the beginning, were mostly about guitar, it felt natural to leave it all at Henderson's, for these exchanges to remain where there was always the sound of guitars being strummed and the woody and vanilla scent of new instruments.

And maybe it was because these messages existed in a private space away from school and our friends and everything else that made Noah start saying things he hadn't said before. One day I came into Henderson's, shook a message out of a nylon-string Yamaha, and read this: "You can play pretty much every song ever written with the I-V-vi-IV pattern. I was doing it last night. Does your dad drink? My dad drinks all the time."

After that Noah mentioned his dad a lot in his messages, as if he felt a freedom now a secret was out. The messages still began with something about guitar or Jess, but then usually moved on to his dad.

Noah wrote how his dad was angry all the time, and the only time he wasn't angry was when he'd had about two drinks, when he became funny and full of love for everything and would promise Noah a new guitar or to fix up his amp. But then he'd drink more and become angrier than he was before he drank anything at all. "I wish he just had two drinks," Noah wrote.

I never knew how to respond in my messages. I would write it sucked about his dad and then say something about guitar. I'd say how good he was and that I wished more than anything to be able to play like him one day. I'd say I thought Jess liked him, even though I didn't really know and to me she seemed mostly focussed on herself and her hair, which she was forever pulling strands of in front of her face like she was checking the colour or quality.

There was this one day at school when Noah was down in a way I hadn't seen before. He was quiet and his eyes were red like he'd been crying or hadn't slept. We were walking between classes. A space opened around us, so that for a moment, in a school of a thousand teenagers, it felt like we were alone.

"Is it your dad?" I said, my voice wavering.

Noah looked straight ahead, as if trying to decide whether to say something or not. I could see a pulsing in his jaw. He could tell I was looking at him. Eventually he put his arm out and his fingers made the shape of a chord in the air. His other arm came down in a strum.

"Crrraang!" he said and turned to me and tried to smile. It may have been his way of saying

he wanted talk about his dad left at Henderson's, or that music would save him. I don't know and I'll never know. But in a moment other students were around us and we were caught again in the stream of bodies heading to class, sounds bouncing off the corridor walls in a way so familiar it was like there was no sound at all.

Noah died about a month later. The car he was in failed to take a turn on a quiet stretch of road just out of town and ran into a tree. I was told there wasn't even skid marks, like the car was just gliding towards a destiny. Noah's dad was driving and was okay apart from banging his leg up pretty bad. But my mum said his life was over anyway and it would have been better for him if he'd died as well.

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I knew something was different when I came into Henderson's, but it took me a moment to work out what it was. I looked around the shop. Trim was behind the counter, untangling and sorting cables. Classic rock was on the radio. The shop was empty apart from the old bloke with an eye patch who came in once a month to tune the pianos. He looked up at me and tapped two fingers to his temple in his usual greeting. Then my eyes followed a line above his head and I saw the empty space on the wall.

"Where's The Shitar?" I shouted across the shop.

Trim looked up, eyes wide. "The what?"

"The guitar that was there," I said, pointing, feeling air rush from my chest. "The guitar that was always there."

Trim spun around on his toes, craned his neck and looked up at the wall. "I know! Can you believe someone bought it, Nick?" He laughed. "I tried to talk them out of it, but it's what they wanted. Crazy I know."

I reached a hand out to the piano beside me. My legs felt rubbery. I dropped onto the piano stool. "Who bought it?" I said. "Where did it go?" I closed my eyes and gripped the stool. It felt like the shop was tilting away from me and in a moment I would fall off the floor and

crash into the wall. I heard Trim moving across the shop towards me and the sound of a single repetitive note being struck on the piano.

I don't remember what I said after that. Words came in a rush, but didn't make much sense. Trim looked at me in a concerned way. He was uncomfortable. He kept pulling his black Neil Young t-shirt away from his skin as sweat created new spots for it to stick. I rambled on, my eyes returning again and again to the empty space on the wall and the outline of The Shitar traced in dust.

But however confusing my words, all the mentions of Noah were enough for Trim to eventually understand there was something about the sale of the worst guitar in the shop that was important to me. He went back behind the counter and found the sale paperwork.

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Tessa Bloom of Emerald Fields looked wary and confused and asked me to tell her again. We were standing at her front door. The summer sun was low in the sky and long shadows had crept across the front yard to where my bike was dropped against the brick letterbox. A breeze had picked up, and the flag on the back of my bike was fluttering and snapping.

"The guitar you bought today," I said. "Or maybe yesterday, at Henderson's – I work there – it had a piece of paper inside it, folded up –"

"Oh yes!" Tessa said. "It did!" She looked relieved to understand something I was saying. She put her hands in the red square pockets of her black overalls, like she was feeling around for the piece of paper. But her hands stayed in her pockets, flexing open and closed against the material. "Yeah I shook that out. Wasn't it just a receipt or something, like from the factory? I threw it away."

"No it wasn't from the factory," I said, louder than I meant to. I was shaky and out of breath from the ride. Sweat dripped from my forehead. "What was in there – it's hard to explain – but it was mine. It's been in there for months. Where did you throw it?"

Tessa thought a moment, held a hand up and turned inside, striding down a long hall. “Hang a minute,” she said over her shoulder. Her hair was chestnut brown and pulled back in a neat ponytail that swung back and forth as she disappeared into a far room.

She looked a few years older than me. She had the aura of one of your friend’s big sisters. That mix of appealing and unknowable. Like a visitor from a land more interesting than where you lived. A place that smelled like musk and was full of things you sensed but knew nothing about.

Tessa came back down the hall holding a black wire paper bin in her arms. “It should be in here,” she said and flipped the bin over, emptying the contents in a pile on the top step. “So much crap. Sorry. I forget to empty it.”

The wind took several pieces of paper and sent them gliding across the yard. I took off after them, trying to catch them under my foot. “That was really dumb,” I heard Tessa say behind me. “You get those, I’ve got these.”

When I came back Tessa had her arms on the pile and was using her body to shelter it from the wind. I looked at the pieces of paper in my hand and dropped them back in the bin.

“See it anywhere?” Tessa said, hovering her hands just above the pile.

I was distracted by Tessa’s nails. They were painted sky blue and chipped in a way that almost seemed like a design. That’s when I noticed she was missing the ring finger on her left hand. Above the knuckle it was just a smooth stump.

“Stay focused,” Tessa said, like it was something she had said before. I dropped to my knees and scanned the pile. There was lots of paper, many pieces scrunched into balls like they had been thrown across the room, as well as gum wrappers, foil blister packs and old tea bags strangled by the string.

I didn’t have to look long. I had seen Noah’s messages so many times – the way they were folded, the Henderson’s scrap paper he used, the words of his handwriting, visible on an outer fold or through the paper – that my eyes were drawn to his last message, sitting among

Tessa's bedroom rubbish. I picked the letter up, gripped it tightly, and pushed it deep into the pocket of my jeans.

"Got it," I said. "Thanks." I realised I hadn't been breathing, and inhaled deeply, remaining a beat on my knees.

"Cool," Tessa said, but she was looking at me in a funny way. She started putting the rubbish back in the bin. "But why was it in the guitar in the first place?"

I played with the message in my pocket and looked over at my bike. It was getting dark. I could just ride off now. Mum would be getting worried. Her worry had grown since Noah died, found new places. But I felt I owed Tessa something.

"Me and my friend used to leave messages for each other inside the guitars in the shop but then he died in a car crash," I said, keeping my eyes down on a patch of sun-scorched lawn. I spoke without pausing. I knew if I stopped for breath a shakiness would enter my voice.

"Shit, I'm sorry," Tessa said. "That's so sad."

I swallowed heavily and a silence fell around us. The only sound was a sprinkler next door, its swish and stutter, softer and louder as it swung along its arc.

But there was a part to Tessa's question I hadn't really answered and it swirled in the air between us. Why was the message still in the guitar? I wasn't completely sure of the answer, even though it was a question I had asked myself many times, particularly on the days I missed Noah the most. But I did know that so long as I didn't read the message, Noah and I were still talking, and the moment I read the message, the talking was over forever.

"I'm not ready yet," I said to fill the silence. But I knew this made little sense, so I kept on talking, hoping to move the attention off me. "Why did you buy that guitar? We didn't think anyone would ever want it?"

Tessa held up her left hand and spread her fingers. I looked away, feeling a blush race up my neck. I slapped at a pretend mosquito on my arm.

“You can look,” Tessa said and laughed. “I do all the time. You think I was going to spend money on the best guitar in the shop when I’m short one finger? I don’t know how I’m going to go with this, but when I saw that guitar it felt right to me, like it was a kindred spirit or something.”

Tessa picked up the paper bin and walked it across the lawn to empty it in the rubbish bin by the fence. Over her head the lights blinked on one by one along the street, like she had set them off with the fall of her feet.

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Later that night I sat on the end of my bed with my guitar on my knees. I took Noah’s message from my pocket, held it a moment, and then pushed it between the strings, letting it fall into the hollow of the guitar. I gave the guitar a shake and closed my eyes, listening to the sound of the message bouncing around inside, like it was a song I loved that I never wanted to end.

After a while I placed my fingers on the strings and made the shape of a chord. I took my ring finger away and thought of different ways Tessa could play the chord without using that finger. I thought about what was possible and what wasn’t. I did this with a dozen chords, feeling the strings cut deep into the soft tips of my fingers.

Then I went back to the first chord and started again. I made notes on a pad. And this time around, with my fingers making their new shapes, I let my other hand fall across the strings in a strum.