

Erica Wagner

The Hollow Ones

She moved thousands of miles away. A Greyhound bus carried her farther and farther from her past, to a new place where she could start over. Obviously there was plenty of heroin where she was now, but she couldn't base her relocation off of where she could score. She made that promise long ago. *Heroin will not define my life anymore.* Avoiding it was still vital, but before her addiction, even before him, she had always wanted to move to a big city. After everything, her options were narrowed down for her; L.A. became too expensive, Chicago too close. New York seemed like her only option. She could rent a studio apartment in downtown Brooklyn for under \$1500 a month, which a good waitressing job could easily support. *That was the one good thing that came from the past couple of years,* she thought to herself. *At least I still have a skill.* Living in the nation's most populous city was quite a contrast from living in the Midwestern suburbs, but she enjoyed the change. The grit of the city felt more welcoming to her damaged soul than the pristine lawns of the privileged which she once called home. Sure, there were a lot fewer police sirens in the upper middle-class neighborhood where she grew up, but her new neighborhood's daunting streets provided just the right amount of danger to fuel a steady pump of adrenaline in her veins, flushing out the last traces of their previous inhabitants.

Moving in on her own was easy, as she had nothing of much value, sentimental or otherwise, except some of her old clothes and pictures, a blanket her grandma knit for her, a few CD's, and some books. These were her only reminders of the life she once had, a spoiled only child of two successful attorneys—parents who loved her, but not enough to take the wool from over their eyes and use some discipline. Her savings were nonexistent, but she only needed to scrimp for a couple more months until her twenty-second birthday, when her grandparents' trust would be available to her. She remembered how, when they died, she couldn't understand why she didn't get a giant check, like in movies and on TV. At eleven, these were the only points of reference she had for loss. Now she had enough experience with loss to last a lifetime.

“One day you’ll get what they left you, Olivia,” her parents explained, “just not until you’re responsible enough to use it well.” Just thinking about all she would do with that money now as opposed to what she would have done with that money a year ago sent waves of nausea through her gut. Had her grandparents known their children were raising a disaster? The picture of the three of them, laughing at a forgotten joke at their last Christmas together, hanging on her wall was the first she put up.

A fresh start in a filthy city. *How do I start over? Can I? Is it even possible for a human who has known the life that I knew to her past behind and move forward?* Really, she already had started over once before. She turned her back on her safe life and became, in her eyes at least, a monster. She threw away the three years of college education her parents had funded, abandoned her ideas of becoming a writer, left the friends who could not and would not handle her new way of life behind. After considering starting over in that way she knew she could do it, though this time it would be much, much harder. There would be no magic injection to make her forget she had no one and nothing but him and an empty stomach, like last time. No, this time, she knew, she would have to feel it. And it would hurt.

The last time she saw Caleb she was strapped to a gurney. He couldn’t even bring himself to come inside the hospital room, where her parents sat at her side with tears in their eyes, saying they couldn’t do this again, that she had to get it together. She stared through the window in the door—double-glass with tiny metal wires intertwined with one another, so no lunatic could break through—trying to fight the tremors, pulling her wrists against the restraints, driving the straps into her skin, which she was sure was going to burst into flame and freeze off all at once, ignoring their sobs and pleas. She couldn’t hear their words anyway. Their voices were metal on metal in her ears. She caught sight of him, standing there staring at her with a look of utmost pain and self-loathing on his beautiful face. The green-blue eyes that stared back at her were not his anymore, she knew that. But she could not help but hope that he would fill the ten steps between them and help her, that he would make the shaking and sweating and heaving stop. But he didn’t. She mouthed his name, trying to get it out, but only managing to slip “Cal” into her gasps. “Liv,” he breathed, and she saw tears welling in his eyes, his hands gripping the hair on the back of his head, his arms slamming tight against the

sides of it. She was about to yell out at him, but before she could find enough air, he had turned away from her. And then he walked away. She became hysterical. The thrashing became more violent, the gasps turned into screams, and before she knew what was happening, a nurse was pumping a vial of something into her IV drip, murmuring soothing words to deaf ears. Blackness dragged her under, and when she resurfaced, all she felt was emptiness. Thoughts like these are what keep her from relapsing. The pain of the withdrawals, the shaking. The memory of her reflection as she changed out of her hospital gown and into her own clothes in the rehab clinic, which showed every rib and protruding hip bones. The hurt and anger she felt toward him, the person who caused all of this. He called her in rehab. He was high and she hung up. He tried to visit, and she heard his voice echoing her name down the hall since they would not let him in. After her month's stay here, she was determined to get away. She called him one morning, hoping to wake him, to catch him before his breakfast injection.

"I can't stay here," she said.

"I know, Liv. I'll get you out of there. I'll explain everything. I'll—"

"No, Cal. I can't stay here. In this town. I need a clean break. I can't go through the things I do with you anymore. When I get released, I'm leaving, and I can't tell you where I'm going. You can't come looking for me. You just can't. It will kill me if you do. Do you understand?"

After a long pause, Caleb spoke. "You can't do this to me. What am I supposed to do here without you? You promised me, we promised each other we'd never do this. You can't do this." Silence. "Don't do this." More silence. "Please, Liv."

A final silence, then, "Goodbye, Cal."

And she hung up.

They first met at a Halloween party, introduced by mutual friends. They were both nineteen, starting their sophomore year of school, and finding out who they were. She was attracted to his stunning good looks, the way his bright eyes contrasted with his black hair, the way the muscle in his jaw moved when he was silent, his still-athletic frame—shown off by his Indiana Jones costume, always a favorite character of hers—which most of the guys their age had lost after the fatal "freshman fifteen" kicked in. He was attracted to her smile, the way she talked and moved, her honey brown hair and tan skin

which would soon fade to a creamy pale hue. He clung to her side the rest of the night, and when he walked her back to her apartment she made him cling even longer. They talked, they dated, they fell in love instantaneously. In less than a year they were talking about their future in “we” terms. They both liked trying new, rebellious things. She took her first drink in her parents’ basement at twelve and was hospitalized for alcohol poisoning by seventeen. Cal was lectured by teachers, principals, parents, older sisters, and even police, when each in turn caught him with pot. Both liked to defy what they knew their parents wanted from them, which was why they both chose seemingly careerless majors: her English, him Anthropology. They felt like Romeo and Juliet—martyrs to their society, their upbringing, their cushy lives—thrown together by fate. They were intense. They did everything together. Their first New Years’ Eve she insisted he try ecstasy with her. They were going to a rave and she wanted to push their limits. But she never intended to take it farther than that. Then again, she never considered cocaine until they tried it together. Cal got a taste for new highs, and it overtook him. Heroin was the only logical outlet left for them, he reasoned, but she knew what heroin was capable of. He didn’t want to do anything without her. He was ready to jump off the cliff, and he needed to drag her with him. She resisted as long as she could, until finally she couldn’t refuse him anymore. She loved him too much to deny him anything. They agreed just once would be enough. And it was enough. A year later, locked in a hospital room with a social worker and her parents, she knew it was enough. Beautiful, intelligent, privileged Olivia Lee never thought that she would become an addict. Or that she would overdose on heroin before her twenty-first birthday. Above all, she never thought that she would do it alone.

Looking back, she knew it was her own idiocy that got her to this point. He weighed fifty pounds more than her and they were injecting the same amount. Of course she turned blue, of course she stopped breathing. He called 911, but left through the back door of her apartment as soon as the flashing lights came into view. She wasn’t mad anymore. She even understood his reasoning. How could he be with her in the hospital if he was being arrested for possession? What she couldn’t understand was the look on his face when their eyes met that last time. She saw pain, she saw longing, but she also saw him turn his back on her. Why had he not come to her? How could he have left her when she was so broken? When she needed him most? So

instead of forgiving, she chose to forget. She would wipe him out. As her body recovered in the clinic, so would her heart.

She was lucky to find a job serving at a new restaurant in Tribeca. Between the business lunches and the afternoon gossip fests between “stay-at-home” moms whose kids were with the nannies, the rumor that the chef just opened his third restaurant in Paris, every shift became a busy one. Olivia soon bolstered her savings enough to furnish her apartment and still have money left over. She started yoga classes to boost her self-control, which helped reduce the residual tremors, and as a result felt better than she would have ever thought possible a few months ago. She even emailed her parents a long letter of apology, letting them know what she was up to and that she was actually okay for the first time in a year. She celebrated a very uneventful twenty-second birthday with her coworkers and a cupcake with a candle stuck in it in the kitchen at work. For the first time in a long time, she felt optimistic about her future. Time to start making some plans, she thought.

About a week after her birthday, as she walked into work for the dinner shift, she saw a face she never expected to see in New York. How had he gotten here? How did he know where to find her? Cal looked like hell, skinnier than she had ever seen him with a yellow tinge to his once alabaster skin. She went over to where he sat with his foot twitching and his eyes fixed on his hands, which were playing with a set of silverware. She didn't sit down but he knew she was there. As he looked up at her their eyes locked on one another's. He had come here for her. He was still using, he was completely broken, but he was here. Loathing herself, she took a piece of paper from her apron and wrote out her address, got her key from her purse, and handed both to him. He left wordlessly, and she understood now why relapsing is so common. The craving she had been fighting for over a year was just too much, the need for a fix too strong. She had a void to fill.