

The subject of the “uncanny”... Belongs to all that is terrible—to all that arouses dread and creeping horror... The German word (for “uncanny”) *unheimlich*, is obviously the opposite of *Heimlich*, meaning “familiar” “native” “belonging to the home” and we are tempted to conclude that what is “uncanny” is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar... (But) among its different shades of meaning the word *Heimlich* exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, *unheimlich*... on the one hand, it means that which is familiar and congenial and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight.

— Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny”

Panpsychism (from Greek *pan*, “all”; *psychē*, “soul”), a philosophical theory asserting that a plurality of separate and distinct psychic beings or minds constitute reality.

Notes

1. *Humour in the Water Coolant* is set over the course of one evening in real time. Times are provided but not necessary to display in staging rather they provide the actors and director a sense of the pacing of the evening.
2. Brackets represent auditory elements and parentheses non-verbal actions.
3. In the play people are objects. There is no visual hierarchy to indicate any difference between actors and the appliances they give voice to. For example, the actor playing Shower is not required to hunch.
4. The play can only be documented via cell phone video material sourced by audience members.
5. Any subsequent restaging must occur with the artist’s permission and within the parameters provided in notes 1-4.

Dramatis Personae

HOUSE Located at 31 Market Street, House was built in 1973. Their facade is a mix of red brick and cheap cream clapboard. Inside, they are just big enough to not feel small and just small enough to not feel big. Recently purchased by Sophie, House contains worn-down rooms, floors that are warped but clean, and a suite of spooky appliances. House communicates with the audience and appliances but remains unseen by Sophie. Omniscience has never been more futile or overrated.

SOPHIE In her early thirties, haggard and threadbare, Sophie looks like someone who hasn't slept for weeks. She is a former soap opera actress who despite the recent syndication of her show isn't getting cast in new roles. Typecast as the libidinal temptress, Sophie was recently told by her agent that she's aged out of the spotlight and maybe should take up gardening. She escaped the din of "the city" to get away from her feelings of failure. Childless, she recently found out she's barren and has begun fertility treatments in an attempt to find meaning in the void of her despair. Wiry from exhaustion she gives off the energy of a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

CRYSTAL Mid-forties, Crystal has large hair and deep laugh lines. She appears to be lit from within, quick to smile but reserved. She dresses as if she is a conservative grade school teacher, an undercover spiritualist. Sophie has called her to perform an exorcism on House and its subsequent appliances.

LAMP Lamp is a mid-century modern hanging lamp with a fan. Lamp is in Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, Codependents Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous, etc. A consummate addict, Lamp can, unfortunately, only attend meetings by phone.

OVEN An aging decrepit thing, Oven is full of crusty shit. Croaking and creaky, they are dying to be emancipated from their sticky history.

SHOWER Shower is in love and desperate to win Sophie's affection. Downtrodden and distraught Shower constantly weeps.

FRIDGE Fridge needs to be replaced. They are rotting from within.

[Sounds of cupboards banging, water running, low hum of a refrigerator, a fan whirls on high, a microwave beeps, kettle whistles, a radiator rattles, hiss of a gas leak.]

Lights flicker on and off.

SOPHIE *(Whispering frantically.)* W-W-WHO ARE YOU?
WHO IS THERE?
COME OUT!

[Silence for several beats.]

09:27 pm CRYSTAL walks up to the door of 31 Market Street. She presses the doorbell and looks at her phone to check the time. CRYSTAL drops her large bag at her feet. As she waits to be let in, HOUSE begins speaking from a corner.

HOUSE Welcome, welcome! Oh yes... just keep brushing your feet on me like that. Stamp on me a little harder. I love it, just like that. Perfect... A threshold is always ripe for defilement, isn't it? A perfect place to pervert my little "Welcome."

Unbeknownst to the guest, HOUSE circles CRYSTAL assessing her.

HOUSE Crystal? I thought I overheard Sophie had set tomorrow as the day for your visit. You *(Nods to CRYSTAL.)* look better than I imagined, less "hippie," thank god.

Evening is an appropriate albeit conventional time for a seance, isn't it? Spring in this part of the world always has a murky, liminal air, as if it can't shake winter. Ideal setting for a ghost story. But that's beyond me. But in here, well, while I may seem like a simple shelter, I've seen it all.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the door, SOPHIE readies to let CRYSTAL in.

HOUSE I know SHE *(Points to SOPHIE.)* has been googling a lot, searching, "Exhaustion" "Hospitalization" "Renovation" "Question mark." And "Break Ups" "Infertility" "Haunting" "Question mark."

Just as the door of 31 Market Street swings open CRYSTAL reaches down to grab her bag, and HOUSE steps aside.

SOPHIE, glasses askew and hair tousled, stands before them. SOPHIE reaches out to shake CRYSTAL's hand, but the CLAIRVOYANT walks in.

CRYSTAL orients herself in the middle of the living room. She turns to SOPHIE.

CRYSTAL So, tell me exactly what happens after you go to bed.

SOPHIE sits on a worn leather chair across from CRYSTAL. She looks down, distractedly, at her hands.

SOPHIE I have my hot tea right around now, and bring old scripts into bed. Then I'll make notes and test lines and usually an hour or so later I'm ready to turn off the lights.

I've gotten into the habit of visiting every room before I try to sleep, trying to understand how my body moves through each space. And even then... I swear... it's as soon as I close my eyes... this whole place *comes alive*. Not always though. No. Other nights it's more subtle, more disturbing... Have you ever heard a shower cry? Or an oven bellow and scream? I know I must sound crazy to you, I hardly believe it myself! The first time this happened, I thought, okay, this is just stress. The stress of moving, the

stress of being alone, of buying this house: making a big change, a big decision. But the second time it happened, I thought... alright maybe this is a mental condition, like a pathology, something going seriously wrong in my head. But now... I mean, it's been every night for fourteen nights.

Am I crazy? If I'm crazy, I'm crazy! It's just, I don't *feel* crazy.

Did I tell you about the thermostat? When I woke up the other morning, it had been set to freezing. I was shivering, my fingers turned blue. (*She gets more and more upset as she is speaking.*) The flowers on the kitchen table had crystallized and the water in the vase was frozen solid.

Oh! And then just last night, I woke up and the gas range was turned on, full blast, the flames practically touching the ceiling.

And when I say the shower was crying, I mean crying. I woke up the other morning and it had been running hot water all night, the wallpaper peeling off in sheafs, the steam bubbling beneath. It doesn't make any sense! Unless... someone *must* be living inside the floorboards or coming into the house without my noticing. Am I being tormented by some psychopath with the key? Some former owners? Or... (*Now speaking low, almost under her breath.*) This couldn't all be happening from *within*... could it?

The two women sit together quietly for a moment. CRYSTAL is listening closely to SOPHIE's account, and at the same time, she is taking in the space. HOUSE has been patiently waiting for a pause and steps back into the proverbial spotlight.

HOUSE Hey, there's a roof over your head isn't there? I've spent years keeping the flies outside. I let rain drip down my spine and

slide down my shingles. Soak me through! I keep the heat in, and let the cold out. And look at this, what has she done for me? Bad taste let me tell you, the wallpaper suffocates.

Then again, it's not her fault. You can't expect someone so fragile to truly inhabit a space. *Unheimlich*. She repulses herself by looking at this "living room." She'll sometimes even pull down the attic staircase and just leave it there, as if she is creating a new exit, or way out of here.

Noticing CRYSTAL's gaze, SOPHIE, somewhat uncomfortable with silence, interjects as if to justify the state of her house.

SOPHIE I'm almost done unpacking, just a few things here and there. Ugh, I am such a terrible procrastinator.

CRYSTAL (*Smiling.*) Or maybe other forces have been delaying your process. If I were you, I also wouldn't want to move in just yet.

The idea that SOPHIE might not want to live at 31 Market Street lands like a sack of sand on her shoulders, spilling over her. We watch as she sinks deeper into her seat, the weight of this idea slowly caking around her ankles like drying concrete.

HOUSE I heard her tell the broker that after four years of traveling for work and subletting place after place, a recent syndication meant that she could finally gift herself the security of having one fixed address: an investment and a place to grow into.

In the background SOPHIE looks at her hands, and then covers her face.

HOUSE And then in late November after months of looking and losing, Sophie found what she considered a diamond in the rough: *me*.

Now, running her hands over her face, SOPHIE pushes back her hair and looks at CRYSTAL.

HOUSE Crystal has said the very thing Sophie can't stand to hear, the thing that touches the tender heart of her crippling self-doubt, her deep fear that she will always make the wrong choice, that she shouldn't be here after all, that she doesn't deserve this security.

CRYSTAL remains unchanged in the face of SOPHIE's intense emotion. CRYSTAL motions to SOPHIE to stand.

CRYSTAL Let's go into the kitchen, I assume that's where you put what I asked for?

10:02 pm *Rapping their knuckles on the ground, HOUSE takes center stage to set the scene for the seance.*

HOUSE Ah, the usual suspects. White and slightly yellowing like my teeth, Fridge abuts Oven with a chipped and stained wood-topped counter that runs seamlessly to the sink. Lamp and even, my god, we even have Shower trying to sneak in. Aren't we excited?

I guess everyone wants their fifteen minutes.

CRYSTAL and SOPHIE stand in front of the round kitchen table looking down at an assortment of river rocks, a key, a folded piece of paper, and three candles. Above them hangs a pendant light.

CRYSTAL lights the candles and closes her eyes. The light flickers.

She raises a necklace, nothing fancy, no denomination present. It is just a single pearl, set in silver, hanging on a silver chain. She swings the chain in a circle, first wide and fast then into ever smaller and diminishing arcs, eventually swinging it side to side.

[Silence. A rattle. A jitter.]

CRYSTAL keeps her eyes lowered, whispering something inaudible. Suddenly a hulking OVEN appears, approaching CRYSTAL and SOPHIE in clunky, mechanical steps. SOPHIE is horrified, frozen in place, eyes fixed on the ground. She cannot look at this approaching thing. CRYSTAL remains composed while dowsing.

When SOPHIE finally raises her eyes, OVEN stands nose to nose with her and speaks.

OVEN (Coughing, hacking and racking.) Ahem. I wasn't born yesterday! Lest I remind you, there is no amniotic fluid when you're an industrial machine.

I remember when they first brought me home, after being born on a factory line under fluorescents. A million little parts. They assembled me. And then, suddenly, here I was. Side by side with the washer and Fridge, part of this small family.

I came to be with no love or even pretense of desire. Nothing viscose, wet. There was no one, nothing to hold me. A beginning, what beginning? I have hundreds of smaller pieces that make me, me. No hands touch me, yet I am touched all over, screwed and fitted into place, used, and opened and closed and open and closed, over and over and over again.

Hands on hips, OVEN is building steam, almost full tilt in their frustration.

OVEN The infernal repetitions of lifestyle I observe. You force me to incubate at will. Running hot to bake, broil, heat my rusted coils. I'm filthy inside, itchy in fact. (Exhales.)

Caked with fat drippings and the overflow of long-forgotten birthday cakes, it's

forever seared in my mind that I am reliant on your reliance on me. What kind of relationship is this but parasitic?

(Almost spitting with spite.) I know, I know, a tool is a hand, set to the desired degree. I am an extension of you, made with images in mind, not of me, but of the confections you crave. I've incubated your hunger for so long, I've existed just to whet your appetite.

(More thoughtfully. A beat.) But what I crave is to run cool rather than to be scorched by this loneliness.

10:32 pm *SOPHIE looks at CRYSTAL to confirm that what she's seeing isn't in her imagination. CRYSTAL nods yes as to say she has heard OVEN and seen this speech. LAMP flicks on and SOPHIE and CRYSTAL turn to look.*

Another figure, this time a beautiful youth, languid and slinky appears. LAMP raises their arms above their hands and stretches.

SOPHIE is visibly agitated.

SOPHIE *(To no one.)* What is going on here?

(Gasps.) Oh my fucking god. That looks like my ex... It can't be, right?

CRYSTAL returns to her candles. She whispers something as she raises both of her hands and then looks at LAMP and invites them towards her.

CRYSTAL *(Softly.)* Hello...

LAMP To shine!

LAMP throws their arms wide. LAMP looks around and zeroes in on SOPHIE, speaking directly to her.

LAMP I feel like myself again. I've been wondering, of course, looking over this place,

if there is any way to ever be known to you. Can you see me, watching you? It's not just you, of course, it's the whole space. Each corner is a microcosm of the world, or so they say. Fractal fantasies, and me your little sun, brought into your life to give your galaxy the approximation of day.

But do you treat me as the power that you want me to be? Do you know how much I know? Do you see even a fraction of what I see? I'm familiar with the spiders, the cobwebs that you ignore, that hang here, like me, left in limbo.

(Laughing, almost snickering.) No, no it's a switch. Yes! Right there. It's on a chain, yes, just pull. Pull harder!

Voila! See! See! Or, ha, now you can see! Finally! But do you, can you ever see?

And sometimes you just turn me on. *(Sober now, with less energy. A sigh.)* You turn me on and leave me wanting all night long, with no witness.

In light, there is clarity, isn't there? Or more room for clouding your reality with fantasy? Sometimes you'd prefer to fuck like this, right? Because you want to be seen too. It's all I wish for myself. But I do get off on compersion. Yes, I get pleasure from your own. Though at times, you decide to let darkness reign. Yet in the dark, I'm left without the ability to know you.

I'm most threatened, of course, by the diurnal turn. I hate most that which I recognize as the essence of what I am, what I can provide. And yes, he who takes over during the day, only wants natural light.

I do not appreciate being used in this way but I am here to be used.

SOPHIE stumbles backward almost as if recoiling from these statements, taking them personally.

SOPHIE Hey wait, that's not fair!

LAMP spits on the floor.

LAMP Use me up. Let me burn all day and night, until I flicker out.

Another person appears as LAMP exits. An older person, almost a crone, shuffles in from the shadows. FRIDGE leans on a cane, dropping market bags at their feet.

FRIDGE *(Cackling.)* Ha! I remember when I was lit from within, able to shine on the inside. Even with my doors closed I knew, at the drop of a hat I could save you. Protect the perishables.

The best thing of my youth was that I knew, at least, that I was filled with possibility. A cabinet of curiosities not yet filled with expiration dates.

But now this aging container, I can no longer maintain my cool. Slowly I fill with rot. The eggs have gone bad and the milk soured. Covered in mold, I'm filled with the shriveled husks of squeezed lemons, half of an avocado blackened, its pit still inside. Malodorous, I'm fragrant with the stench of decay.

What else have you left behind?

Small tubs with attempts at sauces now separated, the fat's hardened. Long fronds of fennel and coriander, once perky and plump with celadon hues, now cast a splintery gray, flaking and dusting like dry skin along the bottom of me. Fruit has gone soft and brown. I watch as you pick the few good berries leaving the tainted fuzzy siblings to decay. Empty jars and cans line the

walls, tops of squirt bottles caked with aging flavor. An avatar of your interior, this rot is what you think you deserve.

You consume waste yet continue to accumulate. What I'm talking about is not a lack of nourishment, but a starvation of spirit. I know what you think of me. That I'm obsolete, but you could skim off the top, see if there's anything worth keeping rather than throw me in the trash. But it's true, neither of us know what you would find.

FRIDGE collects their market bags and shuffles off. HOUSE leads in SHOWER. HOUSE whispers in their ear and pushes them forward. Suddenly, frustrated, SHOWER, the youngest of the group, kicks the chair over and speaks looking at their feet the whole time.

SHOWER I know I'm new but *(Points to HOUSE.)* they say I should express myself directly.

Sophie, your skin is more perfect than any porcelain. God, I love to feel your weight pressing down on me. Your dirty feet, your stinking body, pristine. When you enter me I try to offer you absolution.

Most of the time I feel brittle, dry but as soon as you come to me, it's as if the clouds have parted and I finally get to release. I know the constellations of freckles that align your back.

You allowed me to measure and to cover you. Rinse and repeat. To touch every inch of your skin. But when you first installed me here I saw your joy and reveled in it, humming alongside you. But now, you've become preoccupied with your wrinkling skin, measuring every mole, constantly searching for new imperfections.

I can't weep in private, so I share this grief willingly. I'm best as the protagonist

of my own tragedy. I could lay down in my grief, rust up rather than pour my heart out. I witness you calcifying.

You have meant the world to me. I know I can no longer shower you with my affection, that my heart, like my drain, should never be filled.

SHOWER exits as HOUSE turns to SOPHIE.

[Sounds of cupboards banging, water running, low hum of a refrigerator, a fan whirls on high, a microwave beeps, kettle whistles, a radiator rattles, hiss of a gas leak.]

HOUSE paces back and forth.

HOUSE Crush and grinding, rattle and catch. Crush and grind, rattle and crash.

Do you see how they love you?

How Shower weeps for you, Fridge longs to nourish, Lamp to glow, Oven to warm evenly and thoroughly.

Yet, you operate them at will without a second thought. They do not mean to offend.

I am the keeper of things big and small, a minder and facilitator. Containing these objects, some new, half used, never operated, some even forgotten. Yet you deny their assistance by filling your time looking ahead by looking behind.

In these rooms, your imagined world: you slumber even while you wake. Consumed with desire for a life lost and, maybe, never lived. To be free of the body is to run without a hum, without the worry of a missing heartbeat. There's no growl of an empty stomach, no ache of a strained eye. There's no scent of lactic release or soreness from a sprained and twisted spine.

There's no baited breath walking down these halls with fear and confusion. No internal clock tick ticking away.

How I loathe things. Things are just placeholders, are they not? And yet all I seem to do is provide surface, space, and time for your accumulation and consumption. But what am I without an occupant? Without these things.

I know that eventually, you will vacate me. Leave me bare. That's the problem, isn't it?

Let me ask you, what am I to you but what you imagine of me, of us?

Nothing can be forgotten without a mind.

11:59 pm *And with that, HOUSE leaves, walking out whatever door they can find. The room quiets.*

A deep, still feeling emanates from the room. SOPHIE and CRYSTAL began to take in what they had just observed. There seems to be a hum or echo ringing out, the last vibrations of the voices whose certain reality receded with every passing second..

SOPHIE How do you make a house happy when it never tells you what it wants?

SOPHIE collapses into tears. CRYSTAL begins cleaning her things from the table.

CRYSTAL I think we are just about done... *(Turning back to SOPHIE.)*

Sophie, here are some next steps: open the windows at least three times a day for the next three weeks, let fresh air fill the space, peel back the sheets on your bed when you wake up, let the wind pass over it.

Light candles one hour before you go to bed, and when you blow them out take them to a window and blow the smoke and the ash into the breeze, let it be carried away.

SOPHIE Ok yes. Yes. I can do that. I will do that. Windows. Bedsheets. Candles... You're right, you're so right. Is... is that all?

CRYSTAL Living in many ways requires surrendering. Those extra measures are more precautionary than anything. But it does feel clear here now.

SOPHIE I don't believe it... So can I live here? I live in this house? Finally unpack?

CRYSTAL I don't see any reason why you shouldn't be able to find your peace.

SOPHIE I don't know how to thank you. You don't know what you've done.

CRYSTAL I will send my invoice by email.

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Humour in the Water Coolant

Edited by
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First performed on the opening night of
OLIVIA ERLANGER
Appliance
9.9. - 29.10.2022
KUNSTVEREIN GARTENHAUS, Vienna

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Special thanks to
Rosa Aiello, Eduardo Andres Alfonso, Jill Ferraro, Attilia Fattori Franchini,
Amy Gerstler, Marko Gluhaich, Christina Linher, Ursula Mayer, Franklin Melendez,
Lukas Messner, Zina Noel, Alexander Nussbaumer, Jennifer Piejko, Leonard
Siegwardt, Andrea Longacre White, Elvia Wilk, Isabel Yellin, and the original
cast of *Humour in the Water Coolant*

OLIVIA ERLANGER
Appliance

Wild Seeds 2

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Published by
Wild Seeds, Vienna

Edition of
150

ISBN: 978-3-200-08592-3

Printed in Germany

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This publication is supported by
Austrian Federal Ministry for Arts, Culture, the Civil Service and Sport
Friends of KUNSTVEREIN GARTENHAUS

This publication was made in conjunction with the exhibition
OLIVIA ERLANGER
Appliance
9.9. - 29.10.2022
KUNSTVEREIN GARTENHAUS, Vienna

