

Memory

In that house were many memories. The devil had gone to prepare a place for me.

On the outside, there was nothing overtly ominous about the house. A standard post-war, two-story home, alcoves, paned windows, half-moon glassed front door. The place you'd expect kindly grandparents to live. And kindly grandparents had lived there once. But they were long gone and I had only memories of their presence there. Distant bits of media that played in my head. Memory that could never quite resolve itself, because I was only a child then.

I did remember them, however. My grandmother was an emotional woman, only she hid that emotion. My grandfather was the essential quiet man. Stoic, moral and with the sort of work ethic that has long since faded from my generation and those growing up right behind me. You went to work. You earned a living. You didn't complain. That was it, no more questions.

My grandmother had died when I was only eight years old. The particulars of her death are still something I'm unable to talk about. After her death, my grandfather moved in with my parents and myself, and the old house remained empty, alone, left to contemplate what had happened within its own walls. Sometimes I wonder if it festered there. If the house itself had become angry at being left alone.

The years passed on, as they do, and my grandfather himself passed away. I was still young. Something like fifteen, I believe. His death affected me almost as much as my grandmother's. I just couldn't believe this solid old man could ever leave this planet. He seemed a staple; a figure so strong that not even death could touch him.

The things we believe as children.

Move on, some twenty years or more, and I had my own troubles in life. Troubles that had left me alone and disillusioned. Somewhat bitter, but not to the point I had begun to hate life. Just enough that I had dumped every previous aspect of my life, moved away from the cities I had lived in over the years and had gone back to my small-town roots. I wanted something I remembered. Something stable.

So I bought my grandparent's old house and moved in.

“So, what do you think, Nick?”

Nick was my best friend. I’d known him since, I don’t know, perhaps tenth grade? We’d been away from one another for some ten years, what with life and all. And yet, when I had returned, we had reconnected as though the time had never passed.

“I think you’re a sick man, that’s what I think.”

“Yeah, I’d agree with that, but that doesn’t answer the question I asked. Which, by the way, I asked about the house, asshole, not me.”

Nick laughed. “The house is fine. A bit creepy, but just fine. I can see you living here.”

“It is a bit creepy, isn’t it? But not half as creepy as your fascination with little people dressed in nothing but bits of neoprene.”

“Good God. You find little people porn on my computer once, and suddenly I’m a fetishist?” Nick asked. Not without humor.

“How many more times does one have to see *The Leather Lollipop Guild* on a man’s computer to be worried about him?”

“Point taken,” Nick replied.

That evening, Nick and I shared quite a few Coronas and memories. The house seemed to welcome our presence, as though it had longed for company ever since the day my grandfather had moved out. The air conditioning had always been hit or miss in there, because in the eighties, duct work had been run for the central air unit in a house never built for such a luxury. The units had gone out quite a few times over the years because of how inefficiently the house took to temperature changes. I thought this probably had something to do with the place not selling. Well, that, and the house just didn’t seem to want anyone else to live there.

But that night, the temperature was cool and comfortable. God help me for thinking it, but I wondered if the house wasn’t doing it on purpose, knowing that I am hot natured and like cool temperatures.

Of course, such a notion was preposterous.

“Holy Lord. Was this place always this small?”

Nick and I had gone upstairs. There were two bedrooms downstairs, but one was full of old furniture and junk from years of abandon, and so I had figured

to put Nick in one of the upstairs bedrooms. I had been upstairs once already, but was so enamored of the rich smell of memory in the house that I had not paid attention to much else.

Nick was right. It felt as though the architect had designed the house for no one above five feet tall. The effect was stifling.

Nick towered in the rooms, being a bit taller than me at his six foot three. I was amazed. His head nearly touched the ceilings. The alcoves seemed like tiny nooks in the rooms, not the generous extensions as they looked on the outside.

At least the bed was built for actual people.

There was an attic space at the top of the stairs. A small door, perhaps five feet tall and two feet wide that led into the area. It was ajar. I did not remember leaving it that way. I shut the door and left Nick to what I hoped would be a night of good rest for him. This was, after all, my first night in the house.

I went downstairs into the room I had chosen for myself and undressed, picked up a book and began to read. It was difficult to read. My mind flooded with thoughts of the past. The times I had been in this very home with my grandparents as a child. The way my grandmother took care of me, sometimes allowing things that my parents might not have so much liked. I could have sweets before dinner, provided I promised to clean my plate. Which, for her, I did.

My grandmother would also allow me to watch some of the more violent cartoons of the era (although, looking back, these cartoons were tame in comparison to what kids have these days. God, how old do I feel?). Cartoons my mom wouldn't allow me to see. She would always ask me, "Well, do the heroes win?" And of course, they always did. "Then Good triumphs. And that is all that matters, isn't it?"

I guess she was right.

The house abruptly breathed. I was moved from my reverie by the sound. Everything at once creaked. It was, for the moment, a comfortable sound.

I would learn other lessons in time.

That morning, I went upstairs to find Nick gone. He'd left a note saying that he could not sleep. His mind just wouldn't slow down. He thanked me for my hospitality and noted he'd like for us to get together again soon.

Where he had lain in the bed remained formed in his shape, which I thought was odd being that the bed was a modern mattress, not some old feather bed. I shrugged it off, pulled the sheet and comforter back up, tucked the pillows in and started for the stairs.

The small hallway door leading to the attic was again open. I closed it.

An old friend I had a crush on some twenty years before showed up and knocked on my back door. At first, I did not know what to say. She was as beautiful as I had remembered her when I was a child. She said she had heard I had moved into my grandparent's old house, and wanted to see if it were true. I laughed and asked her now she knew that it was true, would she like to come in for a bit.

She said yes.

When I found myself lying next to her in my bed that night, I couldn't say I was expecting it. I don't know what happened. Maybe she had memories, too. I don't know. Maybe she had pain. But there she lie, asleep after our desperate and lonely sex. The kind that doesn't so much care why or how or when. The human touch is there, and so needed. And so we needed one another in this way. And I did not protest. She certainly did not either.

I fell asleep marveling at how that crush I had felt for her two decades ago remained.

That morning, there was a note from her on the counter in the kitchen. She, too, could not sleep and had left. She said she had enjoyed last night and hoped that we could get together again.

As I made the bed, I noted her shape, too, remained on the mattress, as if she still lay there.

I heard a strange sound from upstairs and went to investigate. I froze at the bottom of the stairs as I saw the small door gently swaying open.

I went to the hardware store down town and bought a small padlock, which I promptly went back home and installed on the small door.

The house breathed again. This time, it did not seem so comfortable.

I made myself a French Dip sandwich that evening with potato chips. It was quite good, but the oddest thing was that I could barely smell the food cooking.

As though the walls were absorbing the smell. I sat in the living room where I had sat with my grandmother years ago as she had watched a nighttime soap called *Dynasty*, popular in those days. I hated the show as a child, unable to understand why the hell all of the men seemed to want to kiss the women and the women just seemed to want money. But she let me watch my cartoons, so I endured her strange television show.

My fifty-two inch flat screen television seemed to swallow up the room.

Something fell upstairs.

I sighed, put my sandwich down and went to investigate. As I got to the top of the stairs, I saw the small door swaying open again, the padlock I had bought lie on the floor, open but undamaged, like someone had unlocked it.

The house breathed again. This time, it was downright frightening.

I went back downstairs and looked for a flashlight. I was thinking seriously about investigating that attic. Some one might be squatting in the house without my knowledge. It was the only explanation for the lock. They had found the key and opened it, hoping the noise of my television would drown out the event.

I found a flashlight and looked at my key ring. The padlock key was still on it.

Maybe there were two in the package.

Back upstairs, the air was full of the smell of the food I had cooked. I could have been standing in my own kitchen, it was so powerful. These old homes do that, I guess. Smells travel well because it's so poorly insulated.

I looked around the upstairs, and there were no signs of entry. I pulled the comforter back on the bed Nick had slept on, just for the hell of it, and the shape was still there. I put my hand on the bed.

It was still warm.

My heart began to pump harder.

Movement caught in the corner of my vision. I looked in the alcove and the curtains were moving. I looked behind me and a shadow was on the floor just outside the door. I put my hand over my mouth to keep from screaming, turned the big Maglight around in my hand and tiptoed for the doorway.

The closer I got, the harder it was to keep walking. Who could be in here? Some nut case who had been squatting here for years? And me with not a single gun. At moments like these, pacifism is for the birds.

I made the door frame and looked around slowly.

There was no one there. But the shadow remained.

And the shadow began walking away.

I did scream.

I ran down the stairs, grabbed my keys and made for the back door. The hell with this.

I had left the back door open to the screen door because the evening air was cool. It slammed shut as I approached. I grabbed the handle.

Fucking hell. Locked.

I ran to the front door. Locked as well. I tried opening a window. It would not budge. My God. I'm in a bad movie!

I looked behind me and the shadow crawled down the stairs, looking exactly as if someone were walking down them, casting this darkness before them. I backed into the corner of the room, tried to make myself smaller and watched. The shadow moved from the stairs into the dining room, passing not four feet in front of me, and made for the living room.

After a few moments, I gripped the flashlight harder and walked toward the shadow.

In my living room, standing at the window, I found her. My crush from twenty years ago.

"I thought you left. When did you come back," I asked her.

She was silent.

I began to notice she did not look right. Her hair was matted and dirty, clumped in haphazard dreadlocks that fell around her slumped shoulders. She seemed very pale, too.

"What happened? Are you all right?"

A strange voice slid from her.

“Why. Did you. Leave us?”

“What? I don’t understand. What do you m...”

“Here,” the voice continued. “Left. Here. To be. Alone.”

“I didn’t leave you here,” I said. “You left me. Left that note that you couldn’t sleep. I thought you were gone. Really. I didn’t even know you were still here.”

She ran a scarred hand through her hair and two big clumps came right out into her fist.

“Died. Here. She died here. No one. Left us. Everyone.”

I was so frightened I could barely register what she was saying. But it started to sound familiar. But no way in hell she could be talking about my grandmother. No way.

There was a noise from upstairs. Damnit.

“Stay here,” I told her. “I’ll be back.”

At the bottom of the stairs, I could see that small door swaying open wider now. Every step toward that door took years from my life. My feet weighed fifty pounds each, easily. At the top of the stairs, new scents assaulted me. My grandmother’s perfume. The Brylcreem my grandfather used on his hair when I was a kid. Gun powder.

Something was in the bedroom to the left. I went in the room and turned on the lamp. In this room was an old pump-organ. It must have been sixty or more years old, covered in dust and cobwebs. The pedals used to pump the air into it moved once. I stopped where I was.

Beneath the organ a leg protruded. Hairy and long, like an insects leg. A spider, maybe. The leg pulled beneath the organ and the entire thing shifted slightly. I backed out and slammed the door shut and locked it. Screw that. If this is a bad movie, I’m not falling for it.

I went into the room where Nick had stayed and flipped the switch. The light popped with a flash and then went out. Something shuffled in the alcove to the right. I turned on the flashlight and pointed it in that direction.

“*FUCK!*” I couldn’t help but scream. Nick stood in the alcove. Slumped, just like my crush downstairs. The same strange voice slid from his blue lips.

“Can’t. Leave. Not. Again. Too lonely.”

Holy God. What the hell was going on? Either me or this house has lost our mind. Maybe both of us. It couldn’t be possible for a house to be lonely. It couldn’t be. It was boards, mortar and block. Brick, insulation and wiring. That’s all. Nothing more.

Nothing more.

I refused to believe it.

Behind me, the air went cold. Something was moving up the stairs. I walked over and looked down. The shadow was ascending. No one was there. Again.

I was trapped.

The shadow moved past me and went in the small doorway. Seconds later, my crush from twenty years ago emerged. Her head was down, hair covering her eyes. But I could see one eye. It was white and empty. She was gone. Something else was there now.

“Stay. Here. Please. Don’t. Leave us. Again.”

I ran.

I made it halfway down the stairs before the shadow caught up and flew past me.

Nick stepped around the corner in front of the door. He grabbed my throat as I made the last step, picked me up like I was nothing and began to carry me up the stairs. Oh, but it wasn’t Nick. Sweet Jesus, it wasn’t Nick *at all*.

At the top of the stairs, Nick stopped. And then fairly threw me through the small door into the attic. The door closed and the padlock snapped.

I screamed until my voice left me.

I’ve been up here for a week now. My senses are leaving me. I am so thirsty and hungry that I am delirious. I hear things. Scraping things. Creeping things. I smell food and perfumes and hair products, toothpaste and flowers. I hear voices. Conversations between people.

It's only a matter of time now.

In the corner I found a box with photos. In the box, there was a World War II photo of my grandmother and grandfather. Him in his Army uniform, her in a very pretty dress. I dusted the photo off and cried for a moment. And the house breathed.

Today, I saw, in the dim light, my grandmother's face some ways off in the darkness.

It's only a matter of time now.

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