

Magenta Presents
by Long Cat Media
The House is Not Haunted, by Mason Ball

CREAKING door

M – Greetings fans of the esoteric and welcome to... Magenta Presents. We're gonna get straight to business today, with a short story by creep-meister Mason Ball called 'The House Is Not Haunted'. I think that might be a little psychological trick, Bernard.

B – Do you think? Do you think the house might have something strange going on?

M – (unintelligible noise)

Although perhaps we should give a quick warning before proceedings get underway, as well. Because, dear listener, you might be about to, um, how can I put this...

B – Fill your pantaloons with doodoo? Stretch your nerves across a cigar box and finger-pick Foggy Mountain Breakdown?

M – Exactly. By tuning into today's episode, you have bought a one-way ticket to Heebie-jeebie land, passing through the Jitters and the Willies. Just so you know.

B – This one's really quite unsettling.

M – That's one way to put it. So, dear listeners, please assume the brace position, for MAGENTA PRESENTS... The House Is Not Haunted.

Mason Ball -

We've all heard those stories.

They say the house is haunted. Those words, enjoyed as they're enunciated, even as they're doubted, revelling in that frisson, that campfire fright of childhood; a memory resurrected to toy with, that cold sensation that still clenches stomachs and steals breath in that moment just before the light comes on- and the world is revealed once again as prosaic and without phantom.

They said the house was haunted, that things had been seen at night, in the attic room, on the stairs. Objects moved. Voices. Footsteps. The house changed hands too often, they said, that no one ever stayed there for very long, were chased away, fled in fear.

But of course this wasn't true. There are no such things as ghosts. The truth was, in fact, so much worse.

The house in question was well known to many of us, the inevitable stories of hauntings, old news and oft repeated, this threadbare societal trope as tired as it was strangely magnetic.

Since we were children the *For Sale* signs had sprung up at regular and suspiciously frequent intervals. There was the story of the face at the attic window. The unexplained fire in the basement. Sounds. We all somehow knew more than we should about any private residence, but then of course such a house ceases to be private when swallowed in the trope of the haunted house. It's all of ours then, common knowledge, however spurious that knowledge may be.

It's true that the price had come down remarkably for such a large property and this, together with the fantastical rumours, was I think what first drew my husband to the prospect of buying it.

My husband William was a writer, one whose name you may even have heard were I to tell it here,

and while he sold the idea to me as the perfect home for our proposed family, it was, I now believe, the prospect of ghosts, and of his writing about those ghosts, that drew us to the house that wasn't haunted.

Two novels into a promising career, William's well had dried and while reaching out for inspiration he'd found the publishing industry oddly, if temporarily, enamoured with the macabre; young girls inhabited by demons, aristocratic debauchery and devil worship in grand houses, sacrificial virgins, spectral apparitions hurling objects at screaming teens.

We'd met at university, and though all I truly did while there, apart from falling in love, was drink myself toward a 2:2 in English Lit, I had joined societies and dabbled in the parapsychological. I remember, he was calm and level-headed in a way that seemed queerly adult on so young a man, he had a surety about him that was immediately attractive, he was driven and focussed in a way that never spilled over into arrogance; and to have such a young man so sure of *me* could not help but be flattering.

We married months after graduation, and while I floundered in job after job, William quickly became a published success.

Years later, when the ideas ran dry, William said that perhaps a move was what he needed, that perhaps we should relocate, maybe my home town; wouldn't I rather be closer to my mother? Hadn't I said I'd like a chance to work on my own writing? And hadn't I been saying how little I enjoyed my job at the assurance company? All true, though I think now that he had already found the house, had already made the decision.

People always say "I'd like to believe," don't they? But they don't mean it, not really. Because what comfort can there be in a belief in ghosts? That we remain, after all the fretting, the goodbyes and the final agonies, we remain, we wander, anaemic shadows treading dimly lit hallways, we wander and jealously frighten those still with the privilege and warmth and life?

I agreed to the move, why wouldn't I? Maybe I *would* write, maybe we would start a family. Such ideas seem so strange and idiotic now, inane somehow under the weight of what took place there; quite the opposite of creation of any kind.

Little Derring was, excuse me, *is*, a large detached property on an ordinary main road in an ordinary Essex town. Something of a sore thumb with regards to its size, it stands on the corner of Farfield Road, its extensive frontage mostly obscured by tired-looking willow trees. I had walked past it every day on my way home from school; every day. Perhaps it was on just such a journey that I first heard the rumours. But no, my mother had heard them too I now recall, this wasn't some children's invention to scare his or her classmates, everyone seemed to have heard it.

The house was too large for the two of us and we and our possessions swam in it, whole rooms bare and empty, yawning. Boxes huddled in the hallway, as if perhaps they too had heard the rumours. During the first week after William and I moved in, nothing out of the ordinary happened. In fact, the house was nothing like I had imagined it would be. It was bright, airy, that dead echo of empty houses pleasantly lacking; though certainly ungainly, it felt like a home.

But perhaps that itself was a warning of sorts. Empty houses have that 'dead echo' precisely because they *are* empty; but of course this one was not.

The Friday after we moved in we held a party, friends down from London, a few people from William's publisher. Ten of us all told. Let me think. Michael and Stephen, David and Julia came down, there was Yvonne, who I'd known since I was a boy, her boyfriend Douglas, my mother Pamela, and a friend of hers, Audrey.

Everything was to be beautifully old-fashioned, mock-aristocratic even, a playfulness to the menu, the place settings; the house was to play the part of our estate, we the lords of the manor, rather than an out of work glorified secretary and a writer bereft of inspiration. It was even suggested that people might like to dress for dinner, though few did, perhaps feeling, in their very British way, this stipulation a little too close to fancy dress.

It cannot be denied that beneath the jollity and the warmth, there was a nervousness, that campfire fright I mentioned, perhaps something more. People began to tell ghost stories, though none, I remember noting, were first hand, only ever *I heard that once-* or *A girl I work with told me her mother saw-* Still it shifted the air somehow, changed it in a way in which I can only describe as tinting it invisibly toward the darker. Nervous laughter and palpitations, a toying with the idea of fear, the savouring of it; you know, you've been in these situations, we all have.

I think we need ask the question, just what are we afraid of from these supposed ghosts? What horrors can the dead truly promise? What threat the departed? And yet this is what we fear in the dark, that which cannot be, and that which, if it did indeed exist, would be insubstantial and surely harmless.

After dinner, after the housewarming toasts and a dessert that hadn't quite worked yet about which everyone was far too kind, the table was cleared. William held forth on the history of the house, or more accurately on its rumoured history (most of which we'd all already heard) and the suggestion of the Ouija board was made. Most thought the idea amusing and those who seemed unsure, my mother and Audrey mainly, were soon convinced that it was *just a bit of fun*.

The lights were put off and we lit candles.

It was so very strange. I make no claims that our use of the Ouija board had any bearing whatsoever on what took place later that night, it did not. Yet there was something that seems, with hindsight, to presage, or at least inform what happened.

From my time at university, from the parapsychology society, I know only too well that Ouija boards 'work', and in fact *why* they work. Ghosts do not guide the planchette to answer the questions of those seated, nor do mischievous participants need to push it to spell out fraudulent and portentous messages from the beyond. The Ouija board works due to something called the ideomotor response, unconscious, miniscule movements made by those with their fingers on the planchette, which give the impression of supernatural involvement. It's an oddly reliable parlour trick, amusing and intriguing, but little more.

Yet when we did it at the house that night, nothing happened. Despite all our finger tips resting as they should, despite the customary questions being asked, the planchette did not move an iota. I had never known this to happen. It was almost as if the unasked question *is the house haunted?* was being met with a firm and emphatic *NO*; yet from whom or what can this answer have come? Eyes were rolled and jokes made; smiles hid a queer disappointment at having been robbed of some kind of counterfeit thrill. We moved out to the hall, where brandy and liqueurs had been laid out; all very grandiose, as I said.

Yvonne began to tease William about his having bought a dud haunted house, which he took in good humour, David joked that perhaps the planchette had been glued to the board and that perhaps some kind of chicanery or diversion was in play to hide the real phantoms.

"We'll be stood here and suddenly poltergeist will start rearranging the furniture or throwing plates at us or some such." William denied any such thing and went back through to the dining room, laughing at the idea, his intent to prove the Ouija board genuine and David wrong. He stopped at the

table, looked about in amused confusion.

"Alright, very funny, who hid the planchette?"

And just then a thing ran at him. In the flicker and lambency of the candlelight a great thing ran at him, took hold of him in its great hands and began to bite at him.

The thing that ran at him was a child, a little boy, my guess would be around three or four, quite naked; but it was immense, at least twelve feet tall, hunched over against the ceiling as it ran. Its hands were huge, open and grasping, fingers too long. Its enormous head lolled, barrel-like and heavy on its neck. Its eyes were deep-set and lidless, staring a mad, empty fury, a hunger, its mouth was a terrible and ill-proportioned grin, a wide and dreadful rictus with far too many teeth in it. It took a hold on him and pulled him apart, even as it bit at him, pulled him apart as a starving man might a lobster, cracked him in two and began to eat him, even as he cried out, even as his arms pushed uselessly at it, even as the life faded and vanished from him, seemingly doing so before he'd even stopped his awful screaming.

I held my breath throughout, I couldn't move.

There were gasps from those of us who watched it, and I think at one point my mother said *William*, almost accusingly, as if he were doing something foolish or embarrassing; we all simply watched him die, watched it pull him to pieces.

It was only when the second thing lurched into view and turned to face us that the spell was broken. Most fled, some upstairs, some into the kitchen. There was a lot of screaming, some prayers, the slamming of doors.

The second thing was an old woman, or an approximation of an old woman. Also impossibly large, its shoulders left a greasy mark across the doorframe as it ducked through. I say approximation because something had gone wrong in its construction, its neck jointed oddly as if broken, its head ballooning and misshapen. While one tendinous, horribly attenuated arm reached out for us, where the other one should have been was merely a knotted aperture disappearing within; the missing arm itself protruding from the thing's enormous mouth, filling it like some awful tongue, where it hung, made lame by its malapropos protrusion from the body, fingers flinching strangely. The old woman thing choked and gagged as it came.

Still I stood.

My mother was tugging at my hand when she was torn away and into another room. I am thankful that I have no memory of the sounds she made as she died.

These were no ghosts, there are no such things as ghosts. These things had form, had flesh; appetites.

Framed in the dining room doorway, a third thing stretched and changed as I watched it, its body oily and unfinished. Limbs and pseudo-limbs came and went, pushing out and retreating, as if it had not yet chosen its disguise; there came the dulled and damp sound of splintering bones from within it. More things crawled and ran from the darkness of the dining room like escapee inmates from some terrible menagerie.

The house was thick with screaming, with cries, with muffled words, and I recall the realisation striking me that this was likely not the first time that *Little Derring* had witnessed this performance, or one like it; nor would it be the last.

It was at that moment, among the noise, the butchery and the blood, that I saw William again.

He stood in the dining room, on the very spot on which he had been killed. He stood stock still and he looked at me. After a time he smiled widely and waved. I almost returned the wave. Even as he

stood there, so perfectly *him*, William, my husband, I could see the stains on the carpet left by his killing, could see the dim shape of the monster child still gnawing at what remained of him. Yet there William stood and there William smiled.

I felt a sharp and sickening pain in my side and looking down, saw an immense mouth chewing at me; an enormous bloated head, pale and reptilian, or flayed and canine, shivering, teeth like broken porcelain, black lips curling, white-eyed. It was only then that I moved, that I screamed, that I beat at it with my hands, that I drove my fingers into those eyes, that I ran.

I do not know how I left the house, or how I managed to do so alive; no one else made it out, none of them.

I have memories of my flight, of blurred hallways, of door after door after door, the sounds of the feast taking place in every room of that house. I think I saw my mother once more, quite intact, at the foot of the staircase, she too smiled at me as I floundered and cried out, she too waved.

I do not know how I escaped, yet escape I did. I ran, gasping, the mile or more to my mother's house. I locked myself in and did not come out, *have not* come out. It's been days. Can it have been weeks?

My wounds are all but healed, yet they ache strangely. I sit with all the lights on and I try not to think. I have barely slept. I doze and snap awake at certain images thrown back into my mind from that night. I try not to think but I fail.

As I told you, the house is not haunted. The very notion of ghosts is so... quaint. Childish.

Something else, something considerably more ravenous and, for want of a better term, corporeal, or organic, is going on.

Those things have form, flesh, appetites, yes, but also an agenda, or at the very least an intent, an imperative, an instinct.

You see, despite myself, I've been thinking. No house is haunted. If you know of a house with a similar reputation to Little Derring (and who doesn't?) the chances are it is less a home of the dead and more likely something analogous to a nest for these things. Nests.

People move in and these things come out of the woodwork.

The first night after it happened something tried my mother's front door, then the back door, then every window in turn. There was a slow, deliberate turn of each handle that was somehow indescribably inhuman. A familiar silhouette stood for hours in the garden, alert for any sound from inside. I stayed quiet and by morning it was gone.

The other William I saw was not William, the mother at the foot of the stairs was not my mother. We are a suit of clothes for these things, we are fancy dress, we provide the vessels in which they may go out into the world unseen. To hide in plain sight.

No, not clothing, for as much as they wear us, or our likeness, they also dwell within that likeness, our image becomes their home, the 'houses' they haunt as they go about, doing whatever dreadful things their kind needs to: killing, feeding, establishing further nests, birthing more murder and more and more and on and on, invisible for the very reason that they look like us.

How many of them are out there, among us? We can never truly know and would likely never really wish to.

At times I wonder if I escaped at all. I look at myself in the mirror and I see me, yet all I need do is smile a little too widely, to wave, and a cold doubt bleeds through me. Am I myself, or merely something that looks like me? How would I know?

I sit in my mother's house and I try not to think, and in doing so think too much. I play the events of

that night over and over, again and again, and I cry, I scream angrily, I claw at myself.
Yet I cannot deny that just as the wound in my side aches strangely, so too the pull of Little Derring
aches within me, a craving to return, something inside, some barbed wish threaded through me,
pulling and pulling and pulling...

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