

Dead House

A short story by Ando Poore

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I suppose there's not much I could say about the house that would make any sense. Not much that you'd believe, at any rate. Most people that aren't from around here think it's 'quaint' how we fear the house. Probably think it's some kind of urban legend. Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't, but I know one thing for sure, I'll never go near that place again.

I suppose you probably think I'll spin some yarn that starts with "A long time ago, there was an evil man that lived in a house..." or something like that. Well, sorry to disappoint, but nobody knows the story of the house and how it got to be so evil. We don't know about any magician of the black arts or some voodoo slave or any such nonsense. As far as any of us know, the house has always been there.

And don't ask why we haven't searched the town records to find out who built the place, because every few years, someone does. I had my turn at it about fifteen years ago. But no matter how far back we go, we can't find any deeds or land ownership documents or anything that says how the house got there.

But even without knowing the history of the house, you know it's evil, and whoever built it was evil. All you have to do is lay eyes on it, and you know. It's not some sense of community-induced fear, parents don't warn their kids of the evil house, kids don't dare other kids to go to the house and take something to prove they were there, there are no ominous "No Trespassing" signs. Nothing like that.

But as soon as you catch a glimpse of the house, your stomach tightens up like it was in a vice. Your mouth goes dry and your lungs feel heavy and thick. And that's just a quick peek from far away. There's a clearing around the

house, about a few hundred feet across. If you step into the clearing, you start to feel sick to your stomach, and your head starts hurting. Some people even say their eyesight got dim and shaky. Walking into that clearing is like entering the eye of a hurricane. Quiet, but not peaceful. Still, but not calm.

I've only walked into that clearing one time in my life, and it was on the day Stanley Brewer disappeared. Stanley and I were classmates, though I can't say I'd call him a close friend. Anyhow, he said he was gonna try and go inside the house one day. The rest of us just got quiet and then Willy Lowman told him he was crazy. Nobody would even dare him to do that. But Stanley said he wasn't doing it to be tough, he was just curious, and his curiosity was beating his fear.

That night I was walking home from my girlfriend Lori's house, and decided to see if Stanley was actually trying. If nothing else, maybe I could catch him in the clearing and convince him to give up such a stupid idea and go home. I trudged through the woods toward the house. As I got to the clearing, I had to stop, close my eyes, take a deep breath, and swallow down my fear. But I looked into the moonlit clearing. I saw Stanley's jacket lying on the ground, and I knew he was out there somewhere. I took a step into the clearing, but stopped immediately. All the night noises had stopped. There was no sound, and if I hadn't heard my own breathing and heartbeat, I would've sworn I'd just gone deaf.

I looked at the house, just about fifty feet away. Far too close for my comfort. But I thought for a second that I saw a flicker of light in one of the windows . . .

The first step was deceptively quiet, but the second step caused a creak that seemed so loud it nearly deafened him. Stanley winced and stood still, listening. Of course, it was ridiculous to think anyone else was there besides himself, but that was why he was here to begin with.

As he took another step up the stairs to the front porch, he almost wished someone had dared him to come here, because even getting this far was a feat of bravery Stanley didn't know he was capable of. He deserved something for getting as far as he had.

Now that he had gotten to the front porch, Stanley stopped, looked, and listened. He had decided that maybe everyone was just easily influenced, and that there was really nothing to be afraid of. After all, it was just an old abandoned house. Nobody lived there. Nothing haunted it. It was basically a bunch of wood and nails, and whatever old furniture might have been left from whoever had lived there last. Surely the most dangerous thing was the wood, which could be rotten and ready to break if too much weight was placed on it, or maybe the nails would by now had to be rusty, and perhaps exposed.

Still, as he practically tiptoed to the front door, those logical thoughts did nothing to comfort him, and he felt as though his heart was a few beats away from bursting out of his chest. Stanley raised his hand to touch the door, and in the dim moonlight, he saw exactly how badly it was trembling. He heard himself breathing, and it was a scared, desperate sound.

The door was not only unlocked, it wasn't even pulled completely closed. Stanley imagined that if the wind blew, it would probably make it bang like in the movies. 'Come to think of it,' he thought, 'I could use a little breeze.' The air was as still as he had ever felt it, and he felt stifled. Sweat was dripping into his eyes, and Stanley ran an arm across his forehead. 'OK, steady now, open the door . . .'

Another surprise, it didn't creak or groan like he was expecting, it simply opened. What little moonlight there was spilled

into the house, but it barely illuminated three feet into whatever room the door opened onto, and somehow, though he couldn't explain why, it felt as though the light was even dimmer, as if the house was devouring it. Stanley shook his head at the thought. 'It's just a house. An inanimate object. It's not alive. It can't hurt me.'

'Then why the hell am I still standing here, shaking in my shoes?'

Stanley reached into his pocket and pulled out the small flashlight he had brought. He turned it on and shone it into the house. He saw pretty much what he had expected to see. A lot of old walls, an old floor, an old ceiling, and God-knows-how-many-years' worth of dust and cobwebs.

He tried to take a step into the house, but the toe of his shoe dug along the wooden porch, and pushing his foot past the threshold and into the room was like shoving a piece of iron. Yet once his foot was inside the house, getting the rest of his body into the house suddenly became easier.

What was that? He spun, looking to either side. He could've sworn he heard something. Almost like an exhaled breath right next to his ear. But that was ridiculous, he was alone. The flashlight beam betrayed how much more violently his hands were shaking. He turned to look out the door, and his breath caught in his throat. The moonlight had been dim, yes, but now it was nearly pitch-black outside. And he knew there hadn't been a cloud in the sky! In fact, that's why he had chosen to go this night, that the moon wouldn't be hidden by clouds. Yet he could barely see past the front porch!

He was about to just run, but he had come this far, he might as well finish what he set out to do. Not that it was easy to convince his body not to run at full speed back to the safety of his

own house, but in the end, his feet stayed rooted to the spot, and he resolved to at least investigate a few of the rooms before fleeing.

Stanley held the flashlight with both hands to steady it somewhat. Off to the left there was an opening, and slowly, he made his way into the room. He kept expecting the fear to subside once he started exploring, but the pall of it hung over him like a blanket, and each step, each breath took great effort. He entered the room and looked around. Nothing but rotting wood. He turned and walked back to the other side of the entry room, where he had noticed another doorway.

But as Stanley slowly pushed this door open, his breath caught again. He could've sworn he saw a face! But as he swept the flashlight beam over the space he thought he saw it, he saw only a square of wood, which looked like it had once been a mirror or picture frame. There was nothing there now. He took a few steps closer to investigate. Sure enough, there were a few rotten tatters of cloth, or perhaps canvas. A painting. He reached out and touched the frame. And that's when it happened.

It was like watching the painting melt, but in reverse. Pieces of canvas, well, for lack of a better term, 'dripped' up into the frame. He wanted to turn and run, but couldn't tear himself away from the sight of the painting being revealed. It was a horrible face. Human, yet twisted and cruel. Indescribably cruel. In the shaking light from the flashlight, the eyes seemed alive.

Finally, a scream tore from Stanley's throat and he turned and bolted from the room. The leaden feeling dropped from his feet and he practically flew toward the front door, the floor creaking with each step. The door was in sight, freedom was his!

He tripped.

A nail sticking up from a floorboard caught against his shoe and he fell against the door, causing it to slam shut. Stanley coughed in the dust, and looked up at the now-closed door. His flashlight shone on it, and he saw a strange symbol on it, painted in a deep red color that had perhaps once been bright. It covered nearly the entire door. He had no idea what it meant, but somehow he knew it was evil.

Then he felt a presence behind him. As surely as if he could see it, Stanley knew that whoever – or whatever – was in the painting was behind him. Trembling and whimpering, he slowly turned his head. He noticed for the first time a staircase leading up to the second floor. And on the staircase, slowly shuffling down, one stair at a time, was the person – if it could be called a person – whose face was in the painting.

He – it – had bright eyes and wore a cruel grin. More than that, he couldn't describe, as his brain refused to register more detail. It started to laugh at Stanley, a low, raspy sound almost more a cough than a laugh. Again he screamed, and scrambled to his feet.

He threw himself at the door and pulled at it, but it wouldn't open. He banged his fists on it, shouting incoherently, kicking at it and throwing his weight against it, but the door held fast. Tears streamed down his cheeks and his screams became high-pitched wails. He dared not look back, he had to escape!

And then his feet fell out from under him. Stanley felt something grab his ankles and pull them backwards. The flashlight clattered to the ground. He looked back, but even though he felt something pulling at his ankles, he saw nothing. He flipped over as it pulled him backwards, scrabbling at the floor, searching for

something to hold onto, but inexorably he felt himself sliding back further into the house.

Stanley looked back again and saw an open doorway, but though the flashlight was shining directly at it, the beam of light illuminated nothing inside. A totally black void was all he could see. He kicked against the unseen hands and kept clawing at the floor. He felt pain at his fingertips and something in his brain told him he was ripping the flesh away, leaving bloody streaks on the old wood. He didn't care, he had to get away! The door was receding slowly, his freedom inching away.

He looked back one last time and saw his feet only a few mere inches from the blackness. But now instead of only the void, Stanley saw its face, leering at him, laughing at him...wanting him.

He gave one last desperate series of kicks, and kept clawing at the floor with his bloody fingers, and he managed one more scream from his raw throat.

. . . a door slammed. A scream was cut off. A small shaft of light flickered and went out. Nothing else mattered at that moment but getting out of there as quickly as my feet would take me.

I flew through the woods, feeling branches lash at my face and arms, but not caring. My muscles started aching, but I ignored the pain. Finally, I burst out into someone's back yard. I didn't know, didn't care whose back yard. It was safety. I collapsed onto the ground, my thighs locking into a cramp.

The scream was still in my mind. Bile rose. I rolled over, my legs still twitching in their cramp, and threw up violently. Finally, the muscles in my thighs loosened, and I limped back to my house.

The next day, Stanley was nowhere to be found. I knew where he was, or at least, where he had been. And once I spoke up and told what I

had seen, his parents broke down weeping, and immediately planned his funeral. Nobody spoke even once of trying to go find his body.

I never went anywhere near that house again, and it's been almost forty years since that night. Every night I pray I can fall asleep without hearing that scream again.

"Great story, old man, but I still don't buy it. So it's a creepy house, I get it. There was a creepy old house back where I lived too. But a bunch of us finally got up the nerve and explored it. There was nothing there but a bunch of dust and rats."

Malcolm sighed and shook his head, rubbing the bridge of his nose. His nephew was a skeptic. Just like his father.

Just like Stanley.

"This isn't some campfire story to scare you into behaving, Max. This is serious. Now you asked me about the house, and I told you everything I know. Just let it lie."

Max stood up and patted his uncle on the shoulder, smiling. "Don't worry about me, old man. I'll be fine." He turned and walked away.

Malcolm sighed again, and muttered, "That's the same thing Stanley said, forty years ago."

Max wasn't sure why anyone waited until dark to come out to the house. After all, they would only be feeding the human nature's natural tendency to be afraid of dark houses at night. Why not go in the daytime when the sun was shining? That's why he would survive. He was intelligent.

In fact, he wouldn't be at all surprised if he got in the house and found the corpses of people who'd gone in at night, and because of what was almost a post-hypnotic suggestion, died of fright because they

thought it was the scariest thing they'd ever experienced. Poor delusional people. Small towns bred this kind of naivety.

Max's breath caught in his chest. There was the house. The sun was shining down brightly in the afternoon sky, and in its rays, the old house looked even darker and more sinister than he had been expecting.

No, no, Max chided himself. That was only giving in to the paranoia. The wood's just rotten, that's all. There's no such thing as an evil house. He took a step into the clearing.

Well, the old man had been right about one thing, it was sure quiet in the clearing. Almost eerily quiet. Now that he had an unobstructed view of the house, he tried to take an objective look at it. The house was two stories tall, fairly small otherwise. There was a small porch on the front, and was made almost entirely of wood, which was dark with age and rot.

As Max slowly approached the house, he felt his anxiety level rise with each step. 'Wow, the old man really did a number on me, he's actually got me scared of this shack.' He was impressed.

The front door was open a crack, and Max wiped his face, which was starting to sweat in the still air. He pulled the door open, and peered inside. The sunlight seemed to get swallowed up in the dust of the house, and Max figured the windows were so grimy that hardly any light could get through. Luckily, he figured that would be the case, and had brought along a flashlight.

But even as he thought that, Max noticed another flashlight inside the house. A little old-fashioned and covered with dust, but there was no denying what it was. 'Well, one piece of the story seems true at least. Kid did have a flashlight with him.' Max took a slow step inside the house and bent down to pick up the older light. He wasn't at all surprised when it didn't work. Still, Malcolm might like a souvenir. Max chuckled nervously and put the old flashlight in his back pocket.

He turned his own flashlight on and shone it around the dim room. He saw two doorways, one on either side of the entryway. Straight ahead there was a staircase leading up to the second floor, and off to the right was another door, and this one was closed. The air in the house was stuffier than Max thought possible, and he decided to take a quick look around and then get out. No sense spending an hour in here.

He walked over to the closed door, but it wouldn't open. 'Hmph, probably stuck, or even nailed shut from the other side.' He decided to check out the second floor, so he carefully started climbing the stairs. Several of them creaked and groaned, but each one seemed sturdy enough to support his weight.

The upstairs was no less dusty, and there were only two rooms. The first room Max looked into was obviously a bedroom, but the bed was nothing but some rusty springs and a broken frame. There were a few chairs, long since rotted and broken, and nothing else.

However, the second room appeared to be a study of some sort. There was a large desk that had apparently been chopped at by an axe or other sharp instrument some time ago, but the two bookshelves seemed intact for the most part. Most of the books had fallen onto the floor, and were in various states of decomposition, but a few seemed partially legible, and Max read the titles.

'Let's see, "The Olde World", "Lyfe and the Heereafter", something about blood, I think. Wow, not exactly the top 10 bestseller list.' He also noticed that the rare page that was readable was handwritten, not printed or even typed. Then he picked up an unlabeled tome, and found it was in unusually good condition. Inside, though, the pages were scrawled with unfamiliar symbols, and he couldn't understand any of it.

Just then, a sound came from downstairs, and he dropped the book, startled. He shone the flashlight over at the door, but saw nothing. He opened his mouth to say something, but it was so dry, nothing came

out. Cautiously, he made his way back out to the top of the stairs and looked around, then down.

Max's blood ran cold. There, on the floor in front of the closed door, was a book. He knew with absolute certainty it had not been there before. Keeping the trembling shaft of light trained on the book, he inched his way down the stairs. The hair on the back of his neck stood up, and he felt as though eyes were watching him, but no matter which way he turned, he saw nothing.

He reached the bottom of the stairs and slowly knelt to pick up the book. Its cover bore no title, but on the first page, the words "The One Way" were written in some sort of red ink. Unlike the books in the room upstairs, the pages in this book were in fairly good condition. The book was hand-written in the same red ink as the title page, and as Max flipped through it, he was disturbed to see the words "death", "sacrifice", "void", "crossover", and "blood" occurring frequently.

A voice slithered through the silence, chilling Max to the marrow. "It's fascinating, isn't it? All one needs to know to cross to the Other Side." Max whirled around, the beam of light stabbing through the dim haze of the dusty room, but focusing on nothing. The voice seemed to come from right next to him, but he could see nobody. He thought, 'Paranoia be damned, I'm getting out of here!' then bolted for the door, but it immediately slammed shut, and he noticed a large symbol composed of hundreds of tiny runes painted onto the door. They looked familiar, and he realized they were the same symbols and runes he had seen in the book upstairs.

He heard shuffling footsteps, and spun around to see a hideous *someone* shambling down the stairs. It wore tattered clothes that hung off its almost skeletal body, but what truly horrified Max was its face, which was little more than skin stretched over a skull so that its teeth almost jutted out from its lips in the same lifeless grin of a bare skull. Yet within

its eye sockets burned a light like fire, yet much deeper than any flame he had ever seen. A few strands of stringy white hair hung over its face.

In a panic, Max did the only thing he could think of; he threw the book at it. The thing, however, caught the book as if picking it out of the air. It then gestured to the closed door, which opened smoothly. Max could see nothing past the door. All light seemed swallowed up past the threshold of that door.

The thing looked back at him. "Did you read about the Crossover Door? I created it. You see, I am of Those on the Other Side." Its voice was horrible, as though it had to force the words through rotting flesh. Max tried to turn away, but the thing held his gaze and continued. "When anyone enters that Door, their blood is forfeit to us. Blood is a very powerful thing, you know." It caressed the book with one bony hand. "This was written in a man's blood. I wrote it while he yet lived. His screams were music to my ears as I penned these words with ink dipped from his veins."

Max wanted to gag, to scream, to run, but the fear overpowered him and he could do nothing. Then his feet slipped from under him, and he fell, his flashlight clattering across the room and throwing odd shadows onto the thing. He clawed at the floor, but it did no good, and he was inexorably pulled toward the Door. The thing somehow managed to grin further, and continued. "Yes, fear, despair. It will only make the Sacrifice more powerful. For this is the way of things here. This is my House. This is Dead House. And you are now mine."

His feet crossed into the blackness, and Max immediately felt as though his body were melting and freezing at the same time. Agony coursed through him like electricity, and each inch that entered the Void felt a new kind of pain. Max screamed and screamed, but even over his screams he heard the gloating laughter of the thing.

Desperately, he grabbed at the doorframe as his hands neared it, but it was as though the frame was now immaterial, and his hands felt nothing. He was now fully inside the Darkness, and there was nothing but the pain. The thing came into sight, stepping through the door, which slowly began to swing closed. It bent over him and reached for him.

As the door closed and Max's vision was consumed by the darkness, he felt the thing's skeletal fingers touch him, and its horrid raspy voice whispered in his ear. "You are mine now, welcome to Dead House."