

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

All my life I had been afraid of the house. I think all of us were. It didn't have a name, and as far as I knew, nobody had lived in it for decades, maybe even centuries. I once asked my father, and he just shook his head and said it was best I didn't worry about it, best to just stay away.

It wasn't like the usual 'haunted house' legend that almost every town has about some old run-down house on the outskirts. This house had no legend, no tall tales of specters, no signs warning kids not to trespass. It frankly didn't need any of that. Even catching sight of the house from afar seemed to fill you with such dread that you wanted to run away screaming. Nobody dared anybody else to go inside and prove they were there.

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

Now that I had gotten to the front porch, I stopped, looked, and listened. I had decided that maybe we were all 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 I practically tiptoed to the front door, those logical thoughts did nothing to comfort me, and I felt as though my heart was a few beats away from bursting out of my chest. I raised my hand to touch the door, and in the dim

moonlight, I saw exactly how badly it was trembling. I heard myself breathing, and it was a scared, desperate sound.

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

Another surprise, it didn't creak or groan like I 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 I couldn't explain why, it felt as though the light was even dimmer, as if the house was devouring it. I shook my 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 was I still standing there, shaking in my shoes?

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the small flashlight I had brought. I turned it on and shone it into the house. I saw pretty much what I 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.

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

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

I was about to just run, but I had come this far, I might as well finish what I set out to do. Not that it was easy to convince my body not to run at full speed back to the safety of my own house, but in the end, my feet stayed rooted to the spot, and I resolved to at least investigate a few of the rooms before I fled.

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

But as I slowly pushed this door open, my breath caught again. I could've sworn I saw a face! But as I swept the flashlight beam over the space I thought I saw it, I saw only a square of wood, which looked like it had once been a mirror or picture frame. There was nothing there now. I took a few steps closer to investigate. Sure enough, there were a few rotten tatters of cloth, or perhaps canvas. A painting. I 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. I wanted to turn and run, but I couldn't tear myself 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 my flashlight, the eyes seemed alive.

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

I tripped.

A nail sticking up from a floorboard caught against my shoe and I fell against the door, causing it to slam shut. I coughed in the dust, and looked up at

the now-closed door. My flashlight shone on it, and I saw a strange symbol on it, painted in a deep red color that had perhaps once been bright. It covered nearly the entire door. I had no idea what it meant, but somehow I knew it was evil.

Then I felt a presence behind me. As surely as if I could see it, I knew that whoever – or whatever – was in the painting was behind me. Trembling and whimpering, I slowly turned my head. I 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, I couldn't describe, as my brain refused to register more detail. It started to laugh at me, a low, raspy sound almost more a cough than a laugh. Again I screamed, and scrambled to my feet.

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

And then my feet fell out from under me. I felt something grab my ankles and pull them backwards. The flashlight clattered to the ground. I looked behind me, but even though I felt something pulling at my ankles, I saw nothing. I flipped over as it pulled me backwards, scrabbling at the floor, searching for something to hold onto, but inexorably I felt myself sliding back further into the house.

I looked behind 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 I could see. I kicked against the unseen hands and kept clawing at the floor. I felt pain at my fingertips and something in my brain told me I was ripping the flesh away, leaving bloody streaks on the old wood. I

didn't care, I had to get away! The door was receding slowly, my freedom inching away.

I looked back one last time and saw my feet only a few mere inches from the blackness. But now instead of only the void, I saw its face, leering at me, laughing at me... *wanting* me.

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

A door slammed. A scream was cut off. A small shaft of light flickered and went out. The house was unchanged.