

*phantom*

IT'S THE LIVING YOU HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT

By Katie G.

Roland whistled a low stream of air, inflating his bubblegum as he studied the house across the street. Foreclosed houses shared a certain savagery. With the heavy nest of weeds snaking over the lawn, the chipped, discolored paint, and the quick-fix cardboard panels patched over the roof, this house was no exception.

Sprawled on the porch, a little boy pursed his lips and fisted a stick of chalk, sketching inscrutable designs. Roland wondered if the boy could still appreciate his artwork even though his eyes were empty, fathomless craters.

Spiders crawled out of the boy's eye sockets every few minutes or so, disappearing into the thicket. If the boy noticed, he didn't seem to care. He also didn't care when a night-gown clad woman stumbled to the window and pressed her palms to the glass, unhinging her jaw to scream soundlessly.

Other such figures appeared during the hour that Roland spent chewing and observing—all in varying states of decay, passing and ignoring each other. He marveled at the sheer scale of the infestation. Long had these spirits withered here, trapped in loathsome purgatory. The boy on the porch must have sensed a wave of ambient pity, because his neck snapped up to stare at Roland. He smiled, flashing rows of red, serrated teeth, and waved.

The bubble popped, deflating with a low hiss. Roland waved back.

Dusting off his slacks, Roland picked up his suitcase and shuffled down the road. He took in the neighborhood as he walked, avoiding the suspicious gazes of its neighbors.

In many respects, the Orange Grove suburb was unremarkable. It consisted of several modest, placid stretches of single-family homes, the sort of blueprint that was popular in the 1970s when assembly-line workers and general laborers could still comfortably afford to buy a house. According to public records, at least half of the original families who bought property here had never left. And why would they? Few would willingly give up a quaint, suburban community like Orange Grove.

Aside from the house with the walking, rotting corpses and the wails of the recently departed, Orange Grove was a perfect place to call home.

Roland stopped at the house at the end of the block. Unlike the foreclosed house, the lawn laid before this address was short and crisp. The smell of fresh paint emanated from the pale pink shutters, a sour scent that carried on the wind.

An elderly man was swift to answer Roland's knock on the door.

Henry Beauford, Orange Grove's Homeowner Association President, ushered Roland inside, offering him water and oatmeal cookies before guiding him to the dining room. Roland nodded his thanks as he took a seat, sipping from the offered glass.

Settling across the table, Henry smiled sadly. "I'm very sorry that you've wasted so much time."

Roland frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I'm sure you've seen the house, Mr. Cassidy," said Henry, his wizened face steepening with sympathy. "You're not the first listing agent who's tried to sell it. It can't pass any of the state inspections—no one is willing to get close enough to fix anything, no matter how much you offer. Best to call it a lost cause and wash your hands of it."

"If you don't mind me asking, how long has the house been like this?"

Henry steepled his hands over his belly and leaned back, thinking. "Oh, there was a tragic situation at that house. Isn't there always? Nice family, two little ones. After the recession, both parents lost their jobs. Our running theory is that one of them tried their hand at witchcraft or devil magic in order to stay afloat, but the ritual drove them insane and they all killed each other. Horrible type stuff, ya know."

"I take it that family never left."

"Right on the money. Every few months afterward, some new residents would move in, and a few months later they'd be out running, screaming, at two in the morning, nothing but the clothes on their backs. The last family didn't even bother selling the place. It's been empty ever since."

"Except for the ghosts."

Henry nodded gently. "Yes, except for the ghosts."

Roland hummed, retrieving another wad of bubblegum from the inner pocket of his blazer.

Wet chewing filled the brief silence that followed, and Henry cleared his throat. "Now that you've seen the state of things, I hope you have a lovely rest of your day. The traffic shouldn't be too bad at this hour."

Roland stood. He knew a *please get out* when he saw one. Rather than mutter his goodbyes, Roland set his suitcase on the table with a resounding *thud*. "I appreciate the advice, Mr. Beauford, but I can take it from here."

Henry's eyebrows knitted together. "You can?"

"This isn't my first haunted house."

It was Roland's eighth haunted house, to be exact. After two unsuccessful attempts to sell houses with overly energetic skeletons and dead grandmothers who vomited on the walls if he changed the drapes, Roland filled out an online ministry application. Less than twenty-four hours later, he was ordained.

Opening his suitcase, Roland skimmed his stock. He carried all the popular holy books and symbols, as well as some of the more obscure ones. The Old Testament had served him well enough so far, but there was no telling when he might encounter a house full of disembodied Mormons or Scientologists. Pocketing the crucifix and a bundle of sage, Roland slipped a white collar under the flaps of his shirt. The collar wasn't strictly necessary, but he liked feeling prepared.

Henry's puzzled expression paled into horror.

"Mr. Cassidy!" he gasped as Roland shut his suitcase. "You can't, it's far too dangerous!" He followed Roland out the door, wringing his hands together nervously.

Roland wasn't deterred. "I'll be alright. They may look frightening, but the dead can't hurt you. It's the living you have to worry about."

"But that's a risk you shouldn't take! Please, let someone else handle this. There are other, less troubling houses you can list—"

"In the middle of a housing crisis?" said Roland, laughing humorlessly. "I practically have a civic responsibility to exorcize this house, Mr. Beauford. Give me a half hour. I'll have it cleared out in no time."

Henry fell quiet, but the unease didn't leave his face. He trailed a few paces behind Roland until they reached the edge of the property, at which point Roland crossed the threshold where the sidewalk met the yard. The President of the Homeowner Association watched him march to the entrance, eyes burning holes into Roland's back.

The door swung open with a long creak, flooding the house with light. A layer of dust and grime covered every piece of furniture and cabinet top, but Roland was pleased to see that most of it looked salvageable. Whoever had previously furnished the house had nice taste.

A hiss drew his attention upward. Crawling around on the ceiling, a little girl bared her teeth when he met her gaze. Her broken, bloody nails shredded the wallpaper, leaving long tears

behind. At the top of the stairs, the woman he'd seen in the window swayed despairingly, her jaw periodically clicking and snapping. The boy with hollow eye sockets peered out from behind her legs, a gesture of curiosity that surprised Roland.

Farther inside, leaning over the kitchen sink, the bulking figure of a man rolled his shoulders and heaved deep, laborious breaths. A pair of eyeballs laid beside him on the countertop.

Five haunted houses ago, the whole scene might have alarmed Roland. But now he just surveyed the ghosts impassively. They didn't want to be here anymore than he did.

Spitting his gum into a tissue, Roland got to work. He splashed holy water around himself, to start. Then he struck a match to light the sage, which made the ghosts bristle. Roland waited for the warm, earthy aroma of the sage to entrench the house before he retrieved his book and his crucifix. At the appearance of these items, the ghosts began to scream.

He recited the prayers over their shrieking, ignoring the gusts of wind now swirling the house. Ghosts were trapped in a place and time, frozen forever in the experience of perpetual terror. They had no other way to express themselves. The realization that their state will change—even if it meant relief to their suffering—only served to amplify their fear.

“Don't worry,” he shouted, after finishing a prayer. “It will all be over soon—”

The sentence ended with a sharp wheeze. His chest felt strange. Looking down, Roland watched in shock as the tip of a knife protruded out from the center of his ribcage. For several long seconds, he didn't understand what he was seeing. As the knife retracted, Roland's world exploded in pain.

Crumbling to the floor, Roland gasped for air and held his chest. Blood gushed out. He couldn't stop it. There had never been pain like this. It was too much, too fast and too red.

His eyes rolled up to see Henry standing over him, gripping a kitchen knife in his shaky fist. He smiled down at Roland apologetically.

“I truly am sorry, Mr. Cassidy,” said Henry, sighing. “I really tried to avoid this.”

“Why?” Roland croaked.

“All of our mortgages have been so much easier to handle since the ghosts appeared in this house. They keep all our property taxes low. I'm on a pension, you see? Everything is so much more expensive nowadays.”

Roland grinded his teeth. “You c-can’t just fire a few rounds in the air, like everybody else?”

“That’s not as effective, I’m afraid. Goodbye now, son. I hope your afterlife is better than theirs.” The sound of footsteps against the hardwood floor echoed throughout the house, fading to nothing.

Coughing up blood, Roland lurched onto his side and dragged himself toward the door. Maybe he could survive this. A single stab wound didn’t have to be the end. Others had survived worse. He just needed to get outside, get to his car. Call for help.

That last candle of hope flickered out when he pulled himself to the doorstep and absorbed the view outside.

The residents of Orange Grove had gathered to watch him die.

They crowded around the perimeter, armed with sharp knives of their own. Their silence was suffocating, interrupted only by his wheezes.

Turning over once more, Roland laid flat on his back and felt a coldness begin to spread from his core. He reached into the inner pocket of his blazer, past the wad of gum, and grabbed an old cigarette buried under everything. Gum was the replacement habit he’d formed to quit, but it was always a poor substitute for the real thing.

He pushed the tube between his teeth and closed his eyes, sighing.

Something bright and hot ignited close to his face, and the familiar, dirty scent of a lit cigarette pervaded his senses. Roland squinted. The ghost boy held a match between his thumb and forefinger, a match from his own matchbox.

Snorting, Roland grinned. “Thanks kid.”

It tasted a little like death as he sunk under the persuasive waves of unconsciousness, breathing out smoke.