



## The Witch on Cleveland Street

*By Harry Ackley*

Of all the rooms in his childhood home, Kevin's was the only one with a crawl space leading to the attic. It was in the ceiling of his bedroom closet. A two-foot square opening covered from above with a dingy white plywood board.

Kevin was quite young when he first noticed it. When he asked his mother, she said that the opening led to the attic. He then asked, "What's an attic?" and she explained what an attic was. He asked, "What's up there?" and she told Kevin that it was empty.

"We don't use it," she said. "We never go up there."

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A year ago, Kevin, now in his fifties, and his wife Claire were driving through Woodland, California, Kevin's home town. Kevin now lived in Sacramento but Woodland was only twenty miles away. Often, for nostalgic reasons, Kevin would drive over. During such visits, he would swing by his old house on Cleveland Street to see how its current residents were taking care of the place.

The house is a two-story colonial-style built in the early 1900s. What Kevin's mother called a saltbox. It's now painted a chocolate brown. When Kevin lived there, it was white with dark green trim.

However, on this visit, it wasn't Kevin's old home that drew his attention, it was the house next door. The Millard house.

The Millard house was older. Kevin's mother once told him that, "It was a Victorian house. It was called that because it was built in the 1880s, during the reign of Queen Victoria in England." She was a member Yolo County Historical Society and enjoyed sharing such facts.

The Millards were a staunch Lutheran family from the Midwest with four older children. The Millard parents never smiled. As the children grew up and moved away, the house fell into disrepair. Then Mrs. Millard died and only Mr. Millard lived there and the house slid into further deterioration.

When Kevin and Claire drove by the house, they could see that it was being renovated. There were workers sanding the exterior and a man repairing something on the roof. A large dumpster sat in front of the property. They decided to stop and see what was going on.

As they approached the house, a stocky woman in her sixties came out the front door with a full black garbage bag. She set the bag down on the porch, looked at Kevin and Claire and said, "Hello. Can I help you?"

"Hello, my name's Kevin. Kevin Andrews. This is my wife Claire. I used to live in the house next door. I grew up there. I was just curious, what happened to the family that used to live here, the Millards?"

The woman smiled broadly and extended her hand. "Hi. My name's Kathy Childers. Nice to meet you.

"Mr. Millard died a few years ago," said Kathy. "The house was inherited by his children but none of them wanted to live in it. So, it sat empty. Squatters would come in. At one point there was a small fire inside. The squatters were trying to warm themselves, I suppose. Anyway, the neighbors were complaining. I finally got ahold of the daughter. They only had one daughter. She worked things out with her brothers and they sold it to me."

"You're doing a great job with the restoration," said Claire.

"Thanks," said Kathy. "You wanna come inside and take a look around?"

The inside of the house was gutted. The walls were bare lath and plaster with strands of rotting electrical wire hanging here and there. In the middle of the living room was a heap of dust-covered wallpaper destined for the dumpster outside.

"It's a mess right now," said Kathy. "But to my surprise, structurally, the place is in pretty good shape."

Kevin looked around and tried to remember what the house was like when he was a kid. Because the Millard children were older, he never played with them. But the daughter did babysit him a few times. He could only remember the rooms being very dark and cluttered.

On one wall of the living room were two sliding pocket doors. Beyond the doors was the dining room. Adjoining the dining room was a large alcove with a tall bay window that looked out into the backyard of Kevin's old house next door.

Standing in the alcove, Kevin looked across the yard and up at the second story window of what used to be his bedroom.

Kevin felt a hand on his shoulder. Claire was standing behind him.

"That was my bedroom window," said Kevin, pointing up at his old house.

"I used to look out of that window and down into this room and watch Mrs. Millard do her ironing," said Kevin. "I remember she used this heavy iron with a thick black cord, suspended by one of those wire cord minders attached to the end of the ironing board. It looked like a big car antenna. It would wave back and forth as Mrs. Millard moved her bony arm from right to left.

"Her head was very round and she reminded me of Olive Oyl from the Pop-Eye cartoons ... a kind of old stern version of Olive Oyl," he added with a smile.

Kathy's phone rang and she excused herself and went out to the back porch to take the call.

Kevin kept staring up at his old bedroom window.

"Anything wrong, honey?" asked Claire.

"In all the years we've been married, I don't think I've ever told you about the witch, have I?"

"The witch?" asked Claire with a soft laugh. "No, you haven't."

"In my old bedroom there was a crawl hole leading to the attic. It's in the ceiling of the bedroom closet.

"One night I started hearing noises up in the attic. Now, you could say it was wind in the branches of that large oak tree on the side of the house scraping against the roof. That's what my mother told me. But it sounded nothing like that. It sounded like something being moved. Like a heavy piece of furniture being scraped across the floor.

"In the closet was a light. Just a bare bulb that was turned on and off by one of those cheap pull chains.

"One night, when I was lying in bed, something came down out of crawl space and turned on that light. I remember hearing the zinging sound of the chain being pulled.

"Then the closet door opened and the witch came out."

"Geez," said Claire. "A real witch?"

"Well, that's what I called it," said Kevin.

"It wasn't like a witch with green skin and a pointy hat, like in the Wizard of Oz. But it was an old woman. Her hair was pulled back in a bun and she was dressed in a long black dress.

"It was her face that terrified me. Have you ever seen the painting by Grant Wood? The Daughters of the American Revolution?"

"I don't know," said Claire. "I don't think so."

Kevin took out his phone and found a photo of the painting. It showed three old ladies standing in front of the famous picture of George Washington crossing the Delaware.

"You see the woman on the right?" asked Kevin. "She has no eyes. Just empty sockets. That's how the witch looked. And when she smiled, she had these triangular-shaped teeth."

"You mean like shark teeth?" asked Claire.

"Smaller," answered Kevin. "Like cannibal teeth, now that I think of it. Have you ever seen pictures of how cannibalistic tribespeople sharpen their teeth?"

"No," answered Claire.

"Yeah. In fact, she used to tell me she was going to eat me when I got big enough."

"Damn, Honey. That's a hell of a nightmare."

"But that's just the thing. To me it wasn't a nightmare. It was real. I was awake."

Claire furrowed her brow with a look of concern.

"At least it seemed real to me," said Kevin. "Like I was still in my conscious state of mind. I don't remember waking up from it. I would just go and get my mother. And when she came back to the room with me, the witch was gone."

“Contractors,” said Kathy Childers, walking back into the room. “It’s hard enough to find good ones. And when you do, you have to keep stroking their egos to keep them happy. They’re all a bunch of babies, if you ask me.”

“So, what are your plans for the place?” asked Kevin. “Are you going to live here?”

“Naw,” said Kathy. “I’m just gonna flip it.

“I live three blocks away and I drive by here every day on my way downtown. I got sick of looking at it. I’m retired now and it just seemed like a fun project. You know, to help beautify the neighborhood. And to keep me out of trouble,” she added with a wink.

“Well, when you get ready to sell, let us know.” Said Kevin. He then reached for his wallet, dug out a business card, and handed it to her.

Back in the car, Claire gave Kevin an incredulous look. “That was unexpected,” she said.

“What?” asked Kevin.

“Giving her your card. Telling her we were interested in buying.”

“I don’t know,” Kevin said shrugging his shoulders. “I’d kind of like to see it when it’s finished. It’s just curiosity. She’ll probably want a fortune for it anyway.”

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That was a year ago. Since then, the world has gone through a pandemic, large areas of California have been consumed by wildfires, and the economy has suffered. And Kathy Childers fell and broke her right humerus as she was carrying a toilet down the back steps of the Millard house.

One afternoon, as Kevin was working in his home office, his cellphone began to buzz. He looked at the screen. It wasn’t any of his contacts who were calling him, but he noticed it was a Woodland number, so he answered it.

“Hello, Mr. Andrews?”

“Yes,” Kevin Answered.

“This is Kathy Childers.”

“Who?”

“Kathy Childers. I’m the one who’s restoring the house on Cleveland Street in Woodland. The one next door to where you grew up.”

“Oh, of course,” said Kevin. “How are you? How’s the house coming along?”

“Well, that’s why I’m calling. You asked me to let you know when I’m ready to sell. Well, I’m ready.”

“Oh, wow,” said Kevin. With all that had been going on in the world, Kevin had forgotten all about having given her his card and telling her he was interested in the place.

"I broke my arm a month ago and it's gonna be a while before I can work on the place again. So, I'm just gonna sell it as is. If you're still interested, why don't you come over and take a look. I haven't put it on the market yet. I hate real estate people."

"Uh, sure," said Kevin. "Let me talk to my wife and I'll get back to you."

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With no real estate agent involved, the purchase of the house moved quickly. Even with depressed property values, the price Kathy wanted was less than Kevin and Claire expected.

Kathy and her crew had done an excellent job restoring the place. All that remained was some wallpapering, painting, a little bit of carpentry, and landscaping. All things Kevin and Claire could handle themselves.

After being in the place a few days, there was a knock on the front door. Kevin answered. An athletic red-headed woman holding a pie covered with Saran Wrap stood on the porch. Behind her was a little boy.

"Hi. I'm Brandi Crilley. I live next door. This is my son Chad. He's a little shy. My husband's traveling right now or he'd be here too. His name is David. He likes to be called David, not Dave, just so you know. Here," she said, extending the pie.

"I know it's kind of cliché ... pie ... welcome to the neighborhood," said Brandi with a giggle. "God, I'm sorry. Look at me. I'm doing all the talking."

"Not at all," said Kevin, taking the pie. "Come in. I'll get my wife."

A few minutes later, Kevin, Claire, Brandi, and Chad were all seated in the living room on beach chairs.

"The house we moved from was a lot smaller," said Claire. "We decided to put the furniture from our old place down in the basement. We ordered more period appropriate stuff for the living room, but it hasn't arrived yet. Hence the beach chairs."

"This place is really cool," said Brandi. "I'm so glad people are living here now. It was kinda creepy living next to an old empty house. Every now and then we'd see the lights from homeless people moving around inside and we'd have to call the cops."

"Yes, that's what Kathy told us," said Claire. "She said there was even a fire once."

"Yes, that's right," said Brandi.

"You know," said Kevin, "I grew up in your house."

"No way!" said Brandi. "No way, really?"

Kevin nodded and smiled.

"Yeah," he said, "My family moved into your house in the early 60s, when I was still in diapers. We lived there for 15 years, until my sisters moved out and my parents downsized."

Kevin got up, walked to the window, and pointed. "That was my room, right there," he said. "The window to the left of the oak tree."

"Really," said Brandi. "No way! That's Chad's room."

Kevin spun around and looked at Chad who sat cross-legged on the floor. "Is that right?" asked Kevin.

Chad nodded.

"If you want, when David gets home, we'll have you over and you can check the place out and see what's changed and all."

"Where is your husband?" asked Claire. "You said he's traveling."

"Yeah, he works in the ag business. Fertilizer. They sell all over the world. But because of COVID, he hasn't been able to see clients. But now things are easing things up ... you know, travel restrictions. So, he's making up for lost time."

"I see," said Claire.

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A week later the Crilleys invited Kevin and Claire over.

David Crilley, a burly fellow with a buzz haircut and a loud voice, met them at the door. He introduced himself and then quickly asked Kevin what he did for a living.

"I'm an environmental researcher. I work for the CEC, the California Energy Commission, said Kevin.

"Guv'ment job, huh?" said David with a chuckle.

"Yes."

"Well, I'm happy to pay your salary," said David. "Let me show you around." He then turned to his wife and told her to go fix some drinks.

On entering his childhood home, Kevin was struck by how small it seemed. He remembered it being so spacious with odd little spaces and places to hide. In the downstairs hallway there was a phone alcove with a funny little seat that would fold down from the wall. He was pleased to see that it was still there.

Some of the things that were no longer there included Kevin's dad's study, that had been adjacent to his parents' bedroom on the second floor. It had been turned into a master bathroom complete with an enormous jacuzzi.

"I love that thing," bellowed David Crilley. "Nothing like getting in the jacuzzi after a long road trip."

"Did you put that in or was it here when you moved in?"

"Oh, I put it in. This room must've been a library or something. The whole wall was bookshelves," said David, as he waved his big meaty hand toward the back wall. "I have no use for that."

After the master bathroom, the Crilleys showed Kevin and Claire the rest of the upstairs.

Kevin poked his head into his old bedroom. He asked Chad if he could go into his room and take a look.

“You don’t have to ask the boy,” said David. “Just take a look.”

Kevin entered the room and went to the window and looked down across the yard and into the window of his new house.

“So, is that where you used to watch the woman ironing?” asked Claire.

“Yes,” said Kevin. “Mrs. Millard. And sometimes I’d watch Mr. Millard working in his shop. It’s where our garage is now, you see?” Kevin pointed to the detached garage in their backyard.

“Back then it was a run-down shed made of corrugated metal siding. Mr. Millard always had projects going on in there. At night I’d often see the blue light of an arc welder flashing from inside. My mother would tell me not to look at the light. ‘You’ll go blind,’ she’d say.”

“Childhood memories,” said David with a laugh. “We all got ‘em, don’t we?”

“I suppose so,” said Kevin, turning away from the window.

“Alright then. Are you ready to see the rest of the ol’ homestead?”

“Sure,” said Kevin.

Before leaving Chad’s bedroom, Kevin paused and stared at the closet door.

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Later that evening, back in his own house, Kevin once again stood in the alcove by the dining room and stared up at his old bedroom window.

Chad appeared in the window. He was wearing pajamas. Kevin waved at Chad and Chad waved back. Then Brandi came in the room and Chad moved away from the window. And then the lights went out.

Kevin went to the kitchen where Claire was sitting at the table, dinking a glass of rosé and looking at something on her phone.

“So, what did you think of David?” asked Claire.

“He’s a bit of an ass,” said Kevin.

“Yeah, he is,” agreed Claire. “More than a bit, I’d say.”

“I feel sorry for the kid,” said Kevin.

“I feel sorry for Brandi ... the way he orders her around.” said Claire. “When we first met her, she seemed on edge. Now I know why.”

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A few days later, Kevin came home to find Claire and Brandi sitting on the beach chairs in the living room. The two were talking intensely about something.

“Still no furniture, huh?” asked Kevin.

“No,” said Claire. “They told me it would be here this week. It’s only Wednesday.”

“Brandi came over to ask if we could keep an eye on their place for the next few days,” said Claire. “They’re going away for a long weekend. She just wants us to check the mail and feed the cat. She gave me a key.”

Brandi looked a little distant.

“Everything ok?” asked Kevin.

“Everything’s ok,” said Claire. Brandi just had a crappy night’s sleep.

“Really?” asked Kevin.

“Yeah,” said Brandi. “David’s back out on the road this week. And lately, Chad’s been having these nightmares. And last night, he was just freaking out. I finally ended up letting him sleep with me ... something that would never happen when David’s around.”

“Nightmares?” asked Kevin. “What kind of nightmares?”

Brandi leaned forward in her chair. “He said it was a witch ... a witch that came out of his closet,” she said, giving an awkward smile.

Kevin turned to Claire whose eyes had grown very large. He then asked, “Did he say what the witch looked like?”

“He said it was an old lady. A creepy lady dressed in black. I mean what else does a witch look like?” asked Brandi.

“I’m gonna go to the kitchen and make myself a drink,” said Kevin.

After fixing himself a gin and tonic, Kevin went to the alcove window and stared up at his old room. As Kevin stared up at the window, he heard the front door open and close. Then he heard Claire walk in.

“Did Brandi leave?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Claire. “She had to go pick-up Chad from a play date or something?”

“I can’t believe what Brandi said,” said Claire. “That’s a pretty creepy coincidence.”

“It’s no coincidence,” said Kevin, nodding towards his old bedroom window. “That thing is still up there.”

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The following night Kevin was lying awake in bed. It was a full moon outside and the light was shining into the bedroom at such an angle that it was right in Kevin’s eyes.

Kevin got up, went to the window and adjusted the curtains. Still feeling restless, he went to the kitchen, thinking a little nightcap might help.

As he passed by the alcove, he paused and looked up at the Crilley house. Suddenly, in Chad’s second floor bedroom, the light went on. In the frame of the window stood the silhouette of the witch. With its back against the light, it was hard to make out the details, but the shape was unmistakable. As Kevin’s eyes adjusted, with the aid of the moonlight, he could see the two vacant holes staring back at him.

'I'm not going to let her terrorize that little kid the way she did me,' thought Kevin.

Kevin posed the question to himself, 'What does one use to kill a witch ... a gun ... an axe?' Kevin opted for a baseball bat and also grabbed a flashlight.

After making sure Claire was asleep, Kevin found the spare key that the Crilleys had left and slipped out of the house.

Going into his old home at night, when no one was there was a whole different thing than taking David's grand tour. The house was still. The way the moonlight touched everything reminded Kevin of how the place had looked fifty years ago. Though the wallpaper and furniture had changed, the shadows and light still fell in the same places.

An anger gripped Kevin and he determinedly climbed up the stairs. To stave off his remaining fears, he shouted. "It's Kevin! I'm back and I'm coming for you!"

At the top of the stairs, he stomped across the hall, flung open the door to his old room, and turned on the light. Nothing. It was just Chad's bedroom. The same room he had seen a week earlier.

'I know I saw that thing,' thought Kevin.

Kevin grabbed the chair from Chad's desk and went to the closet. He planted the chair on the floor of the closet, stood on it and punched at the board covering the crawl hole. He poked his head through the opening and shone the flashlight around the attic. Nothing. Just an empty dusty attic.

The light in the bedroom switched off. Kevin jumped down from the chair, tripped, and fell onto the floor, losing his grip on the flashlight. "Who's there?" he shouted.

He scrambled to his feet and retrieved the lit flashlight. Looking around the room, he saw that it was no longer Chad's room but his. Lone Ranger wallpaper covered the walls. A red, white, and blue braided rug was on the floor. The bunkbeds his parents had bought for having sleepovers stood in the corner.

A blue flashing light then began to flicker on the walls. It was coming from outside. Kevin looked out the window and saw the light from Mr. Millard's arc welder. He looked over to the Millard house, his new home, and saw Mrs. Millard standing in the window ironing, her bony arm moving from right to left and back again.

The light switch clicked again and bedroom light came back on. Kevin spun around to see the witch standing not more than five feet away ... her same black dress, the same dead cavities for eyes.

Kevin took a swing at her with his bat. The witch caught the bat in her hand and flung it against the wall.

"Leave him alone!" shouted Kevin. "Leave Chad alone!"

The witch slowly tilted her head and bared her cannibal teeth. "Chad?" she said.

"Yes," said Kevin.

"I don't want Chad," said the witch in a hoarse voice.

"Don't you remember?" she asked.

Kevin couldn't speak.

"I said I was going to eat you when you were big enough."

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