

House Of My Dreams

Short Horror Tale No.5

By
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House Of My Dreams

Sometimes the weather seems to be setting the mood for your day.

My bus had dropped me about half a mile from Doctor Maybury's house. I had stepped out into a merciless, bludgeoning downpour and was soaked to the skin in seconds. The clothes I was wearing were cheap, second-hand and would show signs of mending to a careful observer, but they were the best I owned. I wore shoes, trousers and a shirt-and-tie rather than trainers, jeans and a T-shirt; my jacket was a little ill-fitting, but I had no other. All I could think was: 'I'm going to look like shit when I reach the doctor's door...'

And I was right. When I arrived at the detached house out in the city suburbs, I was dripping and dishevelled. The weather, however, had changed. Rain had fizzled away and stopped, clouds had begun to separate, and summer sunshine was beaming down upon me.

Just my luck... Or a sign that my luck was about to improve?

If Doctor Maybury was as good as I had been told, I might finally find a cure to the horror that had haunted me for twenty years of my life.

* * *

To me, the house looked like a mansion.

There was a white picket-fence before a flat expanse of perfectly-kept lawn. At the centre of the grass sat a round hydrangea bush, festooned with white blooms. Maybury's tarmac drive ran down the left side of the front garden, to end at the metal roller-doors of a garage.

The garage, I mused for a moment, was probably more spacious than any apartment I had ever lived in. And it was sure to have less rats and cockroaches than many I had been forced to inhabit.

Right of the garage sprawled the house itself. Two stories of pale grey brick, topped with a tiled roof of dark grey. Smoke trailed skyward from a single chimney. The ground floor had bay windows either side of a pristine white front door. I glimpsed curtains that were bright and cheerful – and I thought how welcoming this house was to anyone who approached it. If, as people said, homes reflected their owners, then the Maybury family must have been good people: loving to each other, kind to neighbours, decent folks. I felt a momentary wash of jealousy.

I went through the gate and up the paved path to the door. It opened before I could reach for the fancy door-knocker.

Doctor Maybury wasn't what I expected. I had conjured-up an image in my mind of a man near retirement, with receding silvery hair, a serious face and deeply-penetrating eyes. He would be cold, clinical and precise. Such were my estimates of a psychiatrist who would help special cases such as my own for nothing. Instead, his appearance and demeanour were that of a friendly uncle. Since I'm only five foot seven, his height of over six feet meant he towered above me. Maybury was also very broad-shouldered and his stout girth contrasted with my rather scrawny build. A loose-fitting grey jogging outfit covered his rather generous form, though I doubt he had ever run in this – it was worn for casual comfort.

Maybury's face was big and made up of big features. A square jaw and a dimpled chin. Thick lips around a wide mouth, filled with pearly-white teeth. A long, fleshy nose beneath a high, deeply-lined forehead. Bushy eyebrows and large, bright eyes of intense blue. Ears which jutted out like jug-handles. And a mop of blonde hair that seemed to have defied any attempt to comb it under control. Thick-rimmed glasses had been raised up and planted into Maybury's hair.

What I had heard about Maybury suggested he was at least fifty-five. He looked under forty, and most of this impression came from the exuberance of his grin and the power of his eyes.

Despite being soaked like a drowned rat, I couldn't help but return the infectious smile.

"Luke Smith?" he cried out, as if he were performing on a stage.

"What's left of him," I replied.

"And you swam all the way," he laughed. "Come on, young man. Let's get you in and get you warm and dry, shall we?"

"Thanks, Doctor May—"

As he ushered me in, he waved his hands in dismissal.

"No titles and crap here, Luke. You call me Charles."

* * *

The square hallway was over fifteen feet wide. Its walls were decorated with patterned pale blue wallpaper, and the floor was of polished marble tiles. There were closed oak doors all around: two in the wall to my left; one in the middle of the right-hand wall; and a fourth in the wall facing me, to the left of the carpeted stairs which rose to the upper level. An ornate mirror and a Van Gogh print added to the wall decor. The furniture was just a small table on the right and a wooden coat-stand on the left.

I found my shoes squelching on the thick 'Welcome' mat. Rainwater dripped off my coat to spatter the tiles.

"I'm sorry." I grimaced. "I'm making a mess..."

"Don't worry."

Maybury helped me off with my coat before I could resist, and he shook it to spray the centre of the floor.

"There we are, can't get any worse!" He smirked. "I have a maid who comes in each morning. She complains that I'm much too clean and tidy. Now she'll be overjoyed to finally have something to mop up."

He hung my coat on the stand, where it was left to swing – making me think, eerily, of a hung corpse on a gibbet.

I still felt awkward, and blundered out a response: "Your wife and family won't mind..?"

Maybury paused a moment, and briefly seemed to shrink inward. "My wife died a few years ago. I live alone here."

"I'm sorry..."

The doctor raised a finger and wagged it. "No more apologies. You weren't to know. Now, let's take care of you."

* * *

Thirty minutes later, I was sitting comfortably in the psychiatrist's home office.

Maybury was a more than generous host. I'd been taken to an upstairs bathroom and been given a bundle of towels to dry myself off. Clothing had been found for me to wear while my own hung to dry elsewhere in the house. The replacement garments were another jogging suit and, although it was a little large, it was warm and snug. Maybury told me the suit came from his "slimmer years"... before "a love of pastries overwhelmed my waistline". He also gave me some thick socks, but apologised at having no other suitable spare footwear.

The office was the second door to the left from the front entrance. It was a spacious, windowless room, clearly designed to offer visitors as little distraction as possible. Plain white walls and ceiling, a beige carpet, an office desk, a few chairs, two couches and a coffee table. I noticed immediately that thick plastic covered the carpet.

"That's something for one of my regular visitors," Maybury explained as he guided me to a couch. "He's concerned with bugs, and fears that carpets are filled with them. Which, I suppose, they technically are. Microscopic ones, though."

The couch had the pleasant smell of well-cared-for leather and it was framed in mahogany. I sat back, buoyant on the firm springs supporting me.

Set upon the coffee table was a huge mug of hot chocolate and a platter of biscuits. Maybury had chosen to have just a glass of water with a slice of lemon. He lounged on the other couch, facing mine across the table.

"That chocolate will warm you up, Luke."

"Thanks. For everything." I took a hearty drink from the mug and found the taste exquisite. "That's great stuff. Probably got enough sugar in it to kill a rhino, but it's great."

Maybury patted his stomach. "You've probably noticed that I'm fighting a losing battle against indulgence."

"Maybe," I said, feeling relaxed enough to make a joke, "you should see a psychiatrist about that."

The doctor grinned. "I do. Every time I look in the mirror. He tells me it's okay."

I paused for a few seconds of quiet contemplation. Here I was talking to the man as if I had known him for years. Yet part of my problem was social awkwardness. I usually found it hard, sometimes impossible, to connect with others. Maybury certainly had a gift for putting people at ease.

"It's a pity," I told him, "that today's session is kinda screwed up. I get the feeling you could really help me."

He sipped at his water and I could see he wished it was hot chocolate.

"Your session hasn't started, Luke. I don't work on an hourly basis with special cases like yours."

It's not even three o'clock yet. We have all afternoon ahead of us... and the evening too if it helps. Hell, I've talked with some of my guests until breakfast the next morning. The important thing is that we help you. Nothing else matters."

We spent the next half-hour just chit-chatting in general. Maybury made no effort to guide me into discussing my history or problems – he just relaxed me further.

After he refilled my mug and got one for himself, I realised I was ready. I began to tell him what I knew...

Of course, the worst things were those I couldn't tell him...

* * *

I was born into a world of horror.

Other psychiatrists have told me that I've put up mental barriers to block virtually every memory from my early childhood. Ask me my earliest recollection and I'd describe something from the mental hospital in which I spent my eleventh and twelfth years: the smile of a nurse, someone comforting me after I awoke screaming in the night, or maybe an orderly making me laugh. Everything earlier than that is either erased or hidden. On rare occasions, I have had a flash of *something* – a vague, enraged woman's face or a woman's angry yell, with words indistinguishable – and I've been overcome with dread. Maybe that woman is a memory, maybe she was my mother, or maybe she's a monster conjured up by my damaged mind.

All I know is, the first ten years of my life are a black hole. And something truly sinister lives in there.

When I reached my teens, I was living in a halfway house. That was how the team who ran it liked the centre described – 'a halfway house where children waited for loving adoption'. Older kids like me knew it was really an orphanage; damaged kids like me also knew that no one would ever adopt us. I wasn't upset by these facts, however. I understood that my life consisted of ten years of 'something so bad I had blotted it out', then two years of care at the hospital, and finally the more open environment of the halfway house. I liked the adults who took care of us – especially the janitor who sneaked me old Batman comics – and I loved the schooling we received at the centre. Learning, to me, was true freedom. Knowledge was fuel for the soul.

Best of all, the nightmares I'd suffered from in the hospital had gone. I never slept well – the slightest noise would wake me and I always woke up scared – but I felt far more normal than before. I was a nervous, introvert kid who was afraid of the dark, of strangers, of... well, pretty much everything. It was hard for me to make friends and very difficult for me to trust and confide in someone. But my life had so much more freedom and so many possibilities.

Most of my time at the halfway house varied from contentment to happiness. I only recall one incident that troubled me deeply. It wasn't one of the occasions when I got picked-on by bullies – it was a quiet conversation with another kid:

"Hey, Luke," he had begun, while we wolfed our lunches. "You know those years you can't remember..."

"Yeah. My 'missing years'?"

"Well, you reckon some really bad shit happened to you, don't you?"

"Mmm..." My mouth was full. "The doc's say it was so bad I forgot it all on purpose."

"I just wondered, what if it wasn't that something bad happened to you...?"

"Uh?" I frowned. "Then what..?"

"What if you did something so bad, you forgot it?"

That conversation has haunted me every day since.

What if that blurred female face with the screaming voice wasn't my monster? What if my monster was me? What could I have done..?

End Of Sample

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