

# GRANDDAD'S MYSTERY HOUSE

by Greg Stolze

I don't know if I recall the first time I went to granddad's mystery house. It could have happened when I was too young to remember—too young to understand anything I saw beyond colors and movement. Maybe I was a tiny baby and the day was cloudy, and that's why I always picture the house overcast.

It could have been the first time I saw lightning and heard thunder. Perhaps I was scared and screamed in my mother's arms.

When I think about going there, I imagine gray skies, I think of stairs up to the house, and then the lions. One on either side of the entryway. I know they're lions, even though they're so old and weathered that the eyes are just holes, the open mouths discolored like they're drooling or bleeding from the gums. When I was young, I didn't know what they were, just that they had eyes and teeth but weren't human.

Then the door would open, revealing granddad, wreathed in cigarette smoke, impossibly tall and gnarled like a tree. "There's the boy!" His voice was a growl, a rumble, thunder itself, coarse from years of shouting God knows what at work crews. He picked me up like I was a cat or a sack of groceries, arms like rope and leather, pulling me up to a wire-brush kiss on the cheek.

I laughed, I always did, half nervously and half in relief that this force of nature was on my side. He'd tuck me against his hip and walk me into the house like a newspaper under his arm.

Now, as an adult, I don't notice the climb, which seemed like going up a mountain when my legs were short. The lions are just old, battered... probably a little cheap, certainly a little sad. I knock and think about getting dad one of those camera doorbells. They're a civil rights nightmare, but after those assholes broke in last year we're all worried. We're all worried about a lot of stuff.

It's dad's house now. He lets me in and our hug is slow, gentle. He feels like a bundle of sticks, though he can't be much older now than granddad was when he'd lift me overhead in the backyard and toss me, shouting "Dont'cha dare holler! Don't do it! I might drop you!" until inevitably I'd shriek—again that mingled terror and exhilaration—and he'd pretend to fumble my small body, while actually putting me down, a little rough, but unharmed.

"You got rid of the picture," I say, as we go into the living room.

"Yeah, it was all glossed over with nicotine," Dad replies.

"I never liked that thing."

"It scared the bejabbers out of you as a kid."

"Did it?" I ask.

"I could tell." He coughs. "You want coffee? I can make some."

"Nah, you don't have to..."

"It's no trouble!"

"Are you having any?"

"It just tastes like metal to me now," he says. I'm pretty sure he used to drink a whole pot every day.

I sit in a dusty recliner with a prominent spring in my rump and ask how it's going. A nice neutral question. General.

He bunts it with an answer about the house. "I went into the basement the other day and saw streams of daylight through cracks in the foundation. That's not going to be cheap."

"These days they can just gunk it up with epoxy," I say. "No biggie."

"From your mouth to God's ear," he says, as a creak comes from the ceiling overhead.

"You have a guest?" I ask.

"It's just Agnes," he says, and laughs a little. It turns into another cough.

"Jesus, Agnes," I say.

"Your grandpa had you so convinced this house had a ghost, what was the story?"

"That her husband drowned her in the tub, and she'd come get me if I took too long in the bathroom," I said. "Or if I splashed water. Or if I got out of bed too many times at night."

"Every time this old pile creaked or settled, he'd look up and shake his head. 'Agnes, she's restless.'"

"That wasn't as bad as the werewolf, remember?"

"Werewolf?" Dad asks, grinning.

"He told me he'd trapped a werewolf in the attic and I shouldn't go up there under any circumstances. Of course, by then I was too old to believe it."

"Oh yeah yeah, you were twelve maybe. That was squirrels."

"What?"

“He had squirrels in the attic and you could hear ‘em moving around, you just about jumped out of your skin. You were a nervous little kid.”

“Well, is it any wonder? Your dad told me his house was haunted.”

As a teen, I went through a ghost hunting phase. I actually tried to talk to Agnes via ouija board with my best buddy Ron and our girlfriends, but nothing happened, so we just made out with the girls and snuck beers from the fridge in the icy cold basement. Ron went on to major in engineering. I remember a conversation—after his graduation party, I think—drinking legally and him pointing out that almost every sign of a classic haunting is also a sign of a house being old. Mysterious groans? That’s timbers settling. Flickering lights? Pre-code wiring. Cold spots? You have a draft, and if it’s strong enough it can blow out your candle and move papers around.

When I asked him about humanoid apparitions, he waved his hand and tried to remember a word for that, for false positives in our brain’s pattern matching. He’d read it on a skeptic website. A few days later he texted it to me:

“Apophenia.”

“One time when I was a kid—little—my father told me there were goblins living under the back porch,” Dad says, and I chuckle. “Said they had scales like snakes, red eyes, big ol’ claws and thick black hair like vines.”

“What was it really?” I ask.

“A possum.”

I laugh.

“His old pal Dale came out and trapped it. I remember them pulling out the cage and this very pissed animal thrashing its nasty pink hairless tail, hissing at us. ‘You reckon it’s a mama, Dale?’” Dad says, doing a passable imitation of the old man. “‘I don’t want to deal with any starvin’ pups.’ ‘Let’s give ‘er a look,’ Dale said, and flipped the cage upside down to check. ‘Naw, you can see his lunchbox,’ and they laughed. Then it played dead and they laughed harder.”

“What do you suppose they did with it?”

“I would not be in any way surprised if it wound up on Dale’s plate,” Dad replies.

He asks me about my business and I tell him about this and that before asking about dinner. He just waves his hand.

“Tastes like metal?” I guess.

“Metal if I’m lucky.”

“Dad, look... if you’re gonna get better, you gotta keep up your strength.”

“I’m not gonna get better,” he says.

The silence after that one is thick.

"You... Dad, c'mon, you don't mean that. You... the doctor said..."

"Last time you talked to the doctor, things were one way." He looks away, squinting, grimacing. Were his teeth always that gray? "Things are another way now."

"No, you gotta fight this, you..."

"Son, I don't. I really don't. It's OK." He rubs his eye. "I don't want to guess how many days of food being bad I have left. I don't want to get any new symptoms. I don't want to go through more chemo, more radiation. I just don't."

"But what am I going to do?"

I didn't mean to ask that. I didn't think it, it just came out.

When my father looks back at me and smiles, for just a minute he's back. Back in a way I hadn't realized had gone. He's the man whose laugh could calm me when the closet door creaked open, who never got impatient with my nerves and frights, but never made them worse by playing along.

For a minute, it's the same as it has always been, and he takes that minute to say, "You'll be fine. You're a good man—smart, capable, and most importantly you care. I see it and I couldn't be prouder. That's what matters. Me? Well, I've loved and been loved, and that's about all the point I can see to this human life." He says this like he's been thinking about it a lot. "Everything else is gravy on the biscuit. As your granddad used to say."

"I don't want you to go," I say, quietly.

"Ah son, there's not much for me here but you and pain, and I don't want to be an anchor on you. I'll be OK. One way or the other, I'll be somewhere suffering can't reach." Like punctuation, he coughs.

Then some slyness comes over his grin and he says, "Besides... all this will be yours!"

He gestures at the house where I heard a hundred ghost stories, and smiles.

But I have never been more afraid.