

# 24 BECKENRIDGE DRIVE

by J.M. Diener

## ONE

The dark house stands ominously on the edge of Norm's Pond, a great old mansion that seems to have something truly evil about it. Many rumors circulate in the small community of Druin, Maine, and though the names of the people and the strange occurrences differ in each account, they all lead up to the same conclusion: 24 Beckenridge Drive is haunted.

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Liz and Randy "Mitch" Mitchell drove slowly down the wooded drive, searching the mailboxes for a specific number.

"You see it yet?" he asked quickly.

"No," was the reply. Mitch felt uncomfortable driving so slowly. The road just seemed to drag out forever. He flashed a look at his wife, a pretty blonde, who scanned the roadside consistently.

"Are you sure we've got the right road?" he asked for the twentieth time.

"Of course," she replied with just a bit of impatience. "Oh, there it is, 24." The Taurus pulled to a stop in front of the ivy-covered mansion. A great many windows looked out from it onto the road, giving the old architecture an awesome look. Three quarters of the front were covered by a great twisting ivy and a fence, also covered with ivy, wound itself around the property, only broken by an ornate iron gate. The massive old door to the mansion was just barely visible and seemed able to withstand even a direct attack by a warhead.

"Wow," Mitch said. "Some building."

"It certainly seems bigger than in the pictures," Liz remarked.

"You've got a point there. Let's take a look at it." The two walked to the house across the road, number 25, and knocked on the door. They were instantly greeted by a woman in her mid-fifties.

"May I help you?" she asked, regarding the two in front of her. The man was just slightly under six feet, with brownish hair, sharp features, and gray-blue eyes. The woman was just a tad shorter, blonde, blue eyed, and basically the American dream girl, only she seemed to be nearer forty, than twenty.

"I'm Randy Mitchell," man said, "and this is my wife, Liz. We came to check out the house across the road. I was told that you would have the key." The woman at the door nodded and pulled a key out of her pocket.

"You planning to buy the place?" she asked.

"I guess," Mitch said.

"Well good luck to you then," the woman said with a half-smile, as if she was enjoying some private joke. "You're going to need it." The door closed on the perplexed couple.

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The mansion was beautiful. They checked both floors, looking in the numerous rooms. "This one would be great for Brad," Liz remarked, looking into a big corner room on the second floor with a bank of windows opening onto the large pond behind the house. Mitch nodded, preoccupied.

"They really worked on renovating this place," he said, inspecting the wall sockets. "I just hope we won't blow any fuses when I plug the computer in here."

"I don't worry about it," Liz countered. "This is just great! Each of the kids can have their own room up here and we still can have a couple guest rooms left over!" She looked out the back again. "We even have a pond in the back yard."

"Yeah, I guess buying that canoe will finally pay off," Mitch said, putting his arms around her.

"So, what's the verdict?" she wanted to know.

"Definitely yes!" he said looking at the ornate work of the windows. "But don't you think we should have this room? It's so romantic!" Liz laughed and poked him in the side.

## TWO

The moving truck pulled up in front of the mansion with the Taurus wagon just behind it. Mitch climbed out of the truck and signaled to the car. His older son, Larry, slid out from behind the wheel to look at the house.

"Wow!" was all he could say. The other kids, Marian and Brad, were just as awed by the large, ancient structure.

"Okay," Mitch called. "Let's get this truck unloaded." They spent the rest of the day carefully unloading the truck and the car. Brad, an energetic ten-year-old with his mother's looks, worked hardest, trying to get the work done so he could go exploring. When they were finished, both Marian and Larry joined him enthusiastically, even though they were sixteen and eighteen and knew that there were better things to do than go exploring. There was something about the house that made you feel like a little kid again.

The exploration of the top floor resulted in a vigorous game of hide-and-seek. Brad was it. He walked slowly down the hall carefully opening the doors to various rooms, looking for his older siblings. He reached the next-to-the-last door on the floor. It was a bit narrower than the other doors. *Probably a closet*, he thought, carefully turning the knob. The door swung open silently to reveal a flight of wooden stairs leading upward. A thrill of excitement ran up Brad's spine as he looked up those stairs. He was about to start up, but something in him told him that the others would like to discover this with him.

"Larry, Rian!" he called. "I found something really cool." Larry's tall frame appeared in the door of the room he had just checked.

"Hey," Brad yelled, "I just looked in there! How'd you do that?"

"My secret," the dark-haired eighteen-year-old grinned. Marian came down the hall. She was a bit shorter than Larry and wore a black Celtics cap over her short, straight, blond hair, jeans, and a T-shirt. Larry wore his favorite jeans and polo shirt, both stained by repeated use inside and outside their last house. Brad was dressed like his sister, minus the cap.

"What did you find?" Marian wanted to know.

"Look," Brad said, pointing up the stairs.

"So, it's the attic," Larry said, trying to be indifferent, but inside he was just as curious and thrilled as Brad.

"Let's go up," his sister suggested.

"Okay."

The attic was an immense room, spanning the whole length of the house. The rafters were visible in the slanted walls. A grand piano covered with cobwebs stood just ahead and to their right. A large octagonal table stood in the center of the room, dusty and ancient, surrounded by several broken chairs. The only other thing the room contained, aside from several old candle stumps and cobwebs stuck to the wall, was a large black chest standing against the wall behind the table. The three stood close to the stairs, just taking it all in.

"I wonder if it's tuned," Larry remarked walking over to the piano. Marian went to the table and began wiping some of the dust off it, while Brad explored the ancient chest.

"Larry?" Marian was leaning over the table motioning him. He came over and looked at the top of the table.

"What on earth?" he asked wiping the tabletop. It was covered with strange markings that looked like Sanskrit or Hebrew.

"Hey, guys," Brad called. "Look what I've found." He had succeeded in opening the chest and now held a board aloft. It was also covered with markings, but these were common English letters and numbers. *Ouija board*, shot through both Marian and Larry's heads. They had never seen one in real life, but they knew what it was from photos in a magazine.

"There's some other really neat stuff in here, too," Brad continued enthusiastically. The two older kids came and looked into the chest. There was a deck of cards on the bottom, next to it an object covered by a black cloth and several wooden sticks along with a great number of candles, a couple of nondescript masks, and a thick black book with a pentagram etched on the cover.

"Put it back, Brad," Marian said quickly. Something in her tone of voice made the boy comply instantly. While the other two were laboring to close the top of the box, Larry suddenly felt the hairs on his neck stand up. A chill ran down his spine as he slowly turned around. Before him stood a hazy figure. It had the appearance of a man with white frizzy hair and wild eyes, dressed in black robes. The figure reached out a claw to touch him.

"Aagh!" Marian and Brad looked up at their older brother. He stood with his back to them, shaking.

"What is it?" Marian asked as she came around and.... She instantly pressed a hand to her mouth. Never had she seen Larry like this before. He was white as a sheet, his blue eyes wild, staring at a spot just above her right shoulder.

"Larry?" she said touching his arm. He didn't respond. "Larry!" she yelled shaking him. He suddenly came to himself with a start. He was shaking all over, still wide eyed, but she could tell he was looking at her.

"What was that?" he asked.

"What was what?" Brad asked loudly. Both teenagers jumped.

"I don't know, but I saw this old man here," Larry said in a shaking voice and described the figure he had seen.

"Let's get out of here!" Marian suggested and all three almost ran out of the attic to the sunny lower floor.

"Nobody say anything about this, yet." Larry had regained his composure, but still seemed shaken. The other two just nodded their assent.

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That evening Liz noticed something was wrong with her oldest son. Larry, usually the most talkative, was silent, not a word came from him.

"Larry, what's wrong?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing," he said, absentmindedly stirring his cheese and macaroni.

"Don't try that with me, Larry. I know you better than that," his mother chided. "Now tell me what's wrong."

"Larry thinks he saw a ghost," Brad giggled before Larry could even open his mouth. A glare from his older siblings instantly silenced his laughter.

"A ghost?" Mitch remarked. "Aren't we a bit old for that?"

"Dad, I know what I saw, and I'm not making this up," Larry countered.

"Yeah, right," Mitch mumbled. "So where'd you see this ghost?" Larry sighed to himself and recounted the events with some help from the other two.

"A ghost, eh?" Mitch laughed. "There's no such thing. It isn't rationally possible."

*My father the realist*, Larry thought, almost disgustedly. "Well, Dad, until today I thought so, too, but how else do you explain this?"

"Hallucinations," Mitch said, waving his hand.

"Yeah, right." Marian wasn't too convinced of that theory.

"Well, let's forget about it for tonight," Liz said. She suddenly had this funny feeling. It was the same one she had when she had hidden under her covers as a little girl, afraid of the boogey man.

"All right," Mitch said. And that was that.

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The rest of the evening progressed normally. Their rooms had been readied somewhat: the beds had been moved in and made, along with the dressers and some other necessities. Mitch and Liz didn't talk about the incident anymore. Brad kept poking fun at Larry because of the "ghost." The usually reserved Larry blew up at his younger brother, and Marian got it in the neck when she tried to intervene. Finally, Mitch exploded into the room, yelled at all of them and sent them to bed.

"Something's gotten into those kids," he remarked to Liz as he crawled into bed.

"Hm-hm," was her answer.

Marian felt very unhappy as she slipped into her bed. The day had started out great, but now this "ghost" story was driving her nuts. She hesitated to turn out the light. *You don't believe this do you?* she asked herself. Well, maybe she did. *Nah*, she thought. *Let's forget about it tonight. It will all look better in the morning.* She hit the light and went to sleep.

About midnight something stirred in her room. Marian sat up. Her neck hairs had begun to stand on end. At the end of the bed a pair of luminescent red spots hovered, just above the bottom of her bed. A low guttural growl came from the spots. Marian was too scared to scream. Slowly a weight began to settle on the end of the bed. The girl pulled her feet up as the weight crept up the bed. The bright red slits glowed ever closer, and the growling was now accompanied by an acrid sulfuric smell.

"Ai-ee!" Larry sat up in bed. He was sure he had heard Marian scream. He instantly leaped out of bed and ran to the room next to his. The rest of the family was at the other end of the hall and couldn't hear the scream through the closed doors. He almost tore the door out of the wall. The room was filled with an acrid smell. Larry covered his nose and mouth with his hand and slipped into the room. His other hand searched for the light switch, but he couldn't find it. He thought he could hear something growling in the room. Another piercing scream echoed through the room and suddenly the smell and the growling disappeared. The room instantly grew lighter, and Larry saw Marian sitting in her bed, pale, shaking, her blue-gray eyes wide.

"Are you, okay?" he asked. She didn't answer, just looked at him, afraid he might be another apparition come to torment her. "It's okay, it's just me, Larry," he said. The girl suddenly pitched forward into his arms, sobbing.

"Are you alright?" he asked again.

"No!" she sobbed. "It was here. I saw it. I heard it. It almost got me." He held her for some time just comforting her. A large figure appeared in the door. Both teens shrunk back.

"I heard you scream," Mitch said, turning on the light. "What happened?" Then he saw the shocked look on both their faces.

"It was here," they said, almost simultaneously. Mitch sniffed the room.

"What burned in here?" he asked.

"It did."

"What?"

"The ghost." Mitch almost burst out laughing, but the look on his children's faces stopped him. "Okay," he said, sitting down on the bed. "Tell me what happened." They quickly recounted it while Mitch quietly listened.

"Well, I think we all need to go to sleep. If you want you can come and sleep with us in our room, Rian. Larry, I guess you can manage on your own." Larry nodded.

"Good night," he said and went back to his room. Marian decided to spend the rest of the night in her room and Mitch went back to his room, shaking his head.

"Well?" Liz said, as he crawled under the covers.

"They said it was the ghost," he said sarcastically, wrapping his arms around his wife.

"Both of them did?"

"Yeah. I always thought my kids were normal, everyday kids. Now I discover they're a bunch of paranoid kooks."

"Now, Mitch," Liz chided, "don't say that. If both of them saw or heard something, it must be real. Stop making fun about it."

"All right, all right," he said, reaching for the light switch, and they went to sleep.

## THREE

The next two weeks went by rather quietly. No one worried about the “ghost,” no one even spoke about it. The door to the attic was forgotten and no one even so much as mentioned the strange smells that sometimes wafted through the house.

It was exactly two weeks after the first time Larry had seen the ghost. Mitch and Liz needed a break that night and decided to go out for dinner. The three kids stayed home, all of them sitting in the large family room next to Brad’s room on the second floor. Larry sat at the computer, typing an article for the local paper where he worked as a free-lance writer. Marian was listening to the TV disinterestedly, while sketching Brad who was reading a book on ghost stories. Suddenly the mechanical click of the computer keys stopped. Larry sat back and listened.

“What’s that?” he asked. Marian listened for a moment.

“Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D minor,” she said disinterestedly. She had taken music history last semester.

“It sounds wrong,” Larry remarked. “It’s a piano, not an organ like on Mom’s tape.”

“So, they’ve arranged it for piano,” Marian shrugged. “Maybe someone left the radio on downstairs.”

“It’s not coming from downstairs,” Brad said monotonously. “It’s upstairs.” Suddenly everyone looked at each other. The strains of the famous piece filtered down to them. Abruptly it changed.

“Beethoven’s fifth,” Larry remarked. It was his favorite piece of classical music. Brad got up silently. The other two quickly followed him. The melody changed again before they reached the stairs. It had become something none of them recognized, or did they? The melody went around and around, ever faster.

Suddenly Marian called out, “Grieg! I know it’s from *Peer Gynt*, ‘In the Hall of the Mountain King!’” Brad opened the door and the three crept up the narrow stairway, Brad first, Larry last, and Marian in the middle. The whole room was lit brightly by candles. An incense burner sat on top of the table and a strange mask was propped up beside it. The ghost sat at the piano, hammering out the music to *Peer Gynt*. Abruptly it changed back to the Toccata. The melody made their hair stand on end. The ghost turned and looked at them, a hideous grin fixed on its face.

“Sing along,” came a scratchy voice. The melody changed again, now Beethoven’s ninth. “*Freude, schöner Götterfunken, Tochter aus Elysium...*,” sang the scratchy voice in the original German text. The three looked at each other and ran down the stairs and out the door. Larry remembered to lock it. A hellish laughter seemed to explode from the house as they ran out the gate and to the small house across the street, number 25.

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The door opened almost as soon as Brad had knocked on it to reveal a kindly lady.

“Why, hello,” she said pleasantly. She noticed the shocked looks on the face of the three young people. “Is something wrong?” she asked.

“You won’t believe this, but...,” Larry began.

“You saw the ghost,” the woman finished.

“How’d you know?” they asked in unison.

“Everybody knows that place is haunted,” the lady said shrugging. She stepped away from the door. “Won’t you come in?” she asked, beckoning them inside. They entered mutely.

“I’m Mrs. Lundin,” she said with a smile. Each of the kids introduced themselves. “You know I warned your father about it when he came to pick up the keys for the inspection,” she said.

"He doesn't believe in stuff like that," Marian said with a wave of her hand.

"Well, he should and for a good reason," came a rasping voice from another room. The three turned just in time to see a wheelchair roll into the room. An old man was seated in it. His hair was long and shock white, uncombed, so it gave him an almost maddened look. He had a large, hooked nose and his face was crisscrossed with many wrinkles. He hunched over in his wheelchair, wearing a pair of old-fashioned pants, shirt, and cardigan. But the most disturbing thing about him were his eyes. They were a crystal-clear blue, that seemed to be able to look through anything. They had a look in them that reminded Larry of the eyes of the ghost, and yet they seemed tamer.

"Sit down, sit down," he croaked at them in a commanding manner.

"Oh," Mrs. Lundin said quickly. "This is my father, Mr. Druin. He's descended from one of the original founders of the settlement."

"Enough formalities," the old man barked. "Sit!" They sat.

"All right, now what are your names and what happened with the ghost?" he interrogated them. Larry introduced himself, his sister and brother and told of the encounters they had with their "house guest."

"Heh, heh," the old man wheezed. "Looks like old Jacob still wants his mansion!" He wheezed again and Brad concluded that the old man was trying to laugh. "Well, since you young whippersnappers now live over there, I think I should tell you the story." Mr. Druin settled himself in his wheelchair, closed his eyes for a moment and began his tale in a scratchy voice.

"Jacob Druin was a distant relative of mine who lived back in the 1800's. He was an asset to the community back then, being the mayor, the judge, and holding other offices at other times. He was also a wizard." The old man cackled at the looks on the faces of the kids. "Yes, a wizard," he repeated and cackled again.

*I knew this was going to come in somewhere, Marian couldn't help thinking.*

"Well," the old man continued, "he wasn't a bad wizard, mind you, but a good kind, who would use his powers to help the people of the village, at least, that is, until he had the mansion built. It is said he built it by pure magic and then moved in. After that things began to change. First of all, his wife went insane and drowned herself. Then some of the young girls, girls your age," he said, pointing at Marian, "started disappearing. 'Tis said he sacrificed them to the devil. He was then hung for sorcery by the new mayor, but Jacob wasn't afraid of dying, because he had bonded his soul to the house. 'I'll be back!' he said when he died and a few weeks later he was, playing his piano as usual, doing what he did best: scare the people." The old man chuckled. "And he still does it, as you got to see."

"But what's that growling thing?" Marian wanted to know.

"It's said that that's his watchdog," Mr. Druin answered. "It only warns you once. Then," he said, tightening a wizened hand into a fist, "it kills you." He reveled in the shocked look on their faces. "Others may tell you it's a demon or some such hokum. But believe me, little 'uns, it's a ghost." He turned the wheelchair. "All right, enough for now," he said leaving the room. "Remember the ghost!" They could hear him laugh as he rolled into the next room.

"Some ghost story," Brad remarked. "Sounds a lot like those ones in the book."

"Yes," Mrs. Lundin said, coming out of the kitchen with some milk and cookies, "but he hasn't told you the rest of the story." She sat down in the seat across from Brad. "It is said that Jacob Druin still sacrifices his girls to the devil, because now and again some high school-age girls disappear, and they are always found somewhere in or around the mansion."

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They spent the rest of the evening watching the TV at Mrs. Lundin's, but Larry and Marian's thoughts were far from the flickering screen. Larry's thoughts chorused around the old man's words, *Others*



*may tell you it's a demon.* Demons! He hadn't thought or heard about them since a couple of months before moving here. *Wasn't there something in the youth group about that?* he wondered.

"Yeah, I guess there was," Marian said abruptly. Had he been speaking out loud?

"Huh?"

"You just said something about demons and the youth group," Marian answered.

"I didn't realize I had spoken out loud," Larry admitted.

"But," Marian said, sunk in her own thoughts, "couldn't it be true? I mean, Chris said that they were real and that they had weird powers, sort of like ...."

"Ghosts," Larry finished.

"Yeah." She shuddered. "But the story seems so much like the other ghost stories, it's unreal." She ran a hand through her short blond hair. "It's weird, Larry, and I'm scared of it."

"Yeah, me too," he said in a near whisper.

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Mitch and Liz arrived back at about 11:30 and the kids returned to their "haunted" mansion. Mitch was his usual unbelieving self and Liz seemed slightly unnerved at the prospect of a ghost in the house.

"Ghosts don't exist," Mitch said for the twentieth time as he shoed the kids into their rooms. "They're just a bunch of fairy tales." Even so, that night Marian and Larry found themselves praying for the first time in a long time.

Brad slid into his bed and turned out the light.

*It's actually pretty cool living in a haunted house,* he thought with a grin. *Wonder what they'd say about that?* "They" were his friends, left behind from the move. He rolled over, looking toward the large bank of windows. Somewhere out there the body of the ghost was buried, and he wanted to find it. He closed his eyes for a moment and then opened them again.

*What's that?* he wondered. On the floor beside his bed lay something fairly large. In the half-light it looked almost like... a body?! Brad reached out to touch the thing but drew his hand back.

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"Mom!" Liz came awake.

"What is it, hon?" she asked sleepily.

"There's a body in my room," Brad said excitedly.

"What?"

"Come and see. Rian and Larry are already there." Liz shot out of bed and stumbled into Brad's room.

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Larry wasn't surprised that Brad had seen a body. What surprised him was that it was real, not an image like the ghost of Jacob Druin, only a real human body. Marian had screamed when he turned on the light, because of the blood covering the white robes it wore. With her help Larry lifted the lifeless form onto the bed. *Lifeless? No!* The body was still warm. Either it had only died moments ago, or it was still alive. In that case ...

*Oh my!* he thought as the light spilled over the face. It was a girl with long red tresses framing an oval face. Freckles were sprinkled over her nose. Dark lashes accentuated the edges of the closed eyes and rosebud lips were just slightly apart. A rasping sound came from her throat, and it made Larry jump.

"She's alive," he said to Marian. At that moment Liz came into the room.

"Oh, my word!" the woman breathed, looking at the form on the bed. She turned and hurried back to her own room.

"Randy!" Mitch groaned slightly. "Randy, wake up!"

"What is it?" he said, coming fully awake. Liz only called him by his first name when there was real trouble.

"There's a dying girl in Brad's room," she said quickly. "Call 911 and take the boys downstairs and wait."

"Okay," he said reaching for the phone.

As soon as the men had gone downstairs, Liz and Marian began loosening the white robes around the girl's body. Liz was surprised to find no knife or bullet wounds anywhere. The sight of the blood sickened them, even though they realized it probably wasn't human blood, it still turned their stomachs. Suddenly a siren howled outside the window and seconds later the paramedics came running up the stairs. One knelt beside the bed, preparing an IV, the other one bent over the girl, checking her eyes, shining a light into the partially open mouth.

"There's something in her throat, John," he said to his partner. "We'll need to do the Heimlich, but it might be too late." The other paramedic nodded, and they performed the Heimlich maneuver. It was successful, and moments later the air passages were cleared. John reached into the girl's mouth and pulled out a black membrane.

"Wonder why she swallowed that?" he mused. "We'll have to take her to the hospital, Mrs. Mitchell," he said turning to Liz. "What's her name?"

"I don't know," Liz said lamely. "We just found her here a few minutes ago."

"She's not one of your family?" Liz shook her head.

"Well," John's partner said, quickly packing up his gear. "You're lucky you found her when you did. A few more minutes and she'd be dead."

A police car had pulled up outside the house, alerted by the 911 service. The officers questioned the Mitchells and then left with the inert form of the young woman. They didn't stay up for long, quickly returning to their beds.

## FOUR

The following morning Larry decided to drive over to the hospital in Southall and see how the mystery girl was doing. He arrived at the hospital shortly before twelve and quickly found the doctor who had examined her after she had been admitted the evening before.

"She's quite a remarkable young woman," the doctor said as they walked down the hall. "I'm surprised she held up as long as she did."

"What do you mean by that?" Larry wanted to know.

"Well, from what we could see, she had that membrane in her throat for quite some time, maybe even over an hour. She should have died within minutes." The doctor shook his head. "What happened to her was a miracle."

"Well," Larry said with a half-smile, "we don't live in such a normal house, either."

They reached the room and the doctor stepped toward the door and put a hand on the doorknob.

"Mr. Mitchell," he said quietly. "She can't talk. She does use what seems to be sign language to communicate, but unfortunately no one is here who knows it." He shrugged quietly. "It probably has something to do with the membrane she had stuck in her mouth. She still seems rather subdued, so I don't think you should stay too long." Larry nodded, and the doctor opened the door. The girl was laying in the white bed, seemingly reading a book. She looked up as Larry entered.

"Hi," he said. She waved back, paused for a moment and then signed.

<Who are you?>

Larry translated quickly. The doctor looked at him a moment, surprised.

"How'd you know that?" he asked.

"I took lessons during a seminar at my old church," Larry said. "It was part of a summer training program for the youth group. We sang songs in sign language." He turned back to the girl.

<I'm Larry Mitchell,> he signed quickly. A look of surprise sprang into her hazel eyes. <What's your name?>

Her right hand began to move, slowly spelling out her name: Erin. She paused for a moment, smiling to herself.

<I think I might have gotten a bit of laryngitis. I can't speak.>

<That's okay,> Larry signed back.

"We haven't told her yet, but she might never speak again," the doctor whispered into his ear.

"That seems almost cruel," he said to the doctor, who just shrugged.

Erin's hands began fluttering again.

<Why am I here?>

<My brother found you in his room last night, unconscious,> Larry signed back. <We called the paramedics, and they brought you here.> He stopped. *I must be getting a little rusty at this*, he said to himself. Erin nodded, thinking.

<Where do you live?> she wanted to know.

<The haunted mansion in Druin,> he signed back. A look of recognition came into her eyes.

<What were you doing there, Erin?> he asked. She paused, obviously thinking about what she wanted to say next.

<I don't know.>

"Really?" She cocked her head and thought for a moment again.

<Maybe I do,> she signed. She settled herself a bit and looked uncomfortably at the doctor. <Could you ask him to leave?>

"She wants you to leave, sir," Larry said turning to the doctor.

"All right," the man said stepping out the door. Larry followed the doctor with his eyes. As he turned back towards the bed, he noticed something mounted on the wall: an oblong white box with a lens protruding from it.

*Why do they have a camera in here?* he wondered.

<Thank you,> Erin signed. She paused for a long moment, before moving her hands again. <I'm not sure when it all started, but it was some time last spring. No, it was right after the exams. I was kidnapped by two people. I don't remember who they were. They caught me from behind when I was returning home from school.> She paused for a moment. <I was knocked out. When I came to, I was in a little room somewhere. There was an old man in the room. He was dressed in black, and his hair was white and messy. But his eyes!> She shivered momentarily. <They were something else, so mad and wild.>

<The ghost!> Larry signed quickly. Erin shook her head.

<No, not a ghost, he was a man.>

<Was there a wheelchair?> Larry inquired, suddenly thinking of the old man he had met the night before. The description matched him, too.

<No, but he told me that I was there for a purpose and that he would keep me there until I could help him with something. It must have been several months. This lady brought me food. She always seemed very sad, wanting to talk to me, but not daring to.> She smiled to herself. <She was very nice to me. It was last night, I guess, when the old man came back again. He had a syringe with him and gave me a shot in the arm. I blacked out and when I came to, I was in the back of an ambulance with a massive headache and no voice.> She shrugged. <Maybe my voice will come back sooner or later.>

<Why are you telling me this?> Larry signed back to her.

I don't know why,> she signed, <but I trust you. That's why, I guess.>

<Did you tell the police?> he asked. She shook her head.

<I just got free. I've been asking for them, but nobody here knows sign language.>

<How do you know it?> he wanted to know.

<My mother's nearly deaf,> was all she signed.

"Ah, hah," Larry remarked, jumping at the sound of his own voice.

<Thank you,> he signed. <I'll go and talk to the police for you, if you like.> Erin nodded and he took his leave.

*Boy, I'm going to have quite some time convincing them of this,* he thought as he opened the door, almost walking into the doctor.

"Are you through?" he asked.

"Yeah," Larry said. "Why do you have a video camera in that room?"

"Standard equipment. Every room has one."

"Oh," was all Larry said.

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On the way home from the hospital, Larry decided to stop in at Simpson's Diner in downtown Southall. The bell jingled above the door as he entered. Aaron, the owner's son and one of Larry's few new friends, was standing behind the counter.

"Hey, Larry," he called.

"Hi, Nick," Larry said as he walked up to the counter.

"Heard you found Erin Frasier in your brother's bedroom the other night."

"How'd you hear that?" Larry asked, surprise showing all over his face.

"News travels fast around here, son," came another voice from behind him. He turned around to find himself looking at a fairly tall man with a clerical collar. The man's hair was silver and deep

brown eyes hid behind a pair of gold-rimmed glasses. His mouth was turned up at the corners in a friendly smile as he extended his right hand.

"I'm Father Matthew Reid," he said, shaking Larry's hand. "And you must be Larry Mitchell." Larry nodded, dumbfounded.

"Won't you join us?" the priest asked motioning towards a table.

"Yeah, sure," Larry said, finally regaining his speech. He looked over his shoulder at Aaron, who winked at him and went back to cleaning up the lunch dishes. Larry followed Father Reid over to a table where a black man was seated. The man stood up as the other two came to the table. He was tall, much taller than Larry's six feet, and Larry wondered if maybe he was a basketball player. He was well built, his black hair cut short, and he had a mustache.

"This is Pastor Alex Jenkins," the priest said to Larry.

"Hey, Larry," the dark-skinned man said, gripping his hand energetically. "How's it goin'?"

"All right," Larry said with a smile as they sat down around the table. Father Reid leaned forward.

"I heard you've been having trouble with the 'ghost'."

"How did you know that?" Larry asked. "We haven't told anyone other than Mrs. Lundin."

"Well, it's just hearsay," the older man of God said, leaning back in his chair, "but we wanted to see if maybe we could help you, if you really did have some trouble."

"Thanks," Larry said with a smile.

"Would you tell us about it?" Pastor Jenkins asked.

"Sure." Larry couldn't explain it, but he really felt at ease around these two men. Each was from a different denomination, Father Reid a Roman Catholic and Pastor Jenkins an Non-denominational Evangelical, and yet they were good friends.

*I like that*, Larry thought as he began his tale. He told them about the first encounter up in the attic, the beast in Marian's room, the crazy piano music, Mr. Druin's wild tale, and finally finding Erin Frasier on the floor in his brother's room. The two men of God looked at each other for a moment.

"It's strange that the beast showed up so quickly," Father Reid remarked. "It usually doesn't show up until several months after a family moves in."

"I haven't heard about that beast, Matt," Pastor Jenkins said.

"That's because you only have heard one story, Mr. Druin's. He doesn't mention it unless he's asked." The black man nodded at his friend's comment.

"Is it true that the beast kills people, sir?" Larry asked the priest.

"Yes," Father Reid said sadly. "But it only happened once, and that was when I was a child."

"What do you think about this ghost?" Larry asked.

Pastor Jenkins shifted his weight a bit. "I believe Mr. Druin has already told you the answer, but I'll repeat it again. I believe it's a demon, and a powerful one at that. The story goes that your house has been the site of many occult events, so naturally there will be at least one demon there, if not many."

"Hence the things in the chest," Father Reid added.

"Right," Alex Jenkins said, nodding. "Father Reid has been called to bless the house several times, but each time he did the family had had enough and left a few weeks afterward. If the physical presence of a Christian isn't there, then there is no reason why the demon can't come back. Are you familiar with the passage where Jesus talks about the demon being cast out and then coming back in with seven worse ones, because the person didn't accept the Lord?" Larry nodded. "Well, at least I believe that it's the same way with the house."

"I don't only believe it, Alex," the priest interrupted, "I know it."

"Yeah, anyway, the demon tries to scare them out. I've heard stories of the people there agreeing to become part of a cult surrounding the house, but each of them died soon after that." The black man leaned back in his chair. "You see, the people never had enough courage to get rid of the things you

found in the attic. That way there was a physical stronghold left in the house and the demon could come back as soon as they left."

"If I'd known about those things before this, I'd have burned them with my own hands," Father Reid said, eyes flashing.

"You think we should do that?" Larry asked.

"Yeah, but pray first," Pastor Jenkins said, leaning forward again.

"Prayer is a most powerful weapon," his silver-haired friend said, nodding. "If you have it, along with God's Word, you are invincible." He looked at Larry seriously for a moment. "Maybe we had better pray now," he suggested.

"Yes, let's," Larry said. The three bowed their heads and prayed.

## FIVE

The following afternoon the Mitchells were summoned to the police station. Erin Frasier had been released from the hospital late that morning and had instantly been invited to the police station for questioning on her kidnapping. Liz, Larry, Marian, and Brad all arrived only moments after Erin. She was pleasantly surprised to see Larry. He quickly introduced her to the rest of the family, and she seemed to like them right away. She looked a good deal better than she had in hospital, since she had changed her clothes and had been able to tidy up a bit. As they were signing to each other, a man dressed in an ocher suit came up to them.

"Hi," he said, extending his hand to Erin, "I'm Detective Gorse. The chief is waiting for you." The detective took them down the halls to a small conference room and let them in. Two people were seated at the table, one was a stoop-shouldered gentleman in his mid or late forties dressed in a faded blue business suit, and the other one was a red-haired woman, about the same size as Erin, with the same looks, but older. She raced across the room to take her daughter in her arms, for she was Erin's mother. A rapid exchange in sign language developed and the two looked ecstatic.

"Please have a seat," the stoop-shouldered man said. Erin caught Larry's eye.

<Sit next to me, please,> she signed quickly. Larry nodded and complied. Marian sat next to him, Brad next to her and Liz on the end. Detective Gorse sat down to the right of the stoop-shouldered man, one seat away from Mrs. Frasier.

"All right," the stoop-shouldered man said, straightening slightly and adjusting his black reading glasses. "I'm Detective Crowell, you know Detective Gorse." He nodded to his associate. "Now, I'd like to take your statements on the case concerning Miss Connor' kidnapping." Liz flashed a questioning look at Larry, who kept his mouth shut. "We were able to get the surveillance video from the hospital. Unfortunately for us, there is no sound since you chose to communicate in sign language...."

<Not chose, had to,> Erin signed quickly.

"What was that?" the police chief asked. Larry translated quickly. "I guess we'll have you function as the interpreter then young man," Crowell said with a half-smile. He cleared his throat. "Can anyone else read sign language?" he asked.

Marian timidly raised her hand.

"All right, we'll view the video, let's get to work." The video rolled. It showed Erin from a rather awkward angle, giving a clear view of her hands.

<I look terrible!> she signed to Larry. He left it untranslated.

The video continued, with Marian and Larry translating it alternately. When it finally ended Detective Gorse turned to Erin. "Do you have anything to add to that account?" he asked.

<I don't think so,> she signed. Marian translated.

"Okay," he said, turning to the Mitchells, "tell us how you found her." They recounted the story quickly. Finally, Detective Crowell nodded.

"Would you be willing to pick your captor out of a photo lineup?" he asked Erin. She nodded.

"Let's do it," he said and shoved several pictures over to her. She stared at each of them carefully.

<Where's the man in the wheelchair?> she asked. Larry translated.

"What?" the chief asked. Erin looked at Larry for a moment.

<I've found the lady here,> she signed, pushing the picture towards the police officers.

Detective Gorse turned the picture over. "Annalise Lundin, widowed, 25 Beckenridge Drive, Druin, ME." Larry turned cold. Erin continued sorting through the pictures, chancing upon a drawing. She stared at it, then showed it to Larry. He shivered, the hair on his neck rising again: he was looking at a picture of the ghost!

"Mr. Mitchell, could I have the picture please?" Detective Crowell stood and leaned over the table. Larry handed him the drawing. He turned it over and began reading. "Horatio Druin, widowed, 25 Beckenridge Drive, Druin, ME."

"No!" Marian whispered. Crowell fixed her with a sharp look.

"You know these people?" he asked.

"They're our neighbors," Liz answered for her daughter.

"Well, you're lucky your daughter is alive, Mrs. Mitchell," the detective said. "Mr. Druin has been accused of ritualistic murder, especially of teenage girls." Larry noticed all the women at the table pale slightly. Gorse leaned back.

"No one has ever escaped, but now we have a witness," he said smiling at Erin, who was looking a bit sickly.

<How were they killed?> she inquired.

"Various ways," the detective answered after Larry translated. "Most by knife wounds or asphyxiation. All were found in or on the premises of your residence, Mrs. Mitchell. We found out that you had just moved there, so we did not suspect you." He looked back to Erin. "You were lucky they found you when they did, Miss Frasier."

<Not lucky, protected,> she signed as Marian translated.

"Whatever," Detective Crowell said, waving a hand. "Thank you for your time, ladies and gentlemen." With that he dismissed them.



## SIX

Mitch arrived home about an hour or two after his family had left for the police headquarters in the next town over. He sat quietly in the family room, watching a video, trying to relax from the rather trying day he had. There was a shuffling at the door. Mitch looked up from the TV and saw a mist hovering near the door. He suddenly felt the hair on his neck and arms stand on end as a metaphysical force seemed to enter the room. A crazy laughter came on like someone turning up the volume of a stereo. The mist before the door thickened, slowly forming itself into a humanoid form. A grayish face with shock white hair appeared in the mist. There was a loud sucking sound and the mist compounded, forming a thin figure dressed in black robes, eyes wild, mouth open in a mad laugh. Mitch couldn't help being scared. He pushed himself back into his seat, wishing it would swallow him up. The figure slowly began to move forward. As it passed the TV, the picture began to swim and fizz.

"Hello, Randy Mitchell," came a scratchy voice. Mitch blinked. Had that thing *talked*? The figure moved right in front of him staring him in the eye with a crazed vision.

"I thought maybe you would want to see me, since you have denied my existence so long." The ghost, for it was none other, laughed madly. "I wish you could see the look on your face," it said, its frail frame shaking with the insane laughter. "But now to you," it said, abruptly becoming serious. "You know who I am."

"J-Jacob Druin," Mitch said in a shaky voice. The ghost nodded.

"I've come to give you an ultimatum. Many have lived here before, but many left quickly, because they refused my offer." It leaned in toward Mitch and he could smell a sickly odor coming from the shade before him. "I will only offer this once," it said. "There are many of my followers here, and I want you to join my group. If you don't then you will never have peace, but if you do you will become rich, powerful, and influential. Can your God do that?" The ghost cackled again. "I will return again, and then you will be mine, Randy Mitchell, mine, all mine!" the ghost screeched, laughed and disappeared.

• • •

The door opened, making Mitch jump. The TV was back to normal, and the oppression had suddenly lifted from the room. Liz stood in the doorway, a worried look on her fair face.

"Are you okay, Randy?"

*Uh-oh, he thought, I must really look bad.*

"I guess," he said, voice shaking.

"You saw it didn't you?" Liz asked coming over and seating herself next to him.

"How did you tell?"

"I could feel it Mitch, the instant I entered the house." Liz shook herself. "Every time the kids said it appeared I felt something stir inside me. I can't explain it, but that's what it felt like."

"Yes," he finally confessed, "it was here." He shuddered. "It told me that I had to become part of its group and that I belonged to it." He shook slightly as Liz put her arms around him.

"That can't be true, Mitch," she gently whispered in his ear. "Do you remember in our junior year in college, that crusade I took you to?" Mitch remembered. "Do you remember what happened?" He nodded. "Tell me," she said.

Mitch closed his eyes for a long moment recalling the time, the great auditorium, the speaker, a small figure in the center of the stadium, calling, "I know God is speaking to many of you here. If He

is, and you want to listen to him, then I want you, hundreds of you, to come down here and pray with me." The man launched into a prayer, warm, loving, powerful.

Mitch's eyes opened. "I gave my heart to Jesus that night." Liz smiled warmly.

"You were one of the first to go when Mr. Graham made that invitation." Mitch nodded, sadly.

"But I haven't been keeping to that commitment, have I?"

"No, luv, but it's never too late to come back," she said with a smile. They bowed their heads together, praying quietly.

"I've been praying for you for years, Mitch," Liz said when they were finished. "Even after you made that commitment, I knew you were having trouble."

"Thank you, Liz," he said, holding her tight, and then kissing her tenderly.

## SEVEN

That evening, Erin, her mother, and her younger sister Vicki came over to visit the Mitchells. They spent most of the balmy twilight on the patio in the back, talking and laughing. Shortly after seven Larry suddenly had this feeling as if something was going to happen. Though nearly deaf, Erin's mother could speak and translate the sign language, so he quietly motioned Marian and the two slipped into the house. No one but Mitch noticed them leave.

"What's up Larry?" she asked.

"This is it, Rian," he said, as they climbed the stairs. "This is when the ghost makes his final exit."

"How do you know?"

"Can't you hear it," he said pointing upwards. The famous strains of Bach's Toccata filtered down from the attic again, making Marian blanch. They silently opened the door to the attic and the music hit them in the face like an icy wind. When they reached the top of the stairs, the ghost turned and looked at them, laughing gleefully.

"Sing along, children," it cackled playing Beethoven's Ninth. "*Freude schöner Götterfunken...*"

"...*God of Glory, Lord of might,*" Larry sang. The melody shattered like a crystal glass being struck by a hammer.

"Don't you dare mention that Name in my presence," the ghost hissed.

"That Name' now owns this house, spirit," Larry retorted, "and for that reason you and your cohorts aren't welcome here."

"You have no authority here, boy," the ghost screamed, voice deepening. Its form began to widen and darken, eyes taking on a bloody glow. The transformation was complete, and a beast stood before them, part lion, part wolf, part bull, all monster. Marian screamed silently as it advanced.

• • •

Mitch's head suddenly snapped up. *Those kids need help!* he thought.

"Excuse me," he said, quickly rising and entering the darkened house. The others looked after him questioningly.

• • •

Larry took a deep breath. "In the Name of Jesus Christ, I command you to leave this house," he said in a shaky voice.

"You have no authority over me boy, and you will be my next prey!" the beast growled.

"But I do," came another voice from behind them. Mitch came forward to stand before the beast, his jaw set and his blue-gray eyes burning in a steely fire. "I command you to leave this house."

"You can't do this to me!" the ghost screamed, returning to its original state. "You are mine, I told you so!"

"I have been bought by the Blood of the Lamb, and you have no authority where He is present," Mitch countered. "And now in the Name of Jesus Christ, get out of this house!" The ghost screamed, and suddenly the house was shaken by unseen winds as the ghost screamed. It slowly began to cave in on itself, disintegrating before their eyes. The with a final scream it shot out the window, blasting it open as it went through. The scream lingered for a second, then grew louder again behind them. A crazed form shot out of the back of the attic behind them, waving a staff. Mitch ducked the wild swing and caught the staff as it came back for another pass. Larry ran forward and crashed into the form,

sending it sprawling beside the stairs. Mitch quickly wrenched the staff from the figure's hands and snapped it in half over his knee. The figure leaped up, screaming again, and ran to the window.

"Don't leave me, come back!" it implored. Marian suddenly realized the figure was going to go out the window and ran to catch it and keep it from falling, but it was too late. It launched itself out the window and landed on the patio, limbs twisted in strange angles. The four sitting below stared at it incredulously. Mitch and the two teens hurried downstairs. When they reached the patio, they found the figure still laying there, face down. Mitch reached down and turned it over. The lifeless blue eyes of Horatio Druin stared skyward, his mouth sagging slightly at the corner.

"Oh, no!" Erin suddenly whispered. Larry turned and looked at her.

"You can talk!"

"I can," Erin said in a hoarse voice, a strange feeling of joy and sadness mingling in her. "The moment he hit the ground, my voice came back."

The police came and took the inert form from the old mansion, along with Mrs. Lundin from across the street. As they were leaving, Larry suddenly remembered his conversation with the two ministers at the diner.

"Dad, those things in the attic, we've got to burn them!"

"Even the piano?" Mitch asked.

"Maybe," Larry said.

"No," Liz said, shaking her head. "We'll sell the piano."

They stacked the old chest, the table, and the chairs, now all carefully chopped up into little pieces, into a large pile and lit them. Larry suddenly felt a load go off him as the flames licked the dried wood, turning it to ash. Now there could be no more ghosts.

• • •

The old house still stands at the edge of Norm's Pond in Druin. It is a large, beautiful mansion, partly covered by ivy and surrounded by an ivy-covered wall with an ornate gate set in the middle. That gate is always open in welcome to the people. Many still tell of the strange tales surrounding the mansion, but no one can tell them as well as the owner, Dr. Larry Mitchell. And when he does, he'll take you to the attic where it all started. The place has been cleaned now, the floor covered with rugs, the walls with pictures of nature, people and far off places. A large, wood-colored grand piano stands just to your right when you come in and a round card table stands in the center. The perimeter is lined with cushions of many colors and at the far end of the attic stands a small stereo system. The whole room speaks of love and friendship, not at all resembling the place it used to be.

Across the road from the mansion stands a small dark house, and though the names of the people and the strange occurrences differ, all of the tales about it lead to the same conclusion: 25 Beckenridge Drive is haunted!

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is the story that inaugurated Druin, first a town in its own right, then later a borough of the fictitious town of Southall, Maine. While many of the characters in *Witches' Wager* came into being sometime later, this was my first attempt at melding Christian reality with real-world fantasy. It has stayed with me ever since.

I believe that the impetus for the story came from some discussions I had with my family after watching one of those ghost-hunter shows when I was a teenager. This was a chance to process some of the ideas that arose from that, as well as my initial experiences with the American denominationalism I encountered for the first time during those same years, as my family had recently moved back to the United States from the Middle East.

With the refresh of my website, I had the opportunity to make some minor revisions to this story, so that it is more in line with the 2016 reworking of *Witches' Wager* and "Reunion" prior to the novel's official publication. I corrected Erin's last name in most places and brought a passing reference to her sister Vicki into the story back then, but this time I noticed some continuity issues, which have been dealt with. The flexibility of digital publishing is certainly one of its greatest benefits.

As I have written in the foreword to *Witches' Wager*, this is a fantasy. I am playing with ideas, thoughts, explanations that are speculative and may or may not have bearing on the real world. As such, I beg your indulgence for any liberties I take with the way things "really are". Whether or not what people perceive as ghosts or hauntings are demonic manifestations is debatable, though I personally tend to that view. I do not want my readers to think that I am trying to make Bible-based or systematic theological doctrinal statements with this. If you want to use this as an excuse to research or discuss the topic, feel free to do so, but my primary intention is that you just sit back and enjoy the ride in this short story. For sometimes escapist entertainment based on realities can be beneficial.

Blessings, J.M. Diener  
February 2023

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