

The Brouwer House

I rented the house right after my first wife and I separated. More accurately, I rented it after making a mess of both our lives, but that is a longer story.

I say "house," but it was little more than a cheap wooden shack with a flat roof, single-level and barely 900 square feet, clad in cheap yellow vinyl siding. I had no idea how long I'd stay, so I asked the landlord if I could pay by the week and after some grumbling he agreed.

It was an old neighborhood and one that everyone but the police had long forgotten. Across from my house there was an abandoned mansion. The place must have been a grand example of Victorian architecture in its day, but now it loomed empty amid wild grass and brush, its bare clapboards worn a dull silver by time and the elements. Feral cats dozed on the sagging porch roof.

My first night in the house I slept on the only piece of furniture that it contained, a folding aluminum chaise longue that I'd found behind a pile of junk in the garage. The next day I rented a TV and a La-Z-Boy recliner and stayed holed up inside for a week, drinking and watching old reruns and pitying myself.

One morning there was a knock at the door. It was a tiny old woman dressed in a quilted pink robe, the kind my grandmother used to wear and call her "house coat."

"Welcome to the block," she said, and gave me a paper plate of oatmeal cookies. She said her name was Mrs. Danette and that she'd lived in the neighborhood all her life.

"You know about that place?" she asked, gesturing toward the ruined mansion.

"My landlord told me it's haunted," I said.

"More than haunted," she said. "Evil. Lucifer himself be in there."

She said people called it the Brouwer House, after Francis Brouwer, the man who had built it in the 1880s. I later read that Brouwer had been born a poor immigrant but made a fortune in timber and then in banking. His empire collapsed in a fi-

nancial panic, however, and the house was sold at auction. His wife died and Brouwer could not bear the grief and poverty and died himself not long after in a rented room. Over the years, as the neighborhood's fortunes declined, the house was neglected and finally abandoned. As is often the case, I imagine that the worse the house looked, the more people believed that it was haunted.

"I been after the Council for years to knock it down," Mrs. Danette said. "A boy went in inside once and fell through the floor. The other boys dared him. A nail or something went in his lung. Near drowned in his own blood."

"That's awful," I said. "Though I have to say, I don't believe much in ghosts myself."

She scoffed. "Everybody new here say that. You take my advice, stay away from that place. Me, I don't even look at it if I can help it."

I almost scoffed right back at her but caught myself. "Well," I said, "I have bigger things on my mind, so I will probably not even notice it." I thanked her for the cookies and claimed to have something on the stove.

That night I couldn't sleep, so I went outside and lit a joint. I watched the cats darting through the empty windows of the Brouwer mansion. I was annoyed by Mrs. Danette's scorn at my not sharing her superstitions, as if I was the naive one.

The more I looked at the place, the angrier I became. I grabbed a flashlight and a pint of vodka and my trusty chaise longue and carried everything across the street.

Cats scampered into the darkness when I climbed the rotted front steps and crossed the porch to the doorway. As I entered the parlor I could feel my heart pounding. The floor was littered with broken glass and chunks of fallen plaster. On the wall someone had written, in red spray paint, "YO-MAN YOU FUCKEN DIE!!!"

I continued inside, to what at one time must have been the dining room. The air was stifling, an acrid blend of feral animal waste and mildew. I unfolded my tin recliner and sat down. I took a long pull on the vodka and listened for the slightest sounds in the darkness but heard nothing, only cicadas singing in the summer heat.

I invited any furious apparition or incarnation of evil to come at me. "Let's dance, motherfuckers!!" I screamed, absurdly.

I didn't know what I wanted to happen, only that I wanted something to happen. Nothing happened, of course. Neither Frances Brouwer or Lucifer himself showed up, and eventually I fell asleep.

I awoke at dawn, badly hung over but otherwise undisturbed. I folded up the chaise longue, carried it home, and returned it to the pile of trash where I'd found it.

I wanted to tell Mrs. Danette what I had done (I am that petty), but I never saw her again. Maybe she was the apparition.

A couple months later I landed a job in Omaha and moved away. The job was interesting and I excelled at something for once in my life and made a lot of money at it. I quit drinking and got remarried. Our beautiful twin girls are thriving in good private colleges. I have become a man in full, in every appearance rich and happy and satisfied, but there are still nights when I lie awake in the dark, wishing for a specter to appear.

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