

Just before midnight, a young photographer slips through a broken window into an abandoned mansion. He holds his camera against his chest as he treads lightly on shards of glass that crunch beneath his shoes. The air carries the odor of molding fabric and the dampness of the afternoon rain, which still lingers within the floorboards. The rotting walls are covered in striped wallpaper, bleached and graffitied, peeling woefully from the topmost corners. The room is littered with newspapers, crushed cans, and splintered wood, pierced with folded nails. A fireplace, made of rough-hewn stone, is choked with dust. There's no furniture in the room save for an armchair, toppled over and disemboweled, its cushions nowhere in sight.

The photographer creeps further into the room and surveys the space with unease and excitement. There's so much to capture here. He raises his camera to his eyes, adjusts his settings to the available light, and takes a photo. The click echoes down the mansion's halls. This place is huge, he thinks.

As he steadies his lens for another shot, the ceiling groans. Fear strikes him. He holds still, dreading the sound of footsteps. None come. Instead, chirping crickets break through the heightened silence. The photographer relaxes. "It's nothing," he reassures himself. "It's just an old house."

He continues his work, meticulously framing the fireplace and the toppled armchair against their backdrop of dust and decay. After a few dozen photos, he checks the camera's back-facing display. Each image is in focus. Good. Now he just needs many more of them.

The photographer leaves the room at its back and enters a long hallway, partially lit with somber blue moonlight, while its end is completely shrouded in darkness. The view is ominous. Two sconces bow forward, held aloft only by thin copper wire. The window drools with a viscous substance, that simmers like oil even in the night. It smells putrid. The photographer

can't tell what it is. But it doesn't matter to him. He lifts his camera anyway and captures the scene—every last detail.

With his phone's flashlight to guide him, the photographer strides ahead toward the darkness at the end of the hallway. The decor here is less messy and mangled. The sconces here are upright and securely fastened to the wall. Underneath them are a row of framed newspapers from the Ashwood Times. Curious, he shines his light to read the headlines. *Dodgers Win Global Series. Hurricane Strikes South Florida. President Clinton Reelected.*

The very last newspaper catches the photographer's eye. It was written over three decades ago, and displays a photo of a house—this house—next to which is a portrait of a man with a pear-shaped face, happy eyes, and only several long hairs strung over a glazed head. The headline says: *Man Missing While Visiting Mogul's Mansion.* He continues to read the first few lines of the article.

*In the wake of the newspaper mogul's untimely death, tragedy struck once more as a local man went missing from the sprawling mansion grounds. The disappearance has left his wife distraught, desperate for answers, and with two children to care for. As authorities intensify their search amidst the shadows of the mogul's legacy, the community holds its breath, hoping for a breakthrough. However, two days after his disappearance, no trace of him has been discovered.*

That's terrifying, he thinks. But he dismisses the story and refuses to let its implications sink in. The newspaper hung askew above cracks in the drywall, would make for a great shot. He backs up to the opposite side of the hall, clicks on the flash, and snaps the shutter.

Suddenly, the house groans again—louder this time. The photographer feels the mansion strain against something heavy above him. Thum-thum-thum. He holds his breath once more until the noise ceases. When all is silent, he can no longer hear the crickets. He's

startled—scared, even. His heart races. There's something upstairs, he's sure of it. But what? Not a person, no. A machine, maybe. Whatever it is, it can't be that dangerous. There have been signs of people since this house was abandoned: graffiti, and empty beer cans. People have come and managed to leave. Surely he will too.

The photographer slinks down the rest of the hallway, turns a corner, and emerges into a foyer flanked by twin grand staircases. Only one remains standing; the other has collapsed into a heap of rubble. He steps onto the intact staircase, which creaks perilously under his weight. He hesitates for a moment before mustering his courage and starting up the stairs. The railing wobbles under his grip. Step, step, lightly step—he carefully disperses his body weight. The stairs bend but remain intact. Reaching the top, he lets out a sigh of relief. He stares down at the front door, boarded up, and a long window above it, shattered, revealing a view of the moon and shadowy hills beyond. It's quite a view from up here. He lifts his camera and takes a photo.

The house rumbles violently. The young photographer is thrown off balance and lunges to the wall to steady himself. Then a loud crack and a thunderous crash. The other staircase has collapsed. A cloud of dust billows upward and fogs the air with gray. Loose rocks settle. The rumbling stops. The photographer is terrified now. His eyes sting. Sweat soaks into his shirt and moistens his palms, squeezed against the camera. What just happened? He has no idea. And he no longer wants to find out.

The photographer rushes down the upstairs hall, hoping there's another way to the bottom floor. He opens room after room, finding only half a bedframe and a decomposing wardrobe. Then he notices something—a strip of golden light along the bottom of the door at the end of the hall. Is someone here? Maybe they can help him. He approaches the door cautiously and places

his ear against it. There's a faint ticking sound coming from the other side. Someone's here, he thinks, thank God. And without another thought, he enters.

He blinks, bewildered. It's an empty office, whole and warm. There are brimming bookshelves along each wall. A copper globe is poised between two unbroken windows. And, in the center of the room is a magnificent desk, topped with a glowing incandescent lamp and paired with a luxurious leather chair, pushed back at a polite angle—as if someone had left it only moments ago.

The photographer bites his fingernail. His mind spins and stalls under a flurry of questions as his camera swings from its neckstrap. What? How? Is this real? It doesn't make any sense.

Timidly, he scans the room for any explanation, reading the titles of books on each shelf. He finds volumes of encyclopedias and diverse swathes of history texts, generously used. Like the framed newspapers, their topics range wildly, from politics to sports, to science. Nothing noteworthy here. Then he approaches the desk to find it clean and clear, save for a bold-faced stainless steel watch, still ticking. He compares its time to that displayed on his phone. Both read 12:11.

Hairs tinkle at the base of the photographer's necks. Someone's here, he thinks as he whips around. No one is there, but the door is closed. Fear floods over him again. He never shut the door, nor did he hear it close. Something's not right.

He rushes to the window and peers out into the night. He spots the driveway leading from the house and follows it with his eyes. There's the outer gate, he thinks. His car should be parked right about—where? He presses his face against the glass and retraces the road. There's the gate, he remembers, and off to the left, yes, there's the willow tree, and—it's gone. His car is gone.

The photographer races out the door and then freezes. The hallway has transformed. Cracks have vanished from the walls. The ceiling is intact. Slim carpet lines the wooden floor, no longer roughened and splintered. The air is dry and smells like paper. Bronze sconces bear orbs of orange light that guide the way forward.

“What the hell,” the photographer whispers with a hollow breath. His heart pounds against his chest. Darkness invades the edges of his vision. He feels nauseous and lightheaded and stumbles to the wall to catch himself. It’s a dream, he thinks. He pinches himself and blinks dramatically. Nothing happens.

“Stay calm,” he says to himself. “It’s not real.”

He tiptoes down the hallway and reaches the foyer. It’s glorious now. Suspended from a vaulting ceiling, a chandelier twinkles with light shining through its faceted crystals. The staircases are standing again and are adorned with a gold embroidered rug that flows down its steps. Above the front door are stained glass windows depicting royal blue flowers against panes of leafy green fauna. The light, color, and beauty ease the photographer’s fear and replace some of it with awe. He walks reverently down the steps to the bottom floor. Then, from the center of the foyer, he gazes upward at the chandelier and, instinctively, takes a photo.

A rough cough echoes from somewhere else in the mansion. The photographer spins toward its source and heads towards it. He follows the same hallway he’d come through not long earlier. The framed newspapers are still hanging there, but one about the missing man is gone. Then he finds himself in the same room he’d first entered. The fireplace is no longer dormant but instead fully aflame. The armchair is there too and an old man sits on it, facing the hearth. A thread of smoke wavers above his head. He hums to himself in a low and raspy tone before he says, “Go ahead. Take your pictures.”

The photographer swallows. “Where am I?”

“My house,” says the old man.

“Well but—” the photographer stutters. “It didn’t look like this when I—”

“When you broke in?”

“No one was here. It was abandoned. I just wanted—”

“Pictures.” says the old man as he waves his hand dismissively. “Go ahead and take them.”

The photographer glances down at his camera and fiddles with his settings, twisting the dial to manual, automatic, then manual again. “Am I dreaming?” he asks.

The old man takes a puff from his cigar and blows the smoke toward the fire. “You’re not,” he says.

“Am I dead?”

“Not yet.”

“Then where am I?”

The old man rises from his armchair to a towering height. He tilts his head down at the photographer, his chin burying itself into the folds of loose skin around his neck. Whisps of silver hair fall against his shoulder. His breath is unsteady and guttural. His eyelids droop halfway over clouded eyes, glazed a bone white. The photographer steps back.

“You are not what I expected,” says the old man. “You’re younger. Softer. Scared. I can see it in your face. This house is not for you. Go now. Take your pictures and leave.” He lowers himself back into the armchair. His cigar sizzles as he draws another puff.

The photographer thinks for a moment before he asks, “Can I take one of you?”

The old man groans. “As you wish.”

The photographer kneels and lifts the camera to his eye. But before he presses the shutter, he watches, through the viewfinder, as the man turns his back toward the fire and hums a lonely tune. There's something familiar about him. For a moment, he is puzzled. Then it becomes clear and the young man lowers his camera.

"You're the man in the newspaper," says the photographer. "The one who went missing all those years ago."

"Yes," says the old man. "It has been many years."

"What happened?"

The man sighs but says nothing.

"Tell me. I won't leave until you do."

"Then you'll be here for a very, very long time," says the old man.

The photographer decides to sit cross-legged next to the fire. He listens to it pop and crackle and feels its gentle heat. Then he says, "No one talks about this place. It's probably because it's far from downtown Ashwood—far from anywhere. But even still, there's no place like it. Before I came, I thought it was just some old shack down some dirt road—worth about half a dozen decent photos. But a mansion with so much character and depth? Jesus. Why don't people talk about it? Why don't they care?"

"They are selfish," says the old man. "They vandalize my home and perform vile acts wherever they please. They don't care about this house, what it is, what it stands for. So I scare them away. It spares me from their insolence and spares them from talking with a dead man. It's for the best, you see."

The photographer stiffens as a chill races down his spine. He remains clear-headed and composed. "And what does this house stand for?"

“History. Whoever lives here must attend to it.”

“The house has been abandoned. Destroyed. What’s left to attend?”

The old man takes a puff from his cigar.

“Tell me,” says the photographer. “Let me help you.”

“As I said. You’re too young.”

The photographer stands up defiantly and stares at the old man. “And you’re dead. Or did you forget? Don’t pretend to know me. I didn’t come here with a group of friends. I’m not here to smoke weed or paint shit all over the walls. I’m a photographer. I have respect for people and their stories. So please—tell me yours. People deserve to hear it.”

The photographer takes a deep breath. “When you disappeared, you left behind your wife and two children, remember? Don’t you want them to know what happened to you?”

The old man’s shoulders fall forward. He rests his elbows against his knees. His cigar dangles at the end of his grasp. “Many years ago, I was like you, bold and headstrong. I had just become a journalist for my local paper—it wasn’t a big back in those days—and I’d heard about this abandoned mansion outside of town. I didn’t have any other stories to work on at the time, so I decided to visit the place. I documented what I could but when I reached the office—the whole house had become like new. I found my way to this room where a man—more of a mummy than a man—smiled at me with a rifle across his lap. His teeth were rotten and his skin was leathery and gray like charcoal. I was horrified. I tried to leave but he ordered me to stay. He said that if I left, he’d kill me. I broke down, crying, and tried to plead with the man. I have a wife and children, I told him. But he paid me no mind. He just ran his finger along the barrel.”

The old man’s jaw quivers and his white eyes glisten. “I stayed till morning, unsure of what would happen. A small part of me hoped everything would become normal again. But it

was not so. When the sun rose, the monster and his rifle were gone but the house didn't revert to its decrepit state but remained pristine. I left as soon as I could, but my car was nowhere to be found so I walked for the whole morning back to Ashwood. When I arrived, the town was half of what it was yesterday. Cars were several decades too old but looked new. People around wore the wrong hats, and the wrong clothes—slim suits, and thin ties. A newspaper confirmed my suspicions. It was dated August 14th, 1964—thirty years before my known time. I remember wandering around the rest of that day, dazed. I remember being interested in the details: the pleasant-looking billboards, the lack of cars and noise. It felt tame compared to the town I was used to and, at least for the moment, I was comfortable with my predicament. After all, I was no longer being threatened by a corpse with a rifle. It seemed only a matter of time before I would find my way home but..." The old man covered his face with one hand as a tear rolled down his hollow cheek.

"But you never did." says the photographer solemnly.

"My poor Mary—I hope she forgave me. I hope she—found someone else to help her raise our children. I hope."

"You didn't have a choice. You didn't choose this."

"I didn't," the old man says. "But I tried to make the best of it. The future is a valuable thing to those in the past. In the house's office, I found history—the future history—written down and used it to earn money and find the right people. With that knowledge, I build the Ashwood Times. I tried to make the right choices and find the stories to tell. And by the end of my life, I'd like to think I'd made the town better. But I can't be sure. I don't remember much of my old past. It was so so long ago."

The old man readjusts himself in his chair. “This house is a devil’s bargain, you see. With the knowledge it gives, you can make good with your life more than others can. But once you take ownership, you’re doomed to the past. You will never see time move forward. Everything around you will appear as a memory. When I saw a man walk on the moon, I did not cheer. When I watched the Berlin Wall, fall I was not joyful. When I watched the President declare the next war, I knew its cost. And when my time was up, I passed from the material world, forced to guard the secrets of this house until a successor should take it.”

“What if you don’t find a successor?”

“Then I’m left here, forbidden from moving beyond, to decay as the house decays, like the owner before me.” The old man sighs. “But unlike him, I cannot force someone into this fate. I know the toll it takes. They must choose it willingly.”

The photographer mulls over the old man’s story with empathy. This is someone who made the best of things despite his circumstances and, as he draws cigar smoke into his choked lungs, remains noble. He could have tricked the photographer the same way he had been tricked. He could have threatened death—or worse—to escape his curse. But he didn’t. This poor man, the photographer realizes, has suffered enough.

“Would you like to see your wife and children again?” the photographer asks.

“More than you could know.”

With a grave certainty, the photographer says, “I will take the house from you.”

The old man blinks slowly and only once. “Are you sure you want that?”

As the photographer wanders in his thoughts, he unscrews the lens from his camera, twists the focus, and peers at the upside-down fireplace through the bubbled glass. “There’s no right way to live, you know. No wrong way either. I tell myself that as I listen to my friends talk

about wanting jobs, houses, and kids. I don't need those things, not really. I'd be fine without them. I have my camera, my art, and an endless curiosity. I can find my own path. And this house—even as you've seen—isn't just a curse. It can be a blessing too. You can choose what you want your life to be and seek that out. The house will guide you along the way. What you give up, you also stand to gain. So yes, I'll take this house, for the life I want to live and to help you escape yours. And when you do, I hope you reunite with your wife and spend your eternity together..”

There's understanding on the old man's face. He is calm and satisfied. “Thank you, young man.”

In the fleeting hours of the night, the photographer and the old man enjoy the warmth of the fire. They don't speak. There's nothing to say. Every so often, the photographer gazes out the window to watch the stars vanish and the black sky lifts to indigo. What a pretty color, he thinks. He turns back to the armchair, but all at once, it's empty. The old man is gone. And with grave certainty, he realizes that the house is his now.