

SPOOKY HOUSE  
A short story

I never wanted to go into that old house, but Jack loved doing shit like that, rummaging through old barns and abandoned shacks just to see what he could find. I'll admit it was fun sometimes, the feeling of intruding on another life, even though that other life had long since departed, and sometimes we did find stuff—knives, old books, bottles, antique car parts, rusty tools—random, cast-off items that were not quite worthless. We didn't think of it as stealing. Jack rationalized, saying, "Nobody wants this junk. It's just sitting here wasting. We can find some use for it." Honestly, though, he was always looking for that rare find, some valuable relic he could sell for a bundle on eBay. I went along for the ride.

We passed that old house on our way to our afternoon and Saturday job at the big fireworks store just over the state line. Getting there from campus took thirty minutes over curvy

back roads through a rural area. Really, it was too far to go for college students working part-time, but the money was good, and the work easy, much better than the last job I had gotten fired from, tossing pizza and serving beer at Gianni's Place in Aaronville. Finding a decent job in a college town can be tough, especially when you have a natural aversion to work.

Getting on at Crazy Bob's Fireworks had been easy because Crazy Bob is my uncle. I grew up in a fireworks family; my father helped start the business with Uncle Bob when I was a kid, right after the interstate opened up through Okatchee, our one-traffic-light town. Jack thought the whole fireworks thing was really interesting. "What do you do in a fireworks store, besides sit around and wait for the Fourth of July and New Year's Eve?" he'd want to know. Or "How did your family ever get into such a business? How did they make the *connections*? I mean, is there like a directory of wholesale fireworks suppliers or an association of distributors? Did your dad and uncle attend a marketing seminar? Go to conventions in Vegas every year?"

I'd try to explain that it's like any other business—selling products at a profit and trying to do lots of volume, and that being right off the ramp of a busy interstate just inside the state line that declares a product legal on one side and forbidden on the other didn't hurt. Jack thought the whole thing seemed so "improbable"—that he'd end up being roommates with a guy whose uncle Bob sold fireworks on the side of the interstate. When I told him we could both get jobs there, that he could see firsthand what you do in a fireworks store, he laughed. "How random is that! Sure, I'd love to work at Crazy Bob's." He smiled, looking at something in the distance, probably already imagining how he would update his Facebook profile.

Jack is a pretty cool guy, I'll admit. After all, he came to Aaron-Maslow on a baseball scholarship. And he looks like the frat boy type with his thick, sandy hair, athletic build, and Abercrombie and Fitch clothes. But he's not. Which explains how I met him and how we got to

be roommates. I'd decided by the beginning of fall semester to get away from Okatchee and my parents' house. Mom and Dad were happy for me to stay at home and commute to classes each day, but I'd realized that I was missing out on some important aspects of college life, namely being able to drink and party all night. I discovered that there were some old houses for rent off campus that were cheaper than staying in the dorms, especially with a roommate to share expenses. So I put up a few notices on the bulletin boards and an ad in the college paper.

When Jack called, he suggested we meet at Suds and Silk at four in the afternoon, happy hour. This place was an old Victorian house near campus that had been converted into a restaurant and sports bar. I got there first and took a booth in the corner across from the big flatscreen mounted on the wall. The sports announcers were in their fancy studio giving rundowns and showing clips from the week's contests. They showed a crowd of screaming Argentine soccer fans and police in riot gear trying to control them after a shooting before a game. Then they shifted to a championship ultimate fighting match. They replayed the clip at least three times of the loser getting kicked in the head and collapsing in a heap. The other guy jumped on top of him and punched him twice more in his face before the referees pulled him off. I was thinking about what a rough sport that was and how crazy those guys must be when Jack walked in.

We did the "glad to meet you" handshake thing; then, as soon as he settled into the booth, Jack ordered a pitcher of draft. He seemed incredibly thirsty, drinking about half of his sloppily poured mug in a gulp. Then he started talking and asking me a bunch of questions. He didn't know much about the area, this being his first semester. He found it fascinating that I was from a nearby small town, just across the state line, and he wanted to know what it was like growing up in such a rural place. He was from an Atlanta suburb and had attended a high school with about

two thousand students. He told me about his baseball team going to State, and how the scouts had recruited him, but it wasn't like he was bragging. In fact, he talked about himself in an offhand way. He was more interested in my life and what we did for entertainment "out in the country."

"Where is the nearest mall?" he asked.

"Thirty or forty miles," I answered, "either east or west, toward Atlanta or Birmingham. Take your pick."

This seemed hard for him to grasp. He'd grown up practically in the middle of shopping malls and skate parks, pizza places with arcades, multi-plex theaters. He shook his head and began to look around the bar, along the walls and up to the ceiling, like he was trying to figure out a riddle. I decided it would be a good time to tell him about cow tipping, how it was a favorite pastime among my old high school buddies. This was a lie of course, cow tipping being more rural myth than an actual practice, but I figured it would play well with this guy who'd probably never been around a real cow.

He answered, "Yeah, right. This sounds like one of those stories where the wise farmer makes a fool out of the city slicker. I've already tried cow-tipping. Cows sleep lying down. If they're standing there and two or three guys walk toward them, they just move away. Whole thing's a myth. You're gonna have to do better than that."

Impressive. I conceded that we didn't really cow tip, but we did spend lots of time drinking beer and riding around the back roads, which we had plenty of. "Within a few minutes," I said, "I could have you so far out in the sticks, you'd hear banjos playing, like in that old movie *Deliverance*."

"Cool. Let's do it."

“Now?”

“Not right this minute. We’ve got a pitcher of beer to finish. Then we’ll need to look at that house you’re interested in renting.”

So, that’s how it got started. We decided talking to a potential landlord after drinking so much beer would not be a good idea and spent the evening instead cruising through some of the rural areas surrounding Aaronville and the campus. I took him out Hog Liver Road, toward the state line. This winding route provides a shortcut to the interstate, one exit before Crazy Bob’s. It also passes by that damned house that should have been bulldozed.

We both had our bellies full of beer and had reached the lethargic stage, but Jack leaned forward and craned his neck as we passed. “Wow!” he said, noticing the black hole on the back side of the roof from the fire and the yellow crime tape still hanging limply around the front porch. “What happened there?”

The story was fresh in my mind, even though several months had passed since the tragedy occurred. It was the kind of thing that stayed with you, especially since it happened so near to where I’d grown up. I even knew the people—the victims and the perpetrators.

Four old people, the Bledsoe family, had lived together in that farmhouse for years, ever since the brothers, who had never married, were born. The brothers were in their fifties, and Mr. and Mrs. Bledsoe . . . well, who knew how old they were? They were farm people in the old-fashioned sense, loved and respected in the community. They raised all sorts of animals—everything from goats and pigs to exotic roosters, turkeys, and guinea fowl. They kept bees and sold honey. They also sold vegetables every summer from a large, well-tended garden, and they usually ran thirty or forty head of cattle inside their fenced, rolling pastures.

They possessed skills that most everyone had either forgotten or never learned. The old man was one of the few left in the area who could re-cane old porch rockers with strips he cut himself from white oak and ash trees. I remember when I was a kid my mom taking him a chair to fix and being amazed at the time he was willing to spend on such a tedious task. It must have taken him the better part of a week to re-weave that old rocker, and he only charged Mom ten bucks. When she pressed a few extra dollars on him, he insisted that we take a jar of honey back with us.

The brothers, Ned and Willard, had skills of their own. When they were young, they got interested in Volkswagens and turned one of the old barns into a repair shop. For about a decade they produced all sorts of souped-up Beetles and dune buggies. They were still taking on the occasional restoration project up until a year or two ago. I remember many times riding by the house with Mom or Dad and seeing a fixed-up Beetle, shining like brand new, sitting under the oak tree in the front yard with a For Sale sign in the window. They also restored old John Deere tractors, the ancient, two-cylinder kind that made the *thump-thump* exhaust sound.

And motorcycles too. Willard, the younger brother, became a British bike enthusiast, of all things. According to the stories I grew up hearing, he always had a need for more speed than they could get from those old Volkswagens, even the souped-up ones, and he was famous for ripping up and down the winding roads on his Norton 750 Commando. Their collection over the years of motorcycles, VWs, tractors, and parts had accumulated to the point of filling up a couple of old barns and a chicken house on the lower side of the property behind the white, steep-roofed farmhouse. These buildings were visible from the road, and the area residents often speculated about what all they contained.

Everyone thought the Bledsoes were rich, that besides the treasure concealed within the barns and outbuildings they had cash stashed inside that old house, up in the attic maybe or buried under the back porch. And, like anywhere else, Okatchee and the surrounding area contained its share of derelicts, drunks, and dopeheads. Crimes that had in previous years been unheard of had been on the increase lately—thefts, burglaries, even a couple of rape cases—and meth labs were springing up everywhere. A county-wide drug task force had been initiated, and the sheriff's department had added a cruiser and a couple of deputies.

My parents and most of the older folks blamed the Mexicans. There had been quite an influx, attributable to the interstate that ran right through the middle of the county. The Okatchee High student population had grown considerably in recent years, and special teachers had been hired to help the Hispanic students learn English. There had been several Mexican kids in my graduating class. One of them, Hector, was involved in the crime. He wasn't the instigator, though. I knew him from school as a quiet follower, a bit surly, but not the type to plan and carry out something like that. I blame it mostly on that other dude, Edward, who had also been in my class but dropped out in tenth grade.

Edward had always been bad, someone who would take advantage of weaker kids to get what he wanted or just for the fun of it. Back in sixth grade he kept picking on this nerdy kid named Reese who was always carrying around Manga books and Yu-Gi-Oh cards. Reese even advertised this fantasy world with a vinyl lunchbox plastered with pictures of characters from the "Shadow Realm." He was an easy target.

Reese got sick of having his precious cards yanked away from him and sailed across the recess yard, and he got tired of having his peanut butter sandwiches and Oreos stolen from that Shadow Realm box. He tried to fight back one day, unfortunately for him, on the back side of the

monkey bars, out of sight of Ms. Renfro. Edward made great sport of holding the chubby boy down, twisting his neck to make him squeal. Reese bucked and thrashed trying to get Edward off of him, but soon weakened, lapsing into sobs and minor convulsions. Edward, keeping Reese's arms pinned with his shins, slid down so that his crotch was in the weaker boy's face. He pressed himself against him, making sexual motions, and laughed in a raspy, hissing voice. "Squeal like a pig," he said. "Squeal like a pig." It was disgusting.

I stood and watched, along with several other kids. I wanted to help Reese, but Edward, who had been held back a couple of grades, was bigger and stronger. I was afraid. I didn't want to end up getting Edward's crotch in my face. So I stood there, trying to get up the courage to do something. I tried to at least look away, to not provide an audience and contribute to Reese's humiliation, but I couldn't even do that. Finally, this lanky girl saw what was happening and ran to get Ms. Renfro. Somebody warned Edward, so there wasn't much for the teacher to see by the time she got there. And none of us—not even Reese—would corroborate the girl's story, so, as usual, Edward got away with his cruelty. I realize now that this became a pattern in his life that I had contributed to through my weakness. But, what the hell, we can't all be heroes.

I lost track of Edward after he quit school, and I don't know exactly how he got involved with the Bledsoe brothers. The newspapers made it sound like he and Hector targeted them, looking for easy drug money. A rumor went around the community, though, that there was more to it than that. Neighbors had seen Edward's beat-up Camaro in the driveway and him and Hector coming out of the house on several occasions, weeks before the actual crime. Some thought that Willard and Ned had hired the boys to help put up a saw mill on the back side of the property; others thought there was something else going on.



That part of the story never made it into the newspapers. The accounts only focused on how Edward and Hector were captured minutes after leaving the scene of the crime and how the bank teller had tipped off the sheriff's department that something wasn't right after Ned had pulled into the drive-thru looking distressed—with Edward in the truck with him—wanting to withdraw ten-thousand dollars. She had made up some excuse about the computers being down and that he would have to come back later. By the time the sheriff got around to checking on the Bledsoes, the fire department was already there. They had responded quickly and saved the house, except for that back room. Of course, they didn't know when they were fighting the fire that they were dumping all that water on dead people. They just figured the Bledsoes weren't home, even though the truck was in the driveway.

The charred, soaked bodies were found piled on top of each other in the back room where the fire had been started. The investigators found a blackened baseball bat, and each of the four Bledsoes had a cracked skull. The newspaper also reported that the house had been ransacked and that Edward and Hector had large sums of cash in their possession when they were captured.

That was about it, all any of us knew anyway. The last newspaper story reported, "The suspects were charged with felony murder and ordered to be held without bond." The flurry of gossip died down. It seemed that nobody wanted to talk about what had happened to the Bledsoes, but the partially burned farmhouse stood as a reminder to everyone who traveled that country road—including Jack and me, every afternoon on our way to Crazy Bob's Fireworks.

It was a dry autumn, so the leaves bypassed yellow and red, going straight to brown as they turned and fell. Jack and I started poking around in the abandoned barns and farmhouses on our way to work, pulling his Civic or my Ranger over and parking just far enough down a logging road or behind a shed to be out of sight of the light passing traffic. We never saw

anybody. He often wondered where the people were who owned the old places. “I don’t know,” I would answer. “I guess they either died off or moved away to the city.”

One old house, only a few miles from the Bledsoe place, was particularly interesting. This one had a faded For Sale sign in front, which made Jack even bolder. “If anyone asks what we’re doing here,” he said, “we can act like we’re interested in buying the place.” Yeah, right, I thought. We look like a couple of real estate tycoons.

It was a small frame house with peeling paint and a flimsy metal carport to one side. The yard and shrubs around the house had been untended for some time. I noticed a dented metal dog food bowl next to the concrete steps that led to the front porch, and a garden hose lay coiled in a tangle of brown weeds at the corner of the house.

There were three small rectangular windows in the front door, arranged in a stair-step pattern. Jack peered through the middle one. “Wow. There’s all sorts of stuff in there.” He placed his hand on the knob and turned. “Come on,” he said. “It’s open.”

I held back. “I dunno. What if the owners come up, or the sheriff?” But he was already inside. Not wanting to stand around on the porch or wait in the car, I followed.

The place had that smell old people’s houses sometimes get, the shut-up smell of space heaters, cats, and snuff. And Jack was right. There was stuff everywhere, most of it piled in various heaps in the floor: blankets, quilts, dresses, books, boxes of dishes, and framed photographs of people in big-collared shirts and leisure suits standing in front of old cars smoking cigarettes. It looked like someone—maybe family members or the real estate people—had started cleaning all the junk out of the place but got disgusted and quit.

The rooms were small with sticky linoleum on the floor, except for the first room we entered, which had this filthy orange carpet that looked like it had been there since the seventies. The walls were plywood paneled with flimsy, fake woodgrain.

I was moving slow through the debris when Jack called out from the kitchen, “Hey man, you’ve got to see this!”

When I got there he turned from the counter to face me, holding a big-ass meat cleaver, like something from a George Romero movie. “I’m keeping this,” he said.

It took me a second to recover from the creepy thoughts that popped into my brain. The stench of the kitchen also made it hard to speak. I looked away and noticed several dead roaches on the floor and counter tops. “Why?” I finally asked.

“For one thing, I like the way it feels in my hand, and, who knows, we may need it to defend ourselves against burglars—or *zombies*.”

“I thought that’s what you keep the baseball bat beside your bed for.”

“True. The bat is my preferred first line of defense, but I’m sure we could find a use for this fine utensil. Come here and hold it. Just feel how heavy it is.”

“Yeah, great. I’ll take your word for it. Let’s get out of here. This place stinks.”

We finally left after Jack had gone through the kitchen drawers and the bedroom closets. He got excited over an old eight-track tape deck and was going to take it with us too, but left it behind when he discovered that half of its guts were hanging out. That meat cleaver, though, he was proud of that thing—still has it, I guess. But no. When I think about it, I really don’t know what he did with it.

At any rate, it whetted his appetite for formerly occupied space to poke around in. His desire was with us each day, hanging there inside whichever vehicle we happened to be in, as we

rode by the Bledsoe's old farmhouse. I felt it more when I was driving and he was free to look at things. It came out one day a week or so after the meat cleaver house. Jack said, "We've got to do it, you know—go in there. We've got to go in that house where those old people got killed."

"Hell no," I said. "I ain't going in there. That place is creepy."

I glanced over and saw that he was smiling at me, his opaque eyes reflecting an odd light.

So, I gave in and that's how I came to be in this situation. The inside of the Bledsoe house has become the most vivid of my memories, and the weirdest part is now I see things in my mind that I didn't even see that day. We did it a couple of weeks before Christmas break, went inside that place where horrible deaths had occurred. I followed Jack's suggestion and parked my truck behind the house. Together we mounted the part of the back porch that wasn't burned.

God, I don't even want to describe it, really, or think about it, but I can't help thinking about it. The dreams are the worst part. I wake up sometimes thinking I'm there as it's happening. I hear the bat cracking against skulls, the shrieks, curses, grunts, and moans. It usually takes a few minutes to shake it off, to convince myself that it was a dream. When this happens, I feel blood pulsing in my temples and eyes. It takes effort to separate the real sounds from the sounds in my mind, but eventually, I'll hear Jack's gentle snoring and rhythmic breathing as he sleeps, untroubled by nightmares. Then I know where I am. But the night is ruined; I'm never able to get back to sleep.

Everything is suffering now. During the day when I'm sitting in class trying to concentrate, pictures flash behind my eyelids each time I blink, and I don't mean spring break images of hot chicks in thongs like normal college guys fantasize about. No, I see images of

charred baseball bats, *even though I didn't actually see such a thing*. The baseball bat wasn't there. The police had taken it away as evidence. I wonder, though, where they found it. Part of the floor in that room was burned through. Had the murder weapon fallen to the ground where the hounds slept underneath the house?

The newspaper account didn't provide those kinds of details, the things I really wanted to know. It only said, "The suspected murder weapon, a baseball bat partially burned from the fire, was discovered and collected at the scene along with other evidence." How can people write shit like that? That's another thing that's ruined for me now. I was planning to go into journalism next semester and had even talked to them about getting on the newspaper staff. Now I can't imagine interviewing people—adults, professors, deans, committee chairmen—about things like the building plans for new dormitories or the renovation of the old auditorium. I mean, really, who cares about that sort of thing? How can you write about the mundane things of life when you're plagued by things you've seen and haven't seen?

I see Jack in my dreams now, and Edward. Sometimes Jack is Edward and vice-versa. Edward and Hector holding the Bledsoe brothers down, making them squeal like pigs; Jack, heavy and strong, holding me down, his crotch in my face. Sometimes he has that meat cleaver. And those magazine images keep coming back to me.

There was a stack of them in one of the bedroom closets. The roof over most of the house was intact, so everything was preserved just as it had been that day, the day of the crime. The stuff of their lives was dumped out everywhere: shoeboxes filled with cancelled checks, keychains, pocketbooks, pocket knives, horse-show trophies, catalogs, walking sticks, the old woman's walker, medicine bottles, moldy encyclopedias, flashlight batteries, alarm clocks,

raincoats . . . you get the picture. The worst part, though, was that closet. Their clothes were still hanging in there!

Those shirts, overalls, jackets, and boots got Jack really excited. He was deep into the back of the narrow space when he shouted out, “No way! You’ve got to see this!” I was feeling sick, but once again I was compelled to look. Jack was coming out of the closet, laughing, waving the thing in his hand. He threw it at me, almost in my face. I caught it and immediately noticed the lurid title and picture on the front. The magazine was titled *Thrust*, and it was filled with photos of naked men engaged in all sorts of bizarre sex acts.

“Sick!” I said, tossing it aside.

Jack grinned. “Looks like there was some kinky shit going on here at the old Bledsoe place. There’s a whole pile of ’em in the back of the closet.”

I stood in the middle of the room not knowing what to do or where to look. I was standing between twin beds, the frames at least; the mattresses and bedclothes were dumped onto the floor. The room was arranged with a bed and chest of drawers on each side and the shared closet, where Jack was now having so much fun, on one end. The furnishings looked like they were from the fifties. Thinking about Ned and Willard living in this same arrangement since they were kids almost made my knees buckle, and my guts felt like they were boiling.

Jack had completely disappeared inside the closet. I called out to him, “Hey man, let’s go. This place is making me sick.”

A muffled voice came back to me: “Sure, I’m ready when you are.” Then he stepped out.

I stood blinking at what I saw. Jack was leaning against the door wearing a black leather jacket that must have been left over from Willard’s motorcycle days. It looked like part of James Dean’s wardrobe. As Jack held that pose, the room began to spin. I remember him saying, “It’s a

perfect fit. I think I'll keep it." The pile of stuff in the floor was sucking me downward and there was a rushing sound in my ears. After that there are gaps in my mind. I don't remember leaving the house, but I do remember yelling, "Oh hell no! Take that damn thing off."

But I don't think he did. In the dream he still has it on. There's this one recurring part where he's grinning and saying, "Come on, let's do it," as he holds open the passenger door of a bathtub Porsche like James Dean's. "Oh hell no! Oh hell no!" I say over and over.

I don't believe in ghosts. Nothing really happened that doesn't happen in a normal world. We went back to our little house in town, back to our jobs at Crazy Bob's fireworks, back to classes, but none of it works anymore. Nothing seems real now. There's got to be some kind of help. Surely there are others who suffer like me, who've had their worlds turned inside out. I really need a good night's sleep and some medication to help me function. That's it—the right prescription and I'll be fine.