

# National Novel Month Write-In

November 13, 2019

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PROMPT: It's your first night at the haunted house and your door shuts and locks itself. There's a ghost in the room with you, and it's trying to keep something else out.

## Him

by **Daniel Dassow**

The moment she stepped onto her new front stoop, grayish stone slick with rain, the icy wind whipped her face and took her breath away. A cold front had moved through the night before, drenching the house in some macabre baptism for their new life on the edge of town. I had been her husband's idea, the move. Months before, as she clutched the toilet weeping for another baby lost too soon, he had already begun planning her recovery.

"Let's buy a house with land," he had said, standing over her as she wept. "Somewhere where the house has been lived in and has its own memories."

But she had loved the house in town, with its white cabinets and Christmas lights that sang into the dark every time it rained. It was the home they had christened when they moved in three years before, she and this impulsive college boy she had agreed to marry. The other girls had warned her about how he hurt, but he had whispered to her one night, saying, "You make me feel like a man," and that was enough for her. She was a preacher's daughter unaccustomed to making choices and he had agreed to make every choice for her. The choosing made him feel like a man.

She thought about this as the wet wind pushed her yellow dress against her body, exposing a stomach still swollen with false hope. Nothing had been her choice, except her decision to go on a second date with an exciting boy she met at a stuffy college party. He liked this dress on her, though it was too small for this whipping cold. So she wore it. He wanted a child, and so she had tried to give him all of her. He thought a move away from the white walls that bore witness to her quiet tragedy would heal her, and thus she stood on the stoop of a Victorian home with cracking paint and creaky stairs.

The real estate agent had forgotten the specifics of the home, it had been so long since he'd

shown it to anyone. It had been empty for eight years, and they were the first couple to step inside for two. They stepped gingerly on the old wood floors of the first floor landing, fingers laced together and heads pointed upwards at the webbed ceilings.

“The ceilings were finished in 1885 by local mason George Durall,” piped up the agent, whose name was also George. “It’s the only paneling like it in the county, so I won’t blame you if you fall in love.” Her husband was already smitten, if for no other reason than the house was new and seemed like a challenge. He was restless and bristled at the soft glow of their town house.

The wood pile sat at the far end of the front yard, and she stacked the logs high in her arms. Walking back to the house, she saw all of it at once and hers for the very first time. She and her husband were only the latest in a long line of residents in the aging home. It was this point that had piqued her curiosity on the home tour. While her husband inquired after the age of the appliances and the projected cost of fixing the plumbing or adding central heating, she had asked about the previous owners. Their lives, and more importantly, their deaths.

“I rather wish you hadn’t asked,” said George the agent in a theatrical tone that implied he was really very glad she had asked. “Legend has it that the first mistress and child never made it out alive. The master of the house had a tussle with their son and killed him. I suppose he murdered his wife when she expressed her displeasure,” he said with a small smirk as he turned and led them into a second floor bathroom.

Her husband, who was still gripping her hand, scoffed. “Like in the Shining?” he asked.

Oh no, I think you’ll remember the mother and son survived in that one,” George said with a wry smile.

Her husband rolled his eyes, but she, the history major, looked through the back of George’s head as he walked before them, hungry for more details, but too afraid to ask. Years ago, her boyfriend snatched her European history textbook from her hands, and looked at her from underneath it with a devilish glance.

“Live in the present, honey bear,” he said, before kissing her. And he had made her want to live, and live more fully back then, in the time before their sadness. Their love had been a rush, a quickened heart rate and a flashing pulse of pleasure and warmth, like a fire in the cold.

Stepping back into the chilled and unfamiliar house, she dropped the wood by the fireplace with a hollow, cluttered crash. Her abdomen was still sore from the compounding contracting and heaving of her married life. She wanted to sit and rest her feet before he came back from

his job as a floor supervisor at the local car plant. Some nights, his voice was hoarse from raising it at subordinates and he wanted dinner quickly. Other nights, his voice was smooth as wax and they melted into easy conversation, him watching her weave through the kitchen and her smiling at him from the store. It was the variety that had kept her excited when they dated, but it had morphed into an inconsistency and fear now, which sat like flame on the backs of her ears as she crouched before the fireplace.

Just as she placed the last log, the wide front door opened and a painful scream of wind rushed at her back.

“Any ghost sightings?” he asked, standing behind her. It was a hoarse night. A night of hurting.

“No, actually. It’s been quite uneventful.” She turned and stood up in front of him, wiping ash from her hands over her pants and standing on tiptoes to kiss his bristled face.

“Does that mean dinner will be soon?”

“Haven’t started, but it won’t take long.”

At his sides, he balled his hands into little fists the size of bruises, but he relaxed his face and the wash of anger left him as quickly as it had come.

“Just don’t overwork yourself. You always overwork yourself. It’s not good for you,” he said in a sweetly concerned tone.

“I won’t,” she answered quickly. She wondered about the first woman to live in the house. Had she braved the wind to collect firewood? Did she crouch even though her stomach ached with childbirth? With a sudden chill, she wondered, was she afraid of her husband, too?

She wanted nothing more than to climb the stairs laden with moving boxes and pregnant with creaking and to lie down on their bed and close her eyes. She had lied to him; the day had not been uneventful. She had lifted, opened, hung, strung, closed, assembled, dropped, and picked up the shared objects of their fragile life all day. And she did not want to make dinner in a fix. Walking into the kitchen, she left him to finish lighting the fire.

“How about every man for himself?” she called sheepishly into the next room.

“What did you say?”

“I said would it be ok if we fixed food for ourselves tonight? I’ve been working all day.”

“So have I,” he said, standing in the doorframe between the two rooms, looking down at her. “I’d really rather not have to scavenge on the first night in the new home.”

“Well then I’ll go rest my eyes upstairs and come back and start in a few minutes.”

“How long?” His tone was sharper and higher when he asked this, which made his hoarseness rougher. She could hear the echoes of each grating yell of his day, reverberating through the hollow silence of hers.

“I thought you wanted me to rest. I thought that was why we moved out here.”

“We moved out here because you only saw blood in the old house.”

“No, we moved here because you wanted to.” She bit the puffy inside of her cheek, as she had when her tone became defiant with her father.

“Don’t give me all the credit,” he said, moving towards her with a grin on his face. “You’ll feel better if we mess around a little.”

He grabbed her hips and she lurched backwards.

“What’s wrong?” he asked with a revised tone. The front door lurched open with a gust which surrounded them with cold air. Her hairs pricked on the back of her neck.

“I just need to rest,” she said, moving towards the stairs. “Let me rest please.”

“We’ll both rest after dinner.” he meandered through the front hall to close the door, which had been open long enough to drop the temperature of the entire home. She turned and crept up the stairs. Sitting on the edge of their bed facing the long hallway, she rubbed the back of her neck to warm it. She could hear his quickening footsteps below as he came back into the kitchen.

“Anna?” he shouted, with a screech. “Anna!”

She heard him thump up the stairs quickly. He appeared at the end of the hall as a shadow, but with eyes like the fire meekly cracking below. He lunged towards the bedroom, yelling.

“Get back downstairs!”

She stood, each muscle in her bruised body tensing as she fell towards the door to close it. But before she could reach it, a chilling breeze whipped through the room, and the door slammed

shut. She looked around to see if any windows were open, but they were all shut. As she stared at the door, her husband slammed into it and tried to open it, but it had been locked.

“You’ll be sorry when this door opens, Anna Banana! You’ll be sorry for the third time,” he shrieked from the other side of the shaking door. She fell back on the bed, her hand over her mouth, as tears began to fall from her eyes.

Just then—and she would swear this for years—she heard a woman’s voice. It told her to lie down. It’s him. It’s him, the woman said. But we’ll keep him out this time. He’ll stay out. And then the pounding on the door stopped, and she could no longer hear her husband’s voice, scratched with anger. Everything fell silent as it had when the rain stopped or her father had died. She fell back onto the bed, wiped the tears off her cheeks, rubbed her knotted stomach, and closed her eyes. I’ll keep him out this time.