

Evening Departure

by Doug Bolin

The distant chimes of the bells indicated it was time to depart from the warm second floor office full of rich wood with high ceilings and brick walls covered with plaster. The office was located in the back corner of an ornate Victorian home built a century ago. An extinct fireplace sat in the corner as a reminder of the life that filled the home long before it was converted to use for a modern office.

The worker was alone having worked late into the evening, and as he began the ritual of turning off the lights as he made his exit, shadows began to emerge within the looming space. They danced from the rustling trees outdoors that interrupted the beams of the streetlights, moving gracefully yet like tiny demons performing a pas de deux.

With each step, the worn and tired floorboards creaked to break the palpable silence. As he began the descent of the grand staircase, the creaking of each step grew louder as if announcing his arrival on the mostly dark bottom floor of the former home.

The grandfather clock stood silent next to another fireplace at the bottom of the stairway. Modern candles had been placed within open fireplace to provide warmth when the space was used for social events but in the solitude, they tauntingly flickered to illuminate the face of the Zephyr wind that had been pressed as a decoration into the metal at the back of the coal pit.

He used the remote control to extinguish the candles and as he turned to the right to check the locks on the front doors, he saw a brief movement over his left shoulder and a liquid chill instantly shot up his spine. He turned quickly as his flesh grew chilled but saw nothing but a dressing mirror next to an antiquated elevator, nothing but his weary imagination could have created the movement.

Although he had been through this ritual for years, it was not the first or last time he would feel that haunting sensation in the presence of rational knowledge that nothing was there.

As he traversed through the darkened space, across different time worn floorboards toward the front door, he crossed a carpet which only muted and tortured the creaking sound. With each step, more shadows revealed themselves as if pointing to the large old portrait of the patron of the house hanging high above the entryway. The portrait revealed an older bearded man in a long coat, his piercing eyes glared harshly, seeming to follow the intruder as he moved past the portrait towards the door.

The door was secure and as he turned to make his exit out the back, he sensed another movement – this time in a cavernously empty ballroom. On the far wall was a large mirror that had once witnessed gaiety and dancing, but now, it simply haunted the hollow space and created a mirage of what was surely his own movement reflected in the fading silver of the mirror.

He moved quickly as he retraced his steps past the portrait, refusing to look up to avoid the patron's ominous eyes. He switched off the light above the grand staircase and as he moved past the dressing mirror, the mechanical switch of the old elevator began to click in the basement below as if something unknown was about to ascend from the depths of the old building.

He reached the safety of the back door, quickly set the alarm, and as he rushed to pull open the burdensomely heavy back door to exit, he stopped in his tracks. At the bottom of the steps outside the door sat a long, old, solid black hearse in the midst of the covered portico.

He stepped outside and the heavy door swung behind him with a moving force.

He composed himself and slowly smiled at the half-dozen people standing near the back of the hearse. The hearse was used by a group of local college students who gave nightly tours of "haunted" homes around the city. His abrupt exit certainly created a moment of panic for the willing tour participants.

"You work in there?" the guide asked, likely guessing from the man's business attire and laptop bag. "I do." replied the man. One of the guests on the tour asked sheepishly, "Is it really haunted?" And as he reflected on the experience he had just been through in the nightly ritual of his evening departure, he replied, "Not really, it's just a creaky old building."