

The Unwelcome Kind of Tenants

The late-fall day was chilly as Aynon Drew parked his car on South Drive. When he alighted from the vehicle he ignored the snap in the air and the scent of autumn leaves that accompanied the impending advent of a Pennsylvania winter. He strode down the sidewalk that separated the stately Forum building from Soldier's Grove Park, completely unaware of the brilliant arboreal costumes and leafy finery the nearby oak trees were donning; the squirrels chasing each other across the grass did not interest him. Aynon was involved in far more serious matters than squirrels and fall leaves.

Aynon turned into the state library. In its warm, hushed interior, Aynon shed his jacket and asked at the reference desk for directions to the card catalog. He spent several minutes searching through the wooden file drawers until he found some non-fiction references that seemed likely to be helpful. Then he went to the appropriate shelves and pulled down nearly every book on ghosts, spirits, hauntings, poltergeists, doppelgangers, spooks, specters, and wraiths he could find. Although a healthy 32 years old, he still had to struggle to carry the load to a nearby table. He sat down, and opened the first book in his towering pile.

An hour and more passed to the sound of Aynon scratching notes on a yellow legal pad. He had gotten through three books and opened a fourth one by this time, and had made twice that many pages of notes. At last he stopped, leaning back in the hard wooden chair and raising his fists above and behind his head to stretch the kinks from his spine. It was then that he noticed he was being watched.

She was an older woman, but her exact age would have been hard to assess. She was evidently what polite society referred to as a "street person," with a push cart full of paper shopping bags containing God knows what parked beside her seat, an eclectic assortment of clothes that draped her like layers of skin on a shriveled onion and a rather bedraggled ball cap reading "Yankees" on the front. The skin of her face was a size too large for the bones it covered, and it hung in slack wrinkles under her cheeks and the corners of her mouth. She was the kind of person Aynon ordinarily would have simply, and conveniently, not noticed if he'd seen her panhandling on the street. He tried to not notice her now, but it was impossible. She was staring at him as though she was trying to remember where she'd known him. *Please*, he thought to himself, *don't let her start bugging me. I've got too much to do to waste time on some rummy.* Then his heart sank into his gut when she stood up and started to walk towards him.

Aynon buried his nose in the book he was reading, hoping against hope that the woman wouldn't annoy him if he ignored her. He felt, rather than saw, her stop across the table from him. He heard a dull, scraping sound as she pulled out a twin of his chair, and the wheeze of air being pushed out from her layers of clothing as she sat. She addressed him, and Aynon was surprised at how refined her voice was – so unlike what he'd expected. It was a soft voice, cultured, with a twang that he thought sounded kind of New England-ish. "They won't be any help to you," she said. Aynon tried to pretend he hadn't heard, but she continued anyway. "Those books are written by researchers, ivory

tower egghead types who will tell you the universe is shaped like a banana and none of us really exist and black is white and green is orange and there's a hundred theories on why trans-dimensional-pan-temporal physics will only work once we can prove the chicken came before the egg, but the geniuses can't even balance their own bloody checkbooks. They've never seen a ghost, only talked to people who say they have. They know as much about the actual experience of a haunt as a cocker spaniel knows about the actual experience of being a begonia. You won't get your answers there." Aynon couldn't help himself – slowly, he began to lower the book, allowing her face to begin cresting the paper barrier like the sun rising over a low hill. "You could read every book on the subject in the whole state and you'd still not have your answer – you'd still have a ghost in your house." Then she smiled, her eyes twinkling like a little girl who's discovered the new dolly she's to get for Christmas.

Aynon opened his mouth, ready to deny her assertion that he was dealing with a ghost, even as a part of his brain began to wonder why he cared what this woman thought about him, but before he got a word out she spoke again. "Please, don't insult us both by denying it. I know. Tabby can see the shadow over you. Those," and she tilted her head towards the two half-stacks of books Aynon had collected, "just confirm it." Then she sat back in her chair, stretching her legs out in front of her beneath the table until her feet brushed Aynon's. "Let me see if I have the story right." She stared at him, her expression going blank as though an internal light inside her had been suddenly switched off. Her eyes became hard in a way that sent prickles up Aynon's back. For several seconds she had him transfixed with her glare, and then her mouth fell open and a new voice – rougher, deeper, almost masculine – flowed from her unmoving lips. "Not a ghost...never human...other...bad one...foul, filthy thing...bad trouble." Then the unseen light came back on and the woman shivered, her head dropped and her eyes closed as a rattling cough sparked through her. She took a deep breath and looked up again. "You heard. Tabby says you've got a bad case of the haunts, mister. You can believe it, too. He's never wrong 'bout such things."

It took several seconds before Aynon found his voice. "Wh...what are you talking about, lady? I'm...I'm just doing research for...for my job, 'sall."

Suddenly the topmost book on Aynon's right-hand stack, "Spirits in Transit," slid from its perch and clapped to the floor. The sound echoed in the still library air, making three students and a librarian jump. "You can't lie to Tabby, mister," the bag lady said. "He's mighty sharp, he is. Keep lying to him and he may decide to just wash his hands of you...and when Tabby says you're a lost cause, you're permanently screwed." Then she grinned and Aynon was surprised to notice how perfect her teeth were.

He picked the book up and laid it beside himself. The woman leaned forward, putting her elbows on the wooden table. "Let's us get down to cases," she said. "My name's Emily, and if I had my druthers I'd just leave you here to waste your time with those books and then go back home to your haunted house. But Tabby's telling me that you're in trouble and for some reason he thinks you're worth taking time to help. Now,

you can accept that and let him try to save your dumb butt or you can keep up the act and we'll leave you to deal with your unwelcome tenant all by your lonesome."

Aynon looked her up and down, fighting with himself and his common sense. He frowned and his eyebrows drew together as he considered the tattered female across the table from him. "Ohhhh-kay," he breathed. "So what do you and 'Tabby' want? Money? Hot meal, maybe? A bottle of Ripple?"

Her smile evaporated. "Mister, you're really trying my patience, which I don't happen to have a significant supply of to begin with. We don't want nothin' from you. It's just that Tabby is a kindly soul and a bit of a sucker for orphans and rejects. He wants to help you fight the whatsit you've picked up, and since he and I are a package deal you got to deal with us both. But one more nasty crack like that and we're leaving and you can fight it out with the hellion without our aid. Your choice." As if to punctuate her words, "Spirits in Transit" slid slowly down the entire length of the table and clapped onto the floor again. This time the librarian shot Aynon an evil look and hissed "Shhhhh!"

Aynon retrieved the book and took a deep breath. He stared at Emily for a moment as though trying to decide what to make of her. Then he leaned forward and whispered, "Okay, then, Emily. To tell you the truth, it'll feel good to tell somebody. But first I want to know how you did the book trick."

"Wasn't me," Emily chuckled. "It was Tabby. He wanted to give you a sign that he's really here so you wouldn't think I was some nutjob. He's kinda my familiar, you might say...my companion spirit. I picked him up 'bout three years ago. He keeps me safe on the streets, watches my back for me, gives me someone to talk to." She grinned. "Course when I'm talking to him most folks look at me like I've slipped a gear or three. After all, nobody can see him...not even me."

"Now," she said, leaning forward on her elbows and becoming serious, "your story?"

Aynon sighed. "Yeah, you hit it. My wife and I bought a haunted house – I guess that's what it is, anyway – about two hours north of here. We haven't seen any ghosts – nobody floating around in white sheets or woman wandering about with her head under her arm or anything -- but there's been some heavy-duty weirdness going on. Started about a month after we moved in, and Carol – my wife – moved out a week later. I'm still living there because I can't afford to just give up the place – sank my last buck into it. So I can't leave, but I'm scared to stay there overnight anymore. The things that've been happening..."

"Like what?"

"Sounds, mostly. A sort of scratching noise in the walls. I thought it was rats, but its way too loud for that. And voices, too – sometimes whispering, sometimes laughing,

sometimes calling my name, or...or saying I'm going to die. Stuff moves when I'm not watching. I don't mind the doors opening and closing or the lights turning on by themselves too much, but it's gotten worse than that. When I got home one day every kitchen knife I own was missing. I walked into the living room and found them – driven through the picture of Carol and me on our wedding day – pounded through the picture and a full three inches into the oak wall studs behind it. I didn't realize it right then but the knives weren't all really there, though. I found the biggest one when I got up in the middle of the night to take a crap – it was jammed, handle first, into the toilet seat. If I'd've sat down without turning the light on..."

Emily sat quietly for a moment. "Seen anything strange? Other than that kind of stuff, I mean -- visions or apparitions, maybe? Stuff you can't explain or identify?"

"Well...I think so. I mean, I've seen it, but I haven't *seen* it, if you know what I mean. I see it out of the corner of my eye, but when I turn to look there's nothing there."

"What do you think it looks like? Like a person, or..."

"A shadow. It's dark, like the light drained out of a piece of the air and left this gray hole. I've seen it several times."

Emily frowned, her lips twisting into an almost comical grimace. "Shadows. That's bad. Shadows are cold and empty – an absence of something, rather than a presence of something that shouldn't be there. Ever seen it looking at you?"

Aynon contemplated momentarily. "Yeah. Sometimes when I look in the mirror or catch my reflection in a window I feel it looking back at me, like it's a shadow over my shoulder. But when I try to focus on it, it's just not...really there."

Emily stared at the wooden tabletop. She seemed to be wrestling with this new information. "Mmmm...it's showing itself to you. Very bad. It's not afraid of you, that's for sure. Must be a powerful species of whatsit. Seems to be concentrating on you. 'Course that could be because you're the only person left in the house." Then she raised her face to Aynon's. "So what are you going to do about it?"

"What am I... Well, what are my options? You and this Tabby seem to be the experts here, so what can I do?"

"The way I see it, you have three choices. The first one is that you can walk away and take the house as a loss. That's the easy one, but financially you take the hit for your investment. It also may backfire – the hellion may follow you, and then you've just carried your problem along with you.

"Second choice is to sell the house for next to nothing just to get rid of it. Not a good option – you lose your investment, plus whoever buys the place may have a worse time with the tenant than you do. If the hellion's especially nasty it may hurt or kill the

buyer, and you'd have that on your conscience forever. Besides, it may just follow you when you sell, and again, you haven't fixed the problem.

"Third choice is to fight it. Try to dispossess the spirits; lay 'em to rest and purge the house of 'em. That's really the best option – but it's also the most dangerous. It means you've got to fight the hellion face-to-face. Serious business, that is. Some exorcisms go easy," and she stared at Aynon, her blue eyes cold, "but some go hard. Some exorcists aren't ready for what they step in. They tend to get killed by the thing they were trying to beat." She leaned back, again stretching her legs out under the table. "So, mister, what's it going to be?"

Aynon leaned forward, resting his head in his palms. "Lady, I don't know anything about exorcising ghosts. That's why I came here; I figured I needed more information. I can't use the Internet at home – electronic gear seems to go haywire in the house -- so I thought these books might help, or at least tell me what kind of spook I've got. If what you've said is true, I'd better find someone else to chase the ghost out or I could get in over my head. Oh, and you can call me Aynon." He reached forward to shake her hand but she refused the gesture.

"Sorry, buster," she said, squaring her shoulders and straightening her back. "A proper lady doesn't shake a stranger's hand until they've been properly introduced. I will thank you to..." but before she could finish her baseball cap slid forward over her eyes. "Hey!" she growled as she pushed the brim up again. "Wha...well, okay. Guess you've got a point." Then she reached for Aynon's hand. "Tabby says I'm being stuck-up and that we've already been sufficiently introduced. Sorry." They shook hands and she smiled at him. "Now, Aynon, what say we go over to Strawberry Square and I'll let you treat me to a grande latte before we head to your house. If Tabby and I are gonna come up there and save your fanny I'd like to know a bit more about you."

"To my house? You're volunteering to help me?"

"Well, I'm not exactly happy about it, tell ya the truth, but Tabby says we have to do it and I've learned to trust him. But you're footing the bill, pally. I haven't earned a paycheck since Clinton met Lewinsky, so you're springing for anything we need...and I want a good solid dinner every night of this operation."

Aynon frowned. "Oh, is that right? I suppose a nice T-bone would suit you?"

"Don't get snippy, sonny-boy," Emily growled. "I'm putting myself in danger for you, you know, and I don't owe you squat. You're getting our help awfully cheap. Yes, a good steak dinner would suit me. That's the deal – take it or leave it."

"Well, if you can help me get my house back, I guess I'd owe you at least that much. Okay, it's a deal."

Emily stood up. “Good. Put those books away and let’s go get that latte. I need some caffeine.” As Aynon began gathering the books she turned to get her shopping cart. Suddenly she stopped and began mumbling as though to an unseen ear, then returned to the table. “Hey, what religion are you?” she asked.

“Well, I was raised Catholic, but now I’m pretty much an agnostic,” Aynon replied.

The woman frowned. “Then before we get to your house we’ll make a stop at a church. We can do St. Michael’s; that’s nearby. You’ll have to make a confession and get blessed by a priest, otherwise you’re walking into an awful dark place without a light, and that’s dead foolish.” She saw his expression and shook her finger at him. “Now don’t argue. I can’t take the chance that this whatsit won’t possess you and attack me. That’s how it is, buster – my way or the highway. Got it?”

Aynon could only nod his assent. “Good,” was all Emily said, then she spun back to get her cart.

This story is available on Amazon.com. Do a search there for Stephen Thorn to find it.