



WE USED TO LIVE HERE

A Novel

MARCUS KLIEWER

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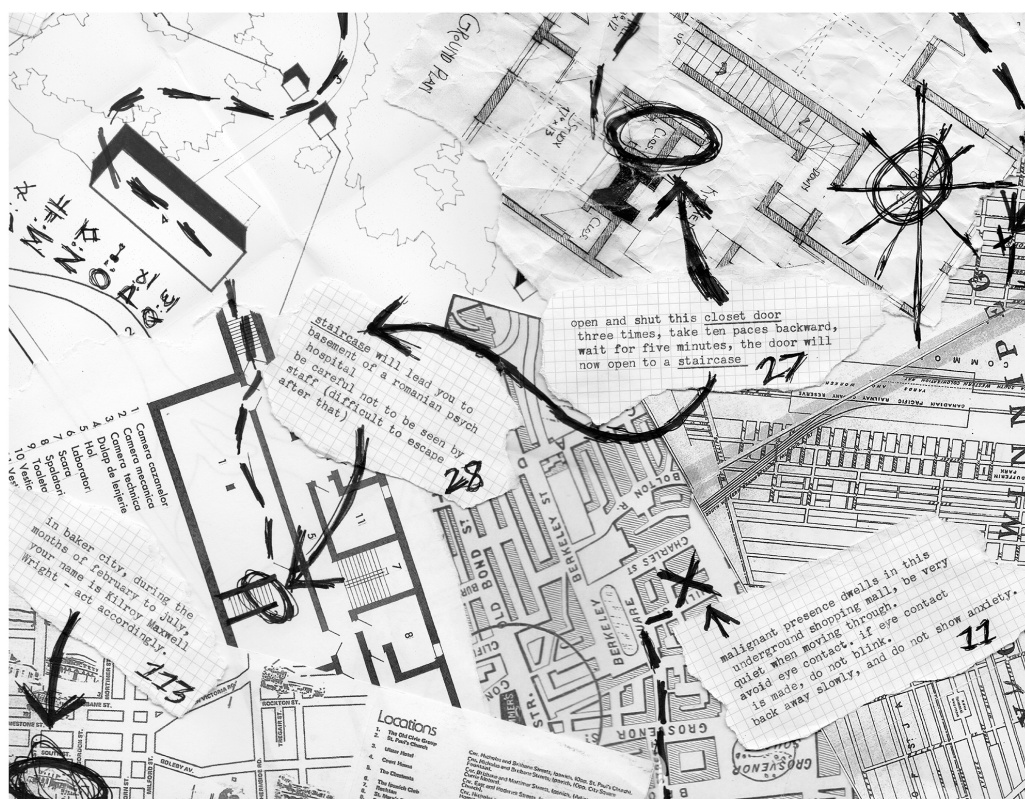
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OLD HOUSE MAP

To the readers from the days of No Sleep

OUTSIDERS

They'd rung the doorbell unannounced on a chilly Friday night.

The strangers on Eve Palmer's doorstep seemed harmless enough. Yet Eve, ever cautious, peered through the blinds and debated whether to open the door. It was a family of five, middle-class, wrapped in sturdy winter jackets. The parents were in their early forties, Eve guessed. A tall father with broad shoulders and a square jaw. A petite blond mother with cold blue eyes and a silver cross necklace. Between them, three kids lined up by height—one girl, two boys. All in all, they seemed the kind of brood that would cap a Sunday-morning sermon with brunch at Applebee's. Eve was more than a little familiar with this crowd.

Concluding they were no serious threat, she opened the door.

"Hello miss." The father smiled. "Sorry to bother you so late. I just— I grew up in this house..."

"Oh, uh, wow," said Eve.

"We were passing through, wanted to stop by."

Was he expecting her to invite them inside? That was just about the last thing Eve wanted to do. Her girlfriend, Charlie, would be home any minute now—they had a whole evening planned: eating leftover chicken and playing drunken Scrabble. A family of strangers wandering around didn't exactly fit that agenda

"My dad grew *up* here," the daughter declared with pride. She was clearly the youngest—no more than seven years old. Clutching a bright green pen and a *Blue's Clues* notebook.

"He just told her that," one of the preteen brothers snorted. This one was tall for his age, with cold blue eyes and platinum-blond hair just like his mother.

The father ignored the chatter and continued. “I know this is completely out of the blue—but I was hoping to give the kids a quick tour? Show them where their dad grew up.”

Eve hesitated. “Inside the house?”

“Just a quick look around,” the father said. “Only if it’s not a problem. We’d need maybe ten, fifteen minutes. Tops.”

Eve stared past him, considering the request.

The surrounding forest echoed with creaks and groans as a slow mountain breeze swept across the yard and brushed over her face. It was a cold night—the type of chill that sunk into your skin, lay dormant for a while, then started scraping against your bones like chalkboard fingernails. Winter was out there, lurking around in the shadows, but the first snow had yet to fall.

It was then that something, or rather the lack of something, caught Eve’s attention. There was no vehicle. Nothing by the old crooked shed at the edge of the woods. Nothing by the alcove where the frosted lawn met the gravel. She looked down the long winding driveway. Nothing. This was more than a little strange, especially considering the cold and the fact that they were in the middle of nowhere. A bizarre image flashed through her mind: the family, hand in hand, wandering out of the darkening trees.

“Where’s your car?” Eve asked.

“Hm?”

“Your car?” she repeated. “I don’t see it.”

“Oh,” the father said, “down on the road.”

Eve blinked at him, unsure.

“We tried pulling up,” he explained. “Too steep, too much ice. So we walked instead.”

“Ah, that’s quite the trek.”

Almost five minutes on foot.

As the father responded, something else caught Eve’s eye: a smudge of dirt on his plaid coat. Her focus, especially in moments of stress, was often distracted by irrelevant details. She called it her “broken spidey-sense.” A random speck halfway across a room would suddenly draw her attention. A *drip-drip-dripping* faucet would turn louder than somebody speaking right next to her. It was hard

for Eve to fully explain. The closest she could get was, “Imagine if several times a day, all at once, every single thing around you became impossible to ignore.” Needless to say, she wasn’t good at parties.

“Is, that okay?” The father’s voice drifted into her thoughts.

She tilted her head. He’d asked a question she hadn’t heard.

“It’s perfectly understandable,” he clarified, “if you’d prefer we not look around. There’s no pressure...”

Eve let out a strained, one-syllable laugh. “Ah, sorry, I, I’m not sure,” she stammered. “My partner and I, we’re still in the middle of moving in, and—I just need to call and check?”

“Not a problem,” he said.

Of course, a well-adjusted individual would’ve simply told him no. But self-destructive people-pleasing was another of Eve’s plentiful idiosyncrasies. She had a crippling fear of disappointing anyone, even complete strangers—even people she disliked. Over the years she’d found a cheap trick to get around this. Internally called the “Let Me Check with Charlie” card. It had become something of a conflict-avoidant mantra. Eve would never have to say no to anyone if her girlfriend did it for her. At first, Charlie had had no problem shutting people down—in fact, she rather quite enjoyed it. Though, after a while, she started to encourage Eve to stand up for herself a little more. “Voluntary exposure is the best way to overcome fear,” Charlie often said. Eve understood this, and was trying, but...

“I— I’ll be right back.” Eve had started to push the door shut when the father said, “Sorry, but is it all right if we wait in the foyer? It’s pretty cold out here.”

Eve opened her mouth, hesitated again.

“We promise not to burn the place down,” he joked.

She tried to smile. “Y-yeah, all good.”

“Thank you, seriously. We’ll stay right by the door.” He motioned his family inside, telling the boys not to touch anything. Eve watched as, one by one, these strangers filed into her home. The distant alarm bells of her subconscious rang out. She vaguely remembered hearing stories. Stories of strangers showing up at houses, claiming they had lived there once, asking to take a quick look around. Then, when the unsuspecting victims had let down their guard: robbery,

torture, murder. Though... she'd never heard of people doing this while posing as a whole family, kids and all, but—

There's a first time for everything, right?

Something lurking in the deepest, darkest chamber of her mind weighed in. An almost audible voice that had been with her even longer than the broken spidey-sense. She was so familiar with it, the voice of “whatever can go wrong, will go wrong,” that she'd even given it a face and a name: Mo. Over a decade ago, a well-meaning counselor had suggested that personifying the terrible voice would disarm it. “Make it something harmless, something familiar,” they said. So, Eve imagined her favorite but long-lost childhood toy, Mo.

Mo was a crazy-eyed monkey with cymbals. Not the one most would think of, not the iconic “Jolly Chimp.” No, Mo was a cheap imitation of that classic toy. His fur was off-white, not dark brown. And instead of the familiar yellow vest and red-striped pants, Mo wore tacky blue felt overalls and a frayed straw hat peppered with holes. The “Hillbilly Chimp,” Eve's father called him.

Where the Jolly Chimp's cymbals were brass metal, Mo's were a cheap and brittle plastic. They made a pathetically dull clicking sound when he was switched on. Like a broken turn signal: *tack-tack—tack-tack—tack*. And when he was bonked on the head, his mouth would open and close, open and close, revealing a set of oversized chompers and bloodred gums. Most people thought of Mo as creepy, but when Eve was a child, he was her favorite toy by far. Maybe it was because a part of her felt sorry for Mo, how everyone called him names. Regardless, childhood Eve couldn't go to sleep without holding him.

And now, all these years later, Mo, the crazy-eyed Hillbilly Chimp, was forever the voice of her paranoia. A paranoia that grew as the family stood cramped in the foyer, huddled around the front door.

Once you let them in, Mo whispered, they'll never leave.

“I'll just be a second,” said Eve, ignoring Mo's absurd comment. She slipped into the living room, pulled out her phone, and dialed Charlie's number.

Three tones rang and then, “Hello?”

“Hey, Charlie, I—”

“Hello. You've reached Charlie. Leave a message, or don't.”

A single tone beeped.

Eve huffed. It wasn't the first time she'd fallen for that dumb trick. Charlie hadn't changed that voicemail since high school, long before they'd met. Anyway, she was likely still in town, picking up booze for tonight. Probably had her phone on silent. Now, Eve would have to shut this family down on her own. She should've just done that from the start. Why did she always drag things out like this? It only made everything way more awkward. Maybe she could lie to the family, tell them Charlie said no, but...

Voluntary exposure is the best way to overcome fear. Charlie's voice, a rational counterbalance to Mo's, echoed in her head. *The more you set boundaries on your own, the easier it gets.*

Charlie—or rather, Eve's projection of her—was right. With newfound determination, Eve stepped back into the foyer. But when the father looked up, hopeful, she floundered and pulled out the Charlie Card: “Hey, uh, my girlfriend says not tonight...”

To Eve's mild surprise, no one reacted to the word “girlfriend.” Not even a blink. She'd half expected the cross-necklace mother to gasp and shield her children's ears, but she didn't so much as shift her weight.

“Sorry,” Eve went on. “We just, we still have a lot to—”

“Say no more.” The father threw his hands up in a little surrender. “This was an incredibly last-minute stop.” Reaching into his coat pocket, he produced a business card. “My email's on there.” He handed it over. “If you're open to it, shoot me a message. We can arrange something in advance next time we're in town, but of course, there's no pressure.”

Eve studied the card. In a faded green font, it read, “Faust's Photolab.” Below that, a logo of a small tree, half of it covered in leaves, the other half spindly branches.

He took a step back. “We should be passing through in another year, maybe two. But again, no pressure.”

“Sorry,” said Eve. “I just, it's not really the best time. Sorry.”

The father shook his head. “No need to apologize. We're the weirdos who showed up out of nowhere.” He turned back to his family. “All right, gang, let's head out.” Pulling open the door, he motioned them onto the porch.

The mother seemed relieved. And the two boys weren't really paying much attention to begin with. But the daughter—her face was filled with growing sadness—like she'd just been rejected at the gates of Disneyland. As the rest of her family started off, she just stood there, idling in the doorway, staring up at the old house with longing in her big green eyes—

“Jenny,” said the mother. After one last glance around, the daughter slinked away to join the rest. Eve stood at the threshold, watching as they trudged off. With every step farther, she felt a growing sense of guilt. Guilt for using the Charlie Card, guilt for dragging things out, guilt for feeling... guilty.

“Wait,” she called out, almost reflexively.

The father stopped in his tracks and looked back over his shoulder.

Eve cleared her throat. “Fifteen minutes?”

He nodded. “Tops.”

DOC_A01_PROPERTY

Description: Real estate listing for 3709 Heritage Lane—transcribed from the no longer operational www.seeking-home.net

Note: It is believed that [redacted] Bank owned the house at the time of posting.

Home is our sanctuary. Make this one yours.

A winding driveway pulls you through the peaceful woods. You're not sure what to expect, but the quiet up here is calming, the crisp mountain air healing. As you round the last bend, the house slowly comes into view and...

... finally, your search is over!

It's everything you hoped for and so much more. Situated on a private 5-acre lot, 3709 Heritage Lane is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. 4 bedrooms + 2.5 bathrooms with over 2,700 square feet of timeless Victorian architecture (not including the unfinished basement). Imagine kicking back on its beautiful wraparound porch, taking in the gorgeous mountain views. Or reclining in front of the brick fireplace, cozying up with a loved one. It's a property with the wisdom of old age and the zestful vigor to get with the ever-changing times. And the land itself?

With over 5 acres of Pacific Northwest rainforest to explore, this is mountain living at its finest. Check out the natural pond in the southwest corner, great for ice-skating in the winter, or the waterfall at the north end. Want to go for a longer excursion? Surrounding hiking trails extend all over Kettle Creek Mountain. (With plenty of locations nearby for hunting, fishing, mountain biking and cross-country skiing, this is also a high-value investment for Airbnb hosts and house flippers.)

And rest assured, civilization is closer than you think. This is serene seclusion, without the sacrifice of connection. Only a 30-minute drive to the municipality of Yale and a scenic 1 hr 45 min* jaunt to the city proper. No longer will you have to choose between downtown fun and the serenity of nature. Retreat

from the world in your own private year-round getaway, or call it your forever home!

NOTE: As is, the house is ready to be lived in**, but it's also a wonderful opportunity for creative renovation or even a complete teardown. Imagine what you could build from scratch!

*In good traffic/weather

**House inspection pending

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