

THE CONTAINER FOR THE THING CONTAINED

I'd been called in to investigate haunted houses before, but this one was a little different.

I could tell as soon as I stepped out of the car. I'd pulled up a few hundred yards away, at the start of the quaint old lane that led to the driveway. I always like to get a good look at a place before I go and get started. The big picture, you might say. And straightaway I could tell.

The house looked ordinary enough. Almost too ordinary, maybe. Normal size, normal style, doors, windows and roof all present and correct, but – there was something wrong. It was too perfect. Like a kid's idea of a house, brought to life. It wasn't that it looked brand-new or anything, or like a show either. It just looked like – and this sounds crazy, but in my line of work, you get used to crazy – it looked like it was *trying too hard*. Like – you ever worked with a guy who's just come to the country from abroad? You know the type – he's picking up the language as he goes along, and he has a good accent and knows the lingo pretty well considering, but he's just trying too hard. His slang is a little too perfect, and his clothes – he looks like what he is, a guy who trying to fit in.

And that's what this house looked like. It had an air of *don't mind me, I'm just a regular house keep right on walking by folks nothing to see here*. One big fake smile of a house.

As I said, it was a little different. And I didn't like it at all.

I got back in the car and headed up the drive. Mrs MacAllister was waiting for me in front. I say "in front" but I noticed as soon as I got out of the car that she was standing as far away from the front door of the house as she could without actually being in the road. She had her back to the house, too, but she kept glancing over her shoulder at it, like she didn't trust it to stay put. All in all, it was transparently clear that Mrs MacAllister did not care for this house one little bit.

I walked up to her and extended a hand. She responded limply, her gloved hand barely brushing against mine like a bruised orchid.

"Mister Isinglass, I presume," she said in a voice that began as a drawl but ran out of energy halfway through the greeting. She had a faint Southern accent, with a hint of disillusionment in it, like she'd learned the hard way not to depend on the kindness of strangers. Four words, but they were heavy with her life. I made a mental note to stick to the facts, and not get involved any further. Other people's lives: you don't want to know about that stuff.

Fortunately for me, Mrs MacAllister seemed keen to give me the salient facts and then get out of there. She asked if we could sit in the car and slid in like she owned the thing. I got back in the driver's seat, lit her proffered cigarette, and she told me her story.

Funny thing: it's always a story. Nobody ever lays out the bare facts – *I came here, this happened, I don't like it, I want you to do something about it.* They always have to make a story of it, beginning, middle and end. They don't know that life isn't like that. Most of the time, things don't have an end. Quite often, they don't have a middle. And sometimes, they don't have a beginning.

Mrs MacAllister's story had a beginning and a middle and I guess she was looking to me to provide an ending. That's what people do: I ask them for the facts, they start telling me a story and then they expect me to finish it for them. I don't mind: I get paid, after all, and it's what I'm good at it.

And this was a story I'd heard a hundred times before, at least the way she told it.

She wound down the car window and breathed smoke into the morning air.

"My husband inherited the house a few years back," she began, and I looked down at where her wedding ring should be but wasn't. "It was no big deal: his family have always owned property, all across the state, and houses come and go with them like cars, or maids. A lot of times I'd mention a town and he'd tell me he owned some property there. It was like he had houses to spare.

"This house was nothing special. I don't think he ever saw it, if I'm honest. Just took a few calls from the agent every now and then and made sure whoever lived in it kept up the payments."

I tried to imagine owning a house I never saw. I tried to imagine owning *anything* I never saw. Pretty much everything I owned was either in my pockets or my car at that moment: there was an apartment, too, but I didn't own that.

She ditched the cigarette and wound up the window again.

"Then he died. He was out walking, they say, he stumbled, let out a curse and fell to the ground dead. There was a bite mark on his ankle, but if it was a snake, nobody ever saw it. And then it was just me. Me and the houses.

"I know nothing about the property market, Mister Isinglass, I run a beauty parlor. I had to make an inventory of his properties, to enable me to work out which were worth keeping and which I could dispose of."

I nodded. All I ever had to dispose of was clothing, and I worked out what to dispose of when there was a hole in my sock, or my shirt buttons fell off.

"Most of it was easy. I sold a few properties right away, took advice on the ones I ought to keep, and the rest I worked my way through. It wasn't too bad: like I said, they were all in this state, and it was a way of dealing with his death for me, driving up and down and looking at the properties with a view to disposing of them."

I wondered when she'd get to the point. I could tell she didn't want to get to the point, but I wished she would.

"And then I came to this house. It wasn't the last on my list but it was damn near to it. For some reason I kept putting it off – the documents were hard to find, the keys were missing, the location wasn't easy to find, all that. But one day I just said to hell with it, drove down here, and took a look at the place."

We took another look at the place through the windshield. To me, it still looked like a big old fake.

"I went straight in. The previous tenants had moved out a while back, and it was proving hard to let. It had been refurnished a couple of years ago – nicely refurnished, too, this is a good neighborhood – but there were no takers.

At first, I liked it. It's bigger than it looks, you know. High ceilings, spacious rooms, a lot of light. It should be a nice family home. But – "

She looked at me.

"There's something wrong with it, Mister Isinglass. Something *badly* wrong."

I frowned. "Looks like a perfectly normal house to me, Mrs MacAllister," I lied. I don't like to lead the client.

"You don't believe that for a moment," she said. "I can see it all over your face. You hate that house as much as..."

She stopped, corrected herself.

"No. Nobody could hate it as much as I do. But all the same, you don't like it. You don't trust it."

"OK," I said, "You're right. But it's just a house."

"Just a house," she said, almost laughing. "Yeah, like a bottle of acid is just a bottle." She turned to me again.

"You a student of grammar, Mister Isinglass?"

I gave her a "who, me?" look. She ignored it.

"I had an English teacher, she was always talking about something called The 'Container For The Thing Contained.' Know what that means?"

"Nope," I admitted.

"Nor do I," she said.

"I see," I began. "That's cleared that - "

"But when I saw that house," she went on, not hearing my interruption, "Those were the words that came into my head. The Container For The Thing Contained."

And then she stopped.

"Is that everything?" I asked, a little taken aback. Normally this is where the client kind of takes off. They start describing what they like to call *phenomena*. Occurrences. Things that defy logical explanation. All that. But not Mrs MacAllister. She didn't even get to the middle. She rode out of the beginning, threw in the business about the Container, and that was all she wrote.

I took out a notebook.

"Can you tell me - " I began.

"No," she said.

"I haven't asked you anything yet," I pointed out.

"You don't need to. I haven't set foot in that house, ever. I never did and I never will."

"You didn't go in it?"

"I didn't need to. It's like they say, you don't need to go to the South Pole to know it's freezing."

I put the notebook away.

"Then why are we here?" I asked.

"Because I want you to go in there, Mister Isinglass," she said. "I mean, it's what you do, isn't it?"

She had me there. It was what I do. It wasn't what I always had done, but it was what I had been doing for the last ten years.

I used to be a private investigator. At least that's what it said on the door. Really, I was a guy who sat in a car in a motel parking lot and kept an eye out for husbands or wives who were screwing their secretaries or pool boys. It was an easy life, if monotonous, and once you got used to the clients - the cuckolds who were both angry and triumphant when their fears were confirmed - it was OK. It paid my rent and it kept me in new socks and shirt buttons.

Then one day I was outside a different motel. The Sunset, it was called, but then they're all called that. This Sunset had a parking lot and a pool and not a lot else.

It was the kind of place that had a TV in every room but no phones. I had been hired by a middle-aged guy with a comb-over and a stomach to keep an eye on his wife. His name was Oakes and his wife's name was Juliet, like the play.

Oakes showed me a photo of Juliet. She was a good-looking woman for her age, which given that her age was 23, was very good-looking indeed.

"I think she's been seeing one of my employees," said Oakes. I said nothing, just looked at his stomach and wondered if Juliet slept on top of it at night, like a cat, or curled herself round it. It was a puzzler all right.

I took the job, and drove out to the Sunset, where Oakes reckoned is where she was going with the other guy. I parked the car and gave the receptionist some bills to look at the register. (I say 'receptionist', because it's rude to call people 'drunk old guys' when you don't know them). Boy, that register was something. To look at it, you'd think the world Smith family convention was taking place at the Sunset Motel. There wasn't a Jones or Green in the place; it was wall to wall Smiths.

I gave up, tossed the register back at the old lush, and went to sit in my car with my camera. All I needed was a photograph of Juliet and the other guy going in or coming out and I'd earned my money.

I sat in that car a long time. The air con was busted but fortunately it was a cloudy day. After a while I became drowsy. Professional that I was, I tipped my hat over my eyes and took a brief nap.

When I woke up, it was twilight. Sunset at the Sunset. And there were two figures making their way across the parking lot, a man and a woman. I struggled upright, picked up my camera from the passenger seat, and zoomed in. It was her all right, as beautiful as her photo, except in 3D and glorious Technicolor. She was a looker, there was no doubt about that. But the guy with her – not so much. Frankly, he was a donut. You know the kind – every part of him round, eyes, body, head, hands and little pot belly. I remembered Oakes' mountain gut and for a moment wondered if Juliet had a pash for huge stomachs. It seemed unlikely.

With a nod to the receptionist, who was pretty much breathing through a vodka bottle now, I followed the odd couple into the motel. I knew I could have just got away with a few snaps of them together, but there was something amiss that I couldn't put my finger on. Juliet and the donut just didn't seem to fit together.

I heard the donut say a room number, and watched them head for the stairs. I followed at a discreet distance, and stopped in the stairwell to light a cigarette. Above me I could hear footsteps, then the click of the key in the door.

I waited until they'd gone inside. I took the pass key that I'd lifted from the rummie on reception and let myself into the room next to theirs. It was empty, like most of the other rooms in the Sunset, and like most of the other rooms, it was awful. Even when you knew that people came here to do only one thing, you

still wondered why they would do it here rather than, say, in the burning fires of hell.

I perched gingerly on the end of the bed, thought better of it, sat on an easy chair that looked like it had been a little too easy in its long career, took out a paperback, and waited. I had no idea what I was waiting for, but that's why it's called intuition.

I didn't have long to wait. Before long, the predictable sound of two people knocking boots came from the other side of the thin wall. It sounded like they were really going at it, too: the donut had a lot of pep in him, judging by all the heaving noises he was making. They were at it like knives, as my old grandma used to say.

After a while, the heaving subsided and I could hear nothing but a low murmur, which sounded like it was Juliet telling the donut how great he was and the donut telling Juliet that there was plenty more where that came from, just let me get my breath back baby.

And then there was a different sound.

It still wakes me up at night, that sound. I never knew what made it, or why it sounded that way, and I'm glad, because I think that if I did know, I might die of knowing. It was that bad.

There are sounds you never want to hear: a child in pain, an animal howling, something breaking that shouldn't be broken. This was like those sounds, only much worse. It didn't sound like anything living could make that noise, but it had to be a living thing. There was too much blood, and muscle, in that sound to be anything else.

It was like snuffling, and chewing, and snarling, and purring. Some of it was crying and some of it was laughing. It didn't go on for long, but it lasted for ever. And then suddenly it was done. Whatever it was that was going on in that room had happened, and was over.

I'm no coward, but I waited until long after it had stopped before getting off that easy chair and going out into the corridor. I listened outside to make even more sure it was all done, then took my pass key and opened the door.

For a moment I didn't move. My entire body didn't want me to go into that room and I didn't blame it. Then I just screwed myself up to do it, and I went in.

The room was empty. It was dirty, and smelled, but then so did the room I'd just been in. There was a bed, and a dresser, and an easy chair. A pay-TV stood over by the wall, and another door led to a bathroom which, like the rest of the room,

showed no signs of any recent occupation. I don't know what I'd been expecting – blood, guts, a severed head – but there was nothing like that here.

I looked around a little and turned up more nothing. No bloodstains, no signs of a struggle: just a few strange little rips – nicks, almost – on the bedspread and the pillow case. Little tears, small enough that maybe a rat could have made them.

And that was it. Of the previous occupants, there was no sign.

I left the room, returned the passkey to the desk clerk, and walked out into the parking lot. I drove home, picked up the phone to call Oakes, then thought better of it. What was I going to tell him? I went out the liquor store, bought as much booze as I could carry, and stayed up all night drinking in case I fell asleep and heard that sound again.

After that, I lost interest in sitting in motel parking lots taking pictures of people. In fact, I lost interest in most things apart from drinking. I must have spent two years in bars, thinking about Juliet and the donut, wondering what happened to them, and trying not to think about that sound.

Then one day my landlady appeared at my door. This was not an unusual occurrence: I was running out of things to sell and my rent was somewhat in arrears. But when she'd swatted the smell of my booze breath away from her face, she said to me, "You're a detective, aren't you?"

"Used to be," I said.

"Come with me," she said, and waddled off back down the stairs.

Her name was Mary Stevens, but everyone called her Mo, even when she was throwing them downstairs for non-payment of rent – "I'll get it to you next week, Mo!" – and she owned the entire building. If there had ever been a Mister Stevens, nobody had ever met him. I heard Mo liked the ladies more, but I never saw her with anyone she wasn't throwing down a staircase. I liked Mo, and I think she liked me, which was probably why I was still living here.

"Here," she said, and pushed open the door of an apartment two floors up from mine. I wiped the flop sweat from my brow and was about to step into the room when I stopped.

"You feel it too?" asked Mo.

"I don't know what you mean," I said.

"Yeah, you do," she said. "There's something in here. A presence."

"I have to go," I said. "I'll get you the money, Mo, I swear."

“Screw the money,” she said. “You fix this for me, Mister Detective, the slate is wiped.”

Then I did step into the room, mostly from surprise. Mo never said “screw the money.” Something must have been worrying her. I went in, and Mo followed. She didn’t close the door behind her, I noticed.

“This room is haunted,” she said. I looked at her. Mo was not a superstitious person. She regarded God, Buddha and the entire spirit world with equal contempt and would, I felt sure, have rented out rooms in Hell if she could have come to an arrangement with the landlord. And the way she said it – “this room is haunted” – Mo was scared.

“There’s no such thing as haunted,” I said, but even I could tell that I didn’t sound sincere. I was thinking of little clawmarks on a pillow case. “Anyway, you want a priest, not a private detective.”

“Find out who died here,” Mo said. “Find that out and then I’ll call a priest.”

And that’s what I did. I asked a few questions, pulled a few files, visited a newspaper archive, and pieced it all together. A guy had killed himself in the apartment, nobody had claimed the body, and ever since then, the place had been what you might call troubled. Noises, lights, vases smashed, bookcases turned over. Hard to rent.

I got the guy’s name, Mo found a priest, the priest did a ceremony, and – believe it or believe it not – it worked. No more trouble.

After that, word got round. It seemed that Mo wasn’t the only landlady with a problem. And not just landladies either - real estate agents and all kinds of people, they all needed someone like me. Someone who could ask around, deal with the legwork and the paperwork, and clear things up for them. Soon I was on first name terms with half the priests in the county: rabbis, too. I was in demand.

And now here I was outside a house that didn’t look right, sitting in a car with a lady called Mrs MacAllister, and she was saying, “Because I want you to go in there, Mister Isinglass. It’s what you do, isn’t it?”

I didn’t say anything, because there was nothing to say. How many apartments, how many houses had there been? Enough, anyway. Enough to know that we rarely go peacefully in our sleep, without pain or the realisation that none of it was worth it. That we’re forgotten more than we’re remembered, lost more than we’re found.

I opened the car door. “That’s what I do,” I said.

I stepped out into the low afternoon sunlight and started up the quaint old lane that led to the driveway. I looked back once at Mrs MacAllister and it was hard to see with the glare of the sun on the windshield, but I think she waved to me.

I walked right up to the house. It no longer seemed to be saying *move along folks there's nothing to see here*. Rather it seemed to be studying me, wondering if I was going to go ahead with it.

I opened the front door and went in. The house was old enough, but smelled clean and fresh. The ceilings were high, just like she said, and the rooms spacious.

I climbed the stairs, feeling the smoothness of the wooden banister under my hand. At the top I saw an open door, and through it what I guessed was the master bedroom.

I went in. There was a large double bed and an old rocking chair, both painted white. Fresh flowers in a vase on a dresser, and fresh linen on the bed. The bedspread was neatly tucked in, and the pillows plumped.

I went up to the bed. There were little marks on the pillows, like something tiny had clawed them.

The door closed. I was inside. Her words came back to me.

The container for the thing contained.

I heard it, then.

DAVID QUANTICK