



Kevin Mullin

**OTHER WORLDS,
OTHER NIGHTMARES**

A Collection of Short Stories

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By Kevin Mullin

Written Words Publishing LLC
P.O. Box 462622
Aurora, CO 80046
www.writtenwordspublishing.com

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Other Worlds, Other Nightmares

Dagda: House of Horrors

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THE LAWTON HOUSE

When my brother, Sam, came home from the Vietnam War in the summer of 1971, he was not the same. He had sustained a major head wound and had to have a steel plate inserted just above his right eye, so we expected him to be different. He survived an explosion that killed four other soldiers instantly, but Sam was lucky, even though the shrapnel grazed his head and left him in a coma for weeks. Another unit of soldiers found him and their medic kept him alive long enough for the evacuation helicopter to bring him to the closest hospital where the Army doctors saved his life.

Normally, such a head wound could have caused all kinds of hardships, but Sam seemed to be unscathed. None of the doctors knew him before the injury so they didn't notice how his personality changed. His outlook on life was less casual and unconcerned. I noticed, after his medical discharge, he started to take pride in his appearance. He threw away his jeans and old t-shirts and replaced them with dark slacks and button-down shirts. And although he never wore a tie, he always affixed a tie pin to his lapel. Shaped like a dragon, it sparkled with tiny sapphires. He

told me they were real, but I wouldn't know a real sapphire from the cheapest fake.

He wore that pin every day, on every shirt. He never left home without securing it to his collar. Some of his old friends and acquaintances occasionally made fun of him because it looked like a woman's broach. Certainly, it was uncommon for a man to wear something like that, but Sam laughed off any negative comments.

"A real good buddy gave me this pin," he said to me. "He told me it would bring me good luck every day I wear it. And let me tell you something: it kept me alive when the shell hit."

"Wouldn't it have been better luck not to get wounded in the first place?" I was skeptical.

"I wanted to come home, anyway," he shrugged. "But yeah, a regular discharge would have been more convenient."

Home was different for Sam after he returned. He turned twenty-one and the Army and the war hardened something in him. The wound and steel plate affected him as well. His friends all grew a few years older in different ways, which made them still fit into their small-town roles. Sam was never going to fit in again and everyone knew it.

In high school, he lived and breathed football. It was his life. Sam and his best friend, Dave Barkley, played the game together for years. Dave manned the quarterback position and was the smartest boy in school. Sam played left tackle and he could have been smart, as our father always told him, but he had no discernable interests in life other than football. He would pick up a book the way a child would pick up a poopy diaper. The quarterback got all kinds of attention and awards. Dave's name headlined the sports page in every Saturday newspaper when they recapped the

game highlights. Sam was a good player but anonymous. Most linemen rarely get their name in the papers, and Sam was no exception, though I genuinely believe he didn't care. Dave also got straight A's and was the class valedictorian. Sam got all C's, thanks to the coach's influence. He received one trophy in his senior year as 'Best Team Player.' although he didn't display it anywhere. He said it was nothing more than a participation award. No big deal.

They joined the Army together instead of going to college. Everyone thought they made a strange decision, especially since Dave received more than a few scholarship offers from some excellent universities. After his father died, he decided to see the world before committing to a career. He easily talked Sam into going with him. Since none of the college scouts even looked at him, Sam decided he had nothing better to do and he needed to make a life for himself. Sam came home with his wound. Dave came home in a box.

Maybe because of the steel plate in his head, Sam lost all interest he had in his old life. He didn't even watch football anymore. His enthusiasm for work became nonexistent, so our uncle hired him to be a night watchman for his closed and deteriorating sawmill. Abandoned buildings draw high school kids and homeless folks faster than free beer at a frat party, he told us. Lawyers love it when the kids fall and hurt themselves. Suing people brings in big money for those who don't like to work. All the adults in our life figured that since 'poor Sam' was virtually unemployable, this would be a good job for him.

Was it ever. He discovered the joy of reading at that job. He began making up for twenty-one years of not studying anything. He devoured books. Real ones, by famous authors. Gone were the comics and girlie magazines he

collected before the Army. Nonfiction became his new favorite. He had a passion for science and unsolved mysteries. And we lived near Nueville, the home of Louisiana's strangest occurrences, disappearances, swamp lights, UFOs, unknown creatures, and anything else supernatural. When he wasn't reading, he visited old houses, fetid lakes and who knows what else.

His favorite subject involved the scientist Dr. Scott Montgomery and his theories on interdimensional physics. Very few people study or even remember Montgomery today. Nobody assigns or reads his papers or books anymore. He was the personification of the fictional 'mad scientist.' People associated him with Nicola Tesla, who many people believe was the smartest man of the 20th century. He may have been. All I can say for sure is that he had a lot of competition.

Sam loved to talk about Montgomery, his new hero and the first man he admired not associated with football. He played the central role in the Lawton House Mystery, sometimes referred to as the Halloween murders. No matter what it's called, there is no evidence that murder occurred there that night. Nobody recovered any bodies, anyway. That's what makes it a mystery.

Fifty miles east of us, the Lawton House, a two-story plantation home, rose ominously from the ground, barely visible from State Highway 190. To most people, it was just an old house with a large fence topped with razor wire that the locals avoided. But on nights with no moon ("New moon," Sam would correct me), people told stories of lights that turn on and off, blinking crazily for all the wee hours before going dark again. Sometimes, people would set up cameras and film these occurrences. The 'true' haunted house shows still love to broadcast those grainy old videos.

That is why people say the Lawton House is haunted and why the fence needs to be so sturdy. Haunted houses attract strange people, some destructive but mostly dumb. The kind of fools who break inside and get themselves hurt or killed and then sue the owners for their own stupidity. And they usually win. Maybe they aren't as stupid as everyone thinks.

Nobody knew exactly what happened there on that mysterious night, other than it must have been bad. Since Sam read so many articles on the subject, he created a timeline of events.

What is known is that, like most terrible events, it started out with the best of intentions. Martin Holmes, who married Maria Lawton, the oldest Lawton daughter, owned the place in 1921, the year of the Halloween party. Maria disappeared the year before and nobody ever saw her again.

The doomed costume party happened on Halloween. The invitations included instructions which clearly stated that only those who came to the door dressed as supernatural beings would gain entrance. Demons, devils, monsters, and vampires entered with no questions asked. The ushers rejected all the pirates, princesses, cowboys, and Indians, even if they had an invitation. No second chances. Rules are rules.

Martin Holmes, by all accounts, was an occult enthusiast of the worst kind: he had lots of money. He hired Montgomery to create a Halloween atmosphere, which inspired the scientist to concoct an 'energy interceptor,' a simple generator adapted to capture and direct invisible cosmic forces to suit his needs. He wanted to blur the lines of our reality with another dimension.

His experiments and studies in galactic forces and interdimensional energy drew great debates in the colleges

and universities of his era. Today, he is a forgotten man. Even though no one ever disproved any of his ideas, the scientists and scholars never pursued them.

“These forces he harnessed are intense,” Sam explained to me one day. “But most of us are unaware of them. Just envision a hurricane with eighty-mile winds. Buckets of rain. Thunder and lightning. Just inches away from us. But we aren’t even aware of it because we’re in a nice dry house with thick walls protecting us.

“Montgomery had the idea that he could force a small hole through the barriers that separate us from other dimensions and allow us to glimpse multiple worlds. Just think of a television. A click of the button changes the channel. He wanted to do that with reality.

“But the energy field itself could be dark. That’s why the guests had to dress up as evil things. It would help enhance the energy flow. Montgomery would harvest that power and channel it into a powerful field and bathe the guests in this dark energy, just enough to momentarily transform them into whatever beast they imitated. The effect would only last for a moment or two and then he would shut it off.”

“Why would anyone want to go to a party like that?” I asked.

“No one told them what the plan was. It was all going to be a surprise.”

He told me more about that party as time went on. Some of the information was new to me. Out of fifty invited guests who entered the house, only four came out alive. Martin Holmes was not one.

“You see, Montgomery left early that night. All he did was set up the equipment and leave before sundown, as he had another important business venture in Baton Rouge.

He gave Holmes strict instructions on how to operate his machine before driving away. Evidently, he told Holmes to turn the power level to a certain point, but Holmes wanted to see more and cranked it to a higher level. According to Montgomery, Holmes took the energy level to a point of no return. Even after Holmes shut down the machine, the guests didn't transform back to their original selves.

"Montgomery was called to testify later that week in the inquest, but his testimony was permanently sealed."

"What happened to the four survivors?" I asked.

"They were committed to a private asylum where all kinds of doctors and specialists examined them. They couldn't help them, mind you, they only studied them."

"Why was that?"

He shrugged, "Officially, they came out of the house with serious burns and the doctors used an experimental treatment on them. That's what the government said, anyway. Montgomery's machine blew up and everyone else burned to death, their bodies charred beyond recognition. That's why the funerals were all closed-casket. Other people said there were no bodies and they buried empty coffins."

"Oh," I said. "And unofficially?"

"There was no fire. The house doesn't even remotely look charred or burnt. The guests all went mad and killed each other after Holmes released the energy and the transformations took place. He must have permanently transformed them into the creatures they dressed up as that night. Human souls. Monster bodies. And that's what they were for the rest of their short lives. And the bodies in the house were unrecognizable. The officials identified the victims by their costumes or driver's licenses. Only the government officials actually saw anything. And their

reports are still sealed, even though it was over fifty years ago.”

The Lawton House remained his favorite subject whenever we got together. I always felt it was a harmless obsession of a wounded veteran and nothing would come of it. But I was wrong.

He knocked on my door one morning after he got off work. “You’ll never guess who I had coffee with yesterday morning,” he said, his eyes wide with excitement.

I looked at the clock as it chimed five o’clock in the morning, then glared at him.

“Niles Warden,” he said triumphantly.

“Who?”

“The caretaker of the Lawton House. You know, ever since the night of the party, the owners never let anyone on the property. Just a housekeeper and caretaker for the land. And they can’t be on the property until the sun is completely up and gone before dusk. Once, he got involved in a project and lost track of the time and started hearing a voice from the house calling him and he hightailed it out of there. So, I just happened to be in the neighborhood and ran into him.”

“The Lawton House is over fifty miles from here. You didn’t ‘happen’ to be there, you made a concerted effort to get there.”

“Whatever, the point is that there’s nobody there all night. And you know what else? There’s a basement. That’s where Montgomery set up his cosmic generator.”

“Really?” I was skeptical. “Nobody builds basements in Louisiana. We build houses on pilons to keep them above the water. A basement would be a wet, moldy mess that would collapse on itself.”

“Montgomery invented a special formula he mixed into

the concrete to seal out water. It had some kind of super small conductors imbedded in the mix and, when the generator was on, it sent electro-static waves throughout the basement, keeping the floor and walls dry. He was able to convert the water back into oxygen and hydrogen. No moisture.”

“Oh,” I replied, unsure if he was serious or pulling off an elaborate joke.

“We’ll recognize the basement door because it’s at the end of a galley style hall with pentagrams and other occult symbols painted on it to help with the dimensional transfer.”

“Some effect. Did he get the idea from an old vampire movie?”

He shrugged.

“So, according to what the police leaked out to the public, before Montgomery left for Baton Rouge he set up the equipment and gave Holmes instructions on how to work it. When to turn it on, don’t touch the settings and make sure it doesn’t overheat from the influx of all that cosmic energy, which is what he thought happened. But we’ll never know. They couldn’t find the machine. Or the basement.

“Which brings me to the point of my visit. We’re going to see the house tonight. Remember Niles, the caretaker? He told me that Montgomery left a whole bunch of notebooks in the basement that night. He wanted to keep them near the generator so they’d be available right away for him to notate the results.”

I liked Sam better when he was virtually illiterate.

“You know that when Tesla died, the FBI ransacked his apartment and stole boxes and boxes of notes. The same thing happened in 1950 when Montgomery died. If we can

find any of his research papers, we can auction them off and be rich beyond our wildest dreams.”

“You want us to break into a haunted house?”

“Absolutely not, and it’s not haunted, just abandoned. Niles told me the combination to the gate’s keypad and where they hide the housekey. It’s under a flowerpot on the porch.”

“Why is he giving you all this information?” I asked.

“We’re giving him a cut of the fortune we’re going to make.”

“Why doesn’t he get it himself? It doesn’t sound like he even needs us. And he can just get the notes in the daytime. Nobody will ever suspect him.”

He shrugged, “If he sells the notes, people will say he stole them and he’ll lose his job and they’ll arrest him for stealing and burglary. He needs to be above suspicion.”

“Me, too. I don’t want to get involved in this,” I said firmly. “Obviously, this is illegal and I want no part of it.”

“Yes, you do,” he replied softly while taking off his dragon pin. He held it to the light and the little jewels flashed at me a few times.

“You don’t care about breaking a couple of little, unimportant laws. You want to do this, don’t you? You’ll have a good time with me.”

I nodded. I had a complete change of mind. I just knew this would be a fun adventure.

We arrived at the Lawton House just past midnight on a dark moonless evening with only pale blue stars above us. The gate opened on the first try and we parked under a gigantic live oak tree with high spreading branches. After I turned off the headlights, the night was so black we could barely see the ominous outline of the old mansion.

“I don’t know about this,” I said doubtfully.

“Relax,” he reassured. “This won’t be a problem. We only need to find the basement and get the notebooks. We’ll be in and out in no time.”

Thick autumn mist covered the ground almost to our knees. Our cheap plastic flashlights created eerie, shadowy creatures that rose above us momentarily until the wind quickly dissolved them back into formless vapor. It was unnerving. I wished somebody had at least left on the porch light.

Sam carried a pick and small spade and I had twenty feet of rope coiled around my shoulder. I understood the rope. The stairs are so old they might be unsafe. But the digging equipment? We wouldn’t know where to dig and if Holmes buried the notes, they’d be rotten, moldy and useless. But Sam insisted.

The key was right where the caretaker said it would be and the door opened with a high-pitched groan. Even though there were no lights on inside, we could see. All the rooms glowed from a soft blue mist, providing us with an eerie illumination.

“Well, that’s handy, if creepy,” Sam commented as we turned off our flashlights. “At least we can save our batteries.”

We looked around. The door entered the kitchen where everything looked as neat as a pin. The housekeeper wiped down and polished the table earlier. The sink was spotless. But then, why would it be any other way? The housekeeper cleaned daily and no one lived there.

Each wall held a door.

All doors lead to the kitchen, I remembered hearing my mother say when I was a child.

The electric lights suddenly turned on and my musings stopped. We both blinked as the bright lights overwhelmed

our pupils. Screams erupted from everywhere, some were howls of agony. Pathetic screeches of sheer terror attacked our ears. I imagined seeing some kind of creature, too hairy and deformed to be human, running toward us but something even more hideous caught it. Something with horns and razor-sharp fangs. This demonic thing grabbed its deformed prey with little effort and chewed it to death while the victim expired after emitting a few pathetic whimpers. The demonic fiend looked right at us, unaware that we were there and proceeded to drag its bleeding victim away from the door.

The lights disappeared, replaced by the unearthly blue glow.

“I’ll wait for you in the car,” I said quietly and turned to leave but Sam positioned himself between me and the door, holding up his flickering dragon broach.

“You want to see this through,” he said. “Don’t you?”

I nodded. My fear vanished. We continued.

“Good. I need you to help me get everything out of the basement.”

We explored the dining room to our left. The table was meticulously set with highly polished silverware. White cloth napkins shaped like boats claimed the center of each China plate. Crystal wine glasses and water goblets finished each setting. A white tablecloth hung down elegantly, not quite touching the eight empty chairs. It was set up beautifully. And it was for no one.

Several portraits from the 17th and 18th century hung high. Long dead patriarchs from the Lawton family sneered at us with stern, unsmiling faces. We walked through the room, careful not to touch anything, since it felt like we were walking through a museum.

Another door to our right opened into a wide, open

room that I guessed was the living room or entertainment area. It was large, with a few couches and chairs pushed back against the wall. The front door stood locked and bolted. A polished and empty bar was in one corner and a small makeshift stage was in the other. More old pictures filled the walls. This time, mature, middle-aged women with severe features glared at us. The wives.

“This is where everyone was dancing when the party began,” Sam told me.

I already figured out that much. We walked across the room, where another doorway beckoned, our shoes clicking on the floor and echoing through the house.

Once again, the lights came on. The shrieks filled our ears. A woman dressed in a pastel green fairy costume was crawling off the stage, blood pouring out of a fatal gouge. A beast-like man with a bull’s head stood over her, blood and gore dripping from his horns. His head was down. He was going to attack her again.

He started his fatal charge when the lights blinked out and we plunged back into the darkness. I was thankful that blue glow illuminated nothing more of that scene. I was also glad the floor was well polished and I could find no trace of blood anywhere.

We walked through the other door and back into the kitchen. To our left was the back door we came in from. To our right was a small aisle with cabinets on both sides. Beautiful China place settings gleamed at us from one side while crystal glassware and table centerpieces sparkled on the other. An oak door was at the end.

“Was all this here when we came in?” I asked.

“Must have been,” he shrugged. “I didn’t see it either.”

“I really don’t think these notes are worth being in here,” I complained. But when I turned to him all I saw was

that damn dragon pin, flashing and sparkling, filling the lost confidence back into my terrified soul.

“I believe we’re safe, don’t you?” he asked quietly.

“We’re safe,” I agreed, although every instinct I had said otherwise.

“This way,” he said and we headed to the door at the end of the aisle.

At first glance, it appeared to be a short distance but, by the time we got to the end, it seemed like we walked at least a hundred yards. Two more portraits flanked the door on either wall. A hauntingly beautiful woman in her wedding dress smiled sadly at me. Something in those warm blue eyes made me feel guilty I invaded her home. The matrimonial arch stood behind her and she clutched a bouquet of red roses in her outstretched hand, showing off a very large diamond ring. Her earrings seemed cut to match it. A bronze label affixed to the frame read: Maria Lawton, 1890.

Across from her, another likeness hung. I would have originally assumed the second painting was the groom, but it was not. A matronly woman of middle age sat straight up and primly in a pastel green blouse that reached the bottom of the frame. Ice cold blue eyes stared, filled with contempt. Her hands sat below the picture frame, most likely clasped together in her unseen lap, possibly holding something. A kitten, maybe. Her expression was haughty and confident, without a trace of humor. She carried herself as though she were royalty. I found it odd that she didn’t wear any jewelry. I read the label on this one: Maria Holmes, 1920.

Dark shades of brown and gray made up the background showing nothing except her. She was not an unattractive woman who noticeably maintained her grace

and poise as time stole her youth and beauty. She certainly had no use for vanity.

“She aged well,” Sam said clinically from behind me.

“Did she die that night?”

“She disappeared the year before. Probably not long after she sat for the painting.” He glanced at the image for a moment, “Nice brushwork. Let’s go.”

I nodded and turned to the basement door. It had faded traces of pentagrams and other disturbing symbols I didn’t recognize. Obviously, somebody washed over them many times but they survived each cleaning. I thought I heard a feminine cough and whirled around. Nothing was there. A small movement caught my eye and I turned toward the later portrait of Maria. She was leaning a bit to the right with her head tilted coquettishly. Her lips had a trace of a knowing smile.

“Let’s go,” Sam hissed at me. “Something happened and we lost time. It’s after three. We only have two hours until sunrise and we’ve been here almost three hours doing absolutely nothing. We must leave before Niles catches us.”

“Why’s that? Doesn’t he know we’re already here?”

“It’s okay as long as we’re gone before he gets here. He has orders to detain or shoot all trespassers when he catches them, especially treasure hunters.”

“And that’s just what we are,” I mused, losing my cool a bit. “Treasure hunters.”

“We’re archaeologists. We just don’t go so far back to find things. Point is: we don’t want to get shot.”

“Why didn’t you tell me any of this before we came here?” I growled at him.

“You wouldn’t have come.”

“Let’s just go,” I said while shaking my head and silently disowning him forever.

He nodded and opened the door. A rickety looking staircase greeted us with dusty steps running steeply down and out of sight. The mysterious blue glow didn't provide light down there.

Our flashlights cut through the dark. At first, I really didn't want to go down, but I dutifully followed my brother. It wasn't long before he found the light switch and dimly lit up the room. Why would anybody put the basement light switch at the bottom of the stairs?

We stood on a rough-hewn pine floor. Some boxes guarded the corners, filled with old photographs of long dead and forgotten people. Some looked like they were set on tin. One photo caught my eye and I showed it to Sam.

It was a picture of the older Maria lying naked on a stone altar. A hooded man stood above her holding a ceremonial knife high over his head. Two giant snakes coiled around his legs, staring at the helpless woman, who seemed drugged and confused. I hoped the serpents were decorative. But I knew they were real.

Sam dropped the photos back in the box and shone his light on the ceiling. A heavy metal hook screwed into the support beam hung down. Right below it, a trapdoor lurked.

"We're here," Sam said excitedly. "This is where they lowered the generator down into the basement by using a pulley system. That's what's left of it."

We quickly opened the trapdoor and let it fall with a bang. We waited a bit until the echoes died down. The noise didn't seem to disturb anything and we aimed our flashlights down into a subcellar. No stairs or ladder waited for us to climb down.

The generator dominated one corner, dusty but intact. Obviously, it didn't explode that night. Made of slowly