

The Haunting of June House

By Wilson Korges

June House was haunted. There was no outpouring of blood, no bone-chilling scream, no beautiful and frightening woman in white, no scratching at the door. At midnight, that witching hour, nothing sinister ever happened. The nights were not terror-filled and inhospitable. It was the day that was most haunted, and in the most pleasant way Reginald could have imagined- every time a glass got too near the edge of the table it moved away from danger. Every china cup that toppled from its place refused to shatter. When the weather was hot and the air fetid and listless, the windows would close as if of their own accord, and the whole room would fill with such a chill that Reginald would shiver and light a fire in the midst of spring.

That was not to say nothing ever happened in the night. From time to time, footsteps could be heard, going up and down the stairs, up and down the halls. It was almost comforting to hear them, Reginald thought. Almost.

When he left candles lit after he'd crawled himself into bed, they went out with the sound of a soft exhalation. In the kitchen in the dead of night, by the hearth fire in the winter, a short spout of humming might be heard, and the servants made the best of it by trying to guess the tune. It was rumored Reginald knew it, and it was probably true- the wistful bittersweet smile he wore when he heard those brief snippets of melody seemed enough proof to stand on.

Sometimes, when alone, the tune came to tell him he wasn't. The day of the funeral was one of those moments.

Reginald dressed quickly that morning, buttoning his shirt and cuffs as best and fast he could against the heavy chill. The dew was thick against the windows. He knew once outside even the horizon would be hard to see.

He was bad at this, and it never failed to cause spectral amusement- perhaps a string of laughter, seemingly warped and too far away, would enter the room by his shoulder. But it was harrowing to Reginald's soul to watch himself struggle on this morning of all mornings. When he heard the beginning of a well-meant chuckle break into his field of existence, he called out to it.

"We are burying you today."

He had never spoken to the tapping footsteps that had

gone up and down his hall. He had never needed to- the tune had been enough, had told him all he needed to know. But now he had finally addressed the source of all this noise, the reason why his cups would not break, the cause of his candles extinguishing in the night. The room had a terrible silence. He had never felt so alone before.

He wondered, for a tight-breathed moment, if he had done something terribly wrong. Had some rule been broken? Had some spell been lifted? The fear of a crime against God crawled insidiously into his brain. Sickness took hold of his stomach. The silence was a terror.

Then, gently, the scuff of a non-existent shoe interrupted his fears, drawing his eyes to the source of the sound- no pale apparition, not yet, he cautioned, but his writing desk. He moved towards it dutifully. On a forgotten piece of blotting parchment was a single word- "Where?"

Reginald cleared his throat. Weakly, he stammered. "T-The cemetery. A plot was bought for you. It's- it's got a lovely view." And just like that, the tears came.

He had not wept before now. He had found the body himself- no shrieking maid or fainting footman had come between him and the full horror of the thing. Of course he had found the body, he thought, who else would there have been? Who but him would have recognized that face half-covered in blood?

He had not wept- he had removed what he could from the face with his fingertips, and then stopped, uselessly, and sat down on the floor. That was how they had found them, their eyes both blank and empty.

He had not wept then, but now he wept, not at the graveside, but in front of a more tentative kind of remains.

That was when he felt it. Sitting at his writing desk, the tears coming down in an unbidden flood, the coldest hand he had ever felt closing briefly around his shoulder. Terror gripped his soul, but it was better than grief. He stopped crying. After a long, frigid moment, in which his breath froze in his limbs, he stood quickly, dressed efficiently, and left economically to stand at his place by the grave.

Lilies for the dead. That was what he had brought- he had never felt stupider than when he stood, watching the black box descend into the earth, and thrown the bouquet upon its top, as though littering the stage of an actor he'd particularly admired.

There wasn't anything dead for the lilies to memorialize, and the cold walk from that spot in the earth they had marked for him seemed unnervingly staged. Reginald did not make his way back to the house too quickly- the contrast from one contradictory fact to the next would have been too much for him to take- instead he wandered about on that dewy field and gave into the first impulse that passed through him. Animated by an idea, feeling like an empty vessel pulled by a taut string, he had paused and made his way into the lonely hillside church alone, trampling sweetly though the dark dew-covered grass.

He entered. He knelt beneath the saints, the red and gold an inverse of the black and silver heavens, candlelight reflecting off the gilding high above him, echoing stars. Saint Sebastian lay above him, a dais high, pierced by his arrows- the martyr's face was fixed in his divine agony, and his look was known to move the weaker-kneed to tears. Reginald had long ago dropped to his knees. He had already fallen and buried his head in his upturned palms. He had wept himself empty. He was waiting for a priest.

A sweet smell- the cloying scent of incense- and small, clicking footsteps heralded a movement that was not his own.

"Father," He called out, and his voice was a calm shadow of his desperation. "Father, have you come to help me?"

"I am here, my son." A figure decked in shadow answered with solemnity.

"I have seen an apparition." He began, turning his knees in the direction of the voice. "Well, I have witnessed it at work. It has inhabited my home for weeks- it tends to my house, it whistles and sits with my servants. I think-" His voice gave for a moment. "I think I know who it is. But I must help him find peace. Father, you must help me to help him."

"How may I aid you, my son?"

"Show me how a soul may find rest." He answered softly. "My knowledge of death is slim."

And with that the figure robed in black approached. He placed his hand upon Reginald's shoulder, and, under the white anguished gaze of St. Sebastian, frozen rolling in his misery, a whisper passed from his lips to Reginald's ear.

There was a heavy moment- the scent of incense suffocated the air, mixed with something else- and then Reginald stood bolt upright, took his coat in both arms, and fled.

He returned home with his tail between his legs. He had already been questioned by all reasonable authorities and left alone, how did he- but it hardly mattered.

The maid gave him a curious look as he threw open the parlor doors, tossed his coat on a nearby couch, and demanded chalk. When she left, he rolled up his shirtsleeves, and when she returned he sent her away.

Then he paced into the entryway. Two broad staircases led up to the second floor, and their stately curves dominated the room. Above them hung a chandelier, heavy and translucent, dazzling even in the low light. He looked up and took a long breath.

Then he ascended the stairs. When he reached the top, he balked. He knew the smooth railing had been dusted, and the floors scrubbed, and the offending rug thrown out, but he had still not walked this route since it had happened. Oddly, it had not been the bottom of the stairs that had made him cold and pale. He stared down that dark hall, and then crouched, and wrote a name on the bare floor. It felt as though he was writing with frozen fingers- in his grasp the chalk felt foreign, and his hands were numb. He turned away from the hall, his back prickling as though under some sinister, malicious gaze.

Slowly, resolutely, he proceeded down the stairs. He had not meant to so solemnly descend. Here was where the body had tumbled. The floor was clean. He bent and wrote the name, but backwards- his mind swam. The scent of blood was thick in the air. There was no great scream. The hall was dark.

"I know you're here." He whispered. There was no faint, distorted laughter. No familiar voice rang out.

"I'm trying." Reginald's voice broke. "I know all this is lunacy- it's all something I read in a book once- the chalk and all. I just wanted to test if I could see you again. Because I know what I have to do now."

There was no apparition at the top of the stairs.

"I'll do it one way or another." He spoke to the emptiness all around him. Then he rose his voice in anger. He shouted, his grief raw in his chest. "Show yourself!"

And the floor went red.

He had not meant it to be this way. But now the scent was thick in his mouth, metallic in the back of his throat, like swallowing lead. Where was his apparition? Nothing but hollow

footsteps.

“For God’s sake.” He whispered. “I just wanted to say it face to face.”

In the empty silence, a dark shadow fell upon the floor and Reginald’s heart leapt into his mouth.

He had never felt so close to death before. He was looking into the eyes of a friend.

“This is it.” He choked out. “You have to go.”

The question leapt to his mind. Why? The answer was there, staring him in the face, if he dared to look down. “You have to leave.”

Silence reigned.

“You can not stay.” He swallowed. “And I can make you go.”

There was a cold dripping noise coming from the bottom of the stairs.

“Please don’t make me make you.”

And still, the sought-after apparition did not walk to some white light and dissolve into the ether; instead, the black shoes that had paced clicking up the staircase darkened sharply as if digging in their corporeal heels. The ghost of a smile took up Reginald’s swimming vision. There could now quite clearly be seen two pale still-gloved hands hanging beside black tailcoats. They were slack, not curled into fists. There was no show of strain or effort. A slick bile rose up in Reginald’s throat.

“You know I did this to you.” Reginald burst. The soft seditious whisper in the church bore rotting fruit. “Why do you stay?”

The tumbling fall. A sickening, torrid struggle- a memory Reginald recoiled from, that could not be him, he would never- and a sinister laying of hands on shoulders. A push that felt like letting go. A series of blackened crunches of bone on polished marble, and the final crack of skull on wood. Like a doll being thrown to the floor by a vengeful child, he shattered loudly, but without so much as an off-color whimper. A kicked dog would have made more noise. He had been too shocked to scream.

Reginald could barely remember a single footstep taken, but he had found himself by the fallen’s side, kneeling by a broken arm, cradling a broken head. Reddish matter sticky on his fingertips, drawing gossamer connecting lines between them. The horror of it all was tangible- a thick presence in the air.

That was how they had found them, stuck in that scene of sickening intimacy- Reginald felt as if he had never moved.

"I sent you to your death." Reginald's insides felt empty. "Let me send you somewhere better."

A warped, high laugh broke out as if behind a closed and heavy curtain. Reginald realized, suddenly, the reason he had stayed.

The air was clouded with a thin film of dust, as soft as milk.

"Go." Came Reginald's desperate whisper. "I have admitted my guilt as was instructed. Leave me here in my grief."

"It's a curious form of suicide to kill that which serves you." There was no sound, in fact it felt as though all air had been sucked from the room, and yet the words seemed as clear as daylight to him. "But you can not rid yourself of me so easily."

If peering in through a keyhole, one could have seen a valet in black tails standing equal with his master, his shoulders squared with a gentle smile, his master with a face as pale as death.

A horrified whisper filled the empty entryway. "I beg you to leave me. I beg you to go."

But the cold persisted. The shame hit his face in a warm rush- no, it was not shame, it was more than that- it was years he had spent, dismissing and calling to his aid a body that was now shattered by his hand and buried unceremoniously six feet in the ground. It was quiet, peaceable neglect. It was the chilling notion that the correcting hand he had so often requested he no longer could banish away.

The gentle, persistent smile did not alter, but an inch or so away from his face it seemed it's meaning was now made clear. I had always been there, and now it would not leave.

"Is this my fate?" Reginald asked. There was a terrible, tremulous note in his voice, half strangled. "Is this to be my existence?"

The smile, unwavering, was now crystal clear even in this low light. There was nothing lost to haze, and not a hair out of place. The man that had sought perfection in life had found it in death. All graceful lines of that buried form were sharper now, somehow more pressingly present.

This was to be his lot in life. Reginald swallowed. A sick wonderment- if that were so, when again would he ever glimpse the tall frame that stood before him in black silk with tails? Would

the still white-gloved hands so plain before him now run up and down banisters and correct tipping teacups from behind that untouchable veil, unseen and unheard except for the stray sounds of crisply clicking footsteps and brief, distorted laughter? Reginald peered at the face before him, memorizing each line- there were only a few photographs in which he still existed, and only as a piece of background scenery. He was not scenery now.

But no- there would be more than that even if he now vanished, more than a few useless photographs and some fading footsteps. There was also the tune, burned now so clearly in his memory- an overly generous Christmas present, a too-warm declaration of friendship in which he had been too delighted and forgot his station- concert tickets. White gloved hands had moved with subtle longing over Reginald's first phonograph, and when Reginald asked after the infatuation, meaning to tease, he had found an encyclopedic knowledge of music at his disposal. That Christmas Reginald had handed him a slip of paper with obvious pride and accompanied him to seat worth three weeks of a valet's wages. His smile afterwards had been worth everything, but Reginald's skin still prickled at the memory- how stupid he had been, how utterly moronic, to let himself be seen that way.

He had talked of nothing but the concert for weeks on end! Reginald had never seen anyone so charmed. He had hummed snippets of symphonies while he worked. There had been no escaping any of it, and for a while, he hadn't even wanted to. The brightest star in recent memory- that was how he had described it, and Reginald was helpless but to agree. One refrain from that night stood out in the mind, and it was the one that came back to him faintly down the hall on winter nights, when he'd spent the day locked in his room pouring over papers and writing letters. Now it circled his mind and broke through the heavy veil with soft persistence when he mistakenly thought himself alone.

Reginald remembered the words he had said, before it had all come crashing down, and the body had hit the last step, and the stairwell had filled with red, and wondered why the tune still managed somehow to find him. Perhaps that was the most terrible thing- the kindness. Reginald looked into his eyes and knew he was deserving of far worse. It was indeed the most terrible thing, he decided, the clemency. The gentle smile. He met a dead gaze straight in the eyes and nodded softly. "I understand."

The cups in the house never broke again. Not once from

that fateful day onward did anything shatter, and the house was full of music. The phonograph- a newer model, which Reginald displayed proudly- never had the chance to gather dust. The walls swelled with warm concertos, and the evening cooled the rooms alongside heady, intoxicating nocturnes. Reginald slept peacefully in silence, if only ever interrupted by the only piece of music he never played. The candles were never left burning, and windows shut themselves. The rooms always stayed pleasant in the warmer months. But sometimes, when the wind blew wild and the master raised his voice, some nights you could hear something falling, tumbling wildly down the stairs.

Wilson Korges is a senior in History and Political Science who enjoys ghost stories, classical music, and studying dead kings.