

THE WHITE HOUSE

“**T**here is no poetry in death,” Mrs. Tanser said. “Only loss and rot, stink and waste. I never could understand those gothic romantics who celebrate the dark and lust after the cycle of decay.”

The little girl in front of her didn’t say a thing, but nodded creamy, unblemished cheeks as if she understood.

“I suppose that doesn’t make much sense to you,” Mrs. Tanser continued, running a powder-coated finger up the girl’s cheek. “You came here hoping to sell cookies and to visit my nieces, and here I am talking to you about death! But I can’t deny death, mind you. Everything has its place. And every place, its thing.”

The older woman laughed, and stood up from the table. Her plate of thinly sliced apples remained untouched, uneaten, the brown creep of time already shadowing the fruit. The girl’s plate, however glistened with the juice of apple long gone.

Mrs. Tanser ground a pestle into a tall bucket that squeaked and shifted on the counter as she worked.

“Well, I’m sorry my nieces Genna and Jillie aren’t here any longer. They only came for a visit, so I’m glad you got to meet them. Perhaps you’ll have the chance to be with them again soon. But I talk too much and time passes. Too fast, too fast. Eat my apples dear. Waste not, want not.”

The plate slid across the table. Mrs. Tanser raised a silver eyebrow as it did.

“You are afraid of this house, aren’t you?”

The child nodded, slowly. Her eyes were blue and wide, and the reflection of the older woman’s methodic grinding and pummeling of the substance in the bucket glimmered like a ghost in their mirror.

“I can’t say that I’m surprised. Quite the reputation it has. I didn’t realize that when I moved in, but now it makes sense what a steal it was. I knew there was something wrong when the realtor quoted me the price – you could see it in her face. She was afraid, that silly woman was, not that she knew why. A beautiful old mansion like this, perched on the top of the most scenic hill in town? I have to admit, I didn’t care what was wrong with it – for that price, I thought, I could fix it. And then I moved in, and started teaching down at Barnard Elementary, and I found out why that girl was scared. You know, she wouldn’t even walk into the house past the front foyer?”

Mrs. Tanser laughed. The pestle clinked against the top of the bucket, and a hazy cloud puffed from the opening like blown flour.

“The one warning that woman said to me was, ‘you know, it’s a bad place for children.’ I didn’t even ask why. “I don’t have any,” I told her. That shut her up. Or maybe it didn’t, I didn’t care. I walked up those gorgeous oak stairs that wind out of the living room and up to the boudoir. I wanted to see it all, with or without her help. She didn’t come with me.”

Mrs. Tanser stopped her grinding then and considered. “Would you like to see the upstairs?” she asked.

The little girl shrugged, and the older woman dropped the pestle.

“That settles it. Genna and Jillie aren’t here, but I can still show you the house. Come on upstairs. I’m going to show you the most beautiful four-poster bed your little eyes have ever seen. The girls loved it! It may be the only four-poster bed your little eyes have ever seen.”

The girl rose from the table, hands held straight at the sides of her red and green striped skirt. She wanted to leave, felt embarrassed that she’d been coaxed into staying somehow. Her freckles threatened to burst into flame as she waited for Mrs. Tanser to wash her hands in the sink.

“C’mon then,” Mrs. Tanser said at last, and led the girl back towards the front door she’d come in. Her backpack from school still lay abandoned on the floor nearby. Mrs. Tanser put a foot on the first varnished step, and then paused.

“What’s your name again then, young lady?”

“Tricia,” the girl answered, in a voice high as a flute song.

“Tricia,” Mrs. Tanser announced, waving at the crystal jewels of the chandelier above, and the burnished curves of the banister on the second floor landing above.

“Welcome to White House,” she said. “Welcome to the House of Bones.”

At the top of the landing, Mrs. Tanser stopped again. “This house was built in 1878 by Garfield White,” she announced. “I looked it up. He was a railroad man, made his living helping folks move their steel and wood and food and such from one place to the next. Why he settled here, in the middle of nowhere, I’ll never know, but there you go. Every thing has a place, and every place a thing. He built this place, and put his wife here in it to raise their son. Maybe he thought she’d give the boy a good upbringing here, away from the corruption and sin of the cities.”

Mrs. Tanser motioned the girl to follow her down the hall to the dark rimmed doorway of a room.

“That woman spent her time in here, so the stories go, day after day after day while her Garfield rode the rails making his fortune. He stayed out on those rails more and more, hoping maybe to gain his son an inheritance.”

The older woman stepped with a click and an echoey clack into the room. The walls were papered in a pattern of whirling pinks and blossomed yellows. But the garish sidelights did little to detract from the majesty of the enormous mahogany bed that dominated the center. Its rich posts rose from lion claw paws on the floor to taper in spears to within inches of the faded ceiling. A translucent gauze of yellowed lace hung between the posts and darkened the space with ghostly light.

“The more her husband stayed lost on the trains, the more his wife stayed lost here, in this very bed,” Mrs. Tanser said.

“Go ahead, sit on it yourself and see why!”

Tricia stepped into the room but stopped at the edge of the mattress, which was nearly as tall as her.

“Use the step,” Mrs. Tanser said, pointing to the dark wooden box near the girl’s feet. “In those days, you wanted to sleep as high above the ground as you could. Rats, you know.”

Tricia hopped up on the step with the mention of rodents, and rolled her body onto the heavy down mattress, smiling at the

caress of the silken blue comforter that covered it.

“They called it the White House, and not because it was in Washington, D.C.,” Mrs. Tanser said. “But it was anything but white inside. Mrs. White kept all of the drapes pulled shut, and spent more and more time here, in this bed. They say she was trying to make it feel like nighttime inside, so her son would sleep. Had the collick, and cried all day long. But pulling the drapes did nothing to calm the boy, and after awhile, Mrs. White went a little bit mad, I think. Day after day, night after night, her baby cried, cried and she paced this floor with him, pounding his tiny back and begging him to burp and then screaming at him to burp.”

Mrs. Tanser shook her head.

“That boy never saw that nest egg his father was out putting away. When Mr. White came back from one of his long trips down the rails, he found the house dark, and all the shutters pulled. I probably shouldn’t be telling you this, you being a young girl and all – but you’ve probably seen worse on TV. Oh the things they show on that tube.” Mrs. Tanser shook her head brows creased in dreadful sadness.

“When Mr. White came home that day, he walked up those same stairs you and I just did, and knew right away something was wrong. I won’t say more than this, but the smell was in the air, and he was no fool. He rushed to the bedroom and threw open this door and...”

Tricia’s eyes widened as the story unfolded.

“...when the light streamed into the pitch-black room, he found his wife and his son, here in the shadows. Only they were in no condition to leave. The poor boy was hung from his tiny neck right off of that pole there,” Mrs. Tanser pointed at the right pole at the foot of the bed. “Mrs. White had tried to quiet him by wrapping a sheet around his head – but when he didn’t quiet, she’d finally snapped. She hung him by his tiny neck like a Christmas ornament at the foot of the bed, and when he finally quieted, she laid down on the pillow and went to sleep. When she woke, and realized what she’d done, she took her own life, using her husband’s straight razor.

“If I took the sheets off this bed you could still see the marks of her blood. Nobody’s ever changed that mattress. She laid

down right there, where you are, and cut her self again and again and again until she couldn’t cut or scream anymore.”

Tricia leapt from the bed as if it had turned to a stove burner.

Mrs. Tanser grinned, wrinkles catching at the corner of her eyes like broken glass.

“She used that blade so much, they say she had to have a closed casket. Can’t imagine cutting your own face with a razor-blade myself, but, I can’t imagine hanging your own baby, neither!

“There’s a reason they started calling this place the House of Bones. But that came later. Mr. White kept this place for almost 30 years after his wife killed their son, and herself here. And he never remarried. In fact, he may have been dead for a year or more before the town grew the wiser. He was gone for long periods at a time on the railroad, and it was only when the spring winds brought a tree down on the west wing of the house that someone from the town realized it had been months and months since Mr. White had been seen. When they looked into it, they found out that he hadn’t been out on a rail for more than a year, and that’s when someone thought to look in the basement.”

Mrs. Tanser looked at the trembling girl and shook her head.

“I’m sorry, I’m scaring you. My home does not have a cheery history, I must admit. But it’s fascinating too, don’t you think?”

The old woman shook her head. “C’mon downstairs, and I’ll buy some of those Girl Scout cookies. A lady needs her vices, huh?”

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The doorbell rang. But there was no silhouette showing through the stained purple glass in the front door of White House.

Mrs. Tanser answered the ring, nevertheless, and smiled as she saw the pale features of the girl on the landing, shivering and yet waiting outside. So small, she couldn’t even send her shadow through the glass.

“Come in child,” she insisted. “You’ll catch your death of cold. I don’t believe your mother lets you go out like that in the fall chill.”