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The Shade

by Mary Brannigan

Instinct is a marvellous thing. It can neither be explained nor ignored. I wonder about this as I recall the time I did ignore it. The flat was just what I needed at that point, light and airy and above all cheap. I was beginning my studies for an English Degree. Money was going to be tight, so when Adrian said he was giving it up to go travelling I jumped at the chance to view it. His landlady, an elderly woman, lived on the ground floor. She had converted the upstairs to self-contained accommodation and let it out cheaply to afford her some companionship. To this end she was very fussy about the type of tenant she wanted. For reasons best known to herself she decided I would fit the bill.

As Winnie showed me around I took in the spacious living room and well fitted kitchen and bathroom. One bedroom was plenty for me, though she pointed out that the spare room could be used for overnight guests if I required it. As I entered this extra room it didn't appeal to me despite overlooking a well kept garden. I couldn't say why I disliked it, only that I felt uncomfortable as we looked around it. In fact, I felt the need to back out of it as soon as decently possible.

Still the rest of the flat was exactly what I needed in a nice quiet house for studying. So I put aside my misgivings about the spare room, thus ignoring my instincts this once. Winnie was very welcoming and I duly moved into number six Higher Drive.

One year later and all was working out well. The flat was reasonably close to college, and best of all Winnie turned out to be very good company when we met occasionally for coffee in the music room.

During the holidays in my second year at number six a friend called to visit on Christmas Eve. We shared a bottle of very good wine and as it grew late Peter wondered if he could spend the night, before going to his parents on Christmas Day. Time to take up Winnie's offer to use the spare room. At around 1am my friend retired to bed and I wished him a good night's sleep. I slept very well, due no doubt, to the excellent wine. As we compared notes next morning, Peter said he'd had his worst night's sleep ever, being plagued by nightmares till dawn. I recalled my discomfort in the room at the initial viewing, but dismissed it as coincidence.

The next time I thought about it was around a month later. Being very tired, I'd gone to bed early and was just drifting off to sleep when a dark shadow appeared on the wall opposite my bed. Terrified, I sat bolt upright hoping it was a trick of the light. But no, it grew even darker. That's when I started to pray. I was not very religious but something from my Catholic childhood kicked in. I found myself saying the Lords Prayer. I don't know how long the shadow lasted but it went eventually. As I lay back down a thought flashed through my mind 'it's from the spare room and it's connected to Winnie's father'. Being of a sceptical nature, I put this down to imagination and tried to sleep. But to no avail. When dawn broke I was still wide awake.

From that night on I felt the same unease throughout my flat that I'd had in the spare room. It was weeks before I felt safe going to bed. At last, summoning up my courage, I asked Winnie if anyone had died in the unused room.

"Oh, only daddy," she replied. I kept my own counsel at her answer, but never went to sleep before sending up a silent prayer. I managed to stay at number six till my degree was complete.

During this time Winnie became very frail and was admitted to a nursing home. This left me alone in the house during the year it took to sell it. I baulked at the idea of being on my own in the place. But the strange thing was that the atmosphere lightened imperceptibly on the day she left. As the weeks passed the house felt increasingly peaceful and I was never disturbed again. The people who bought it commented on the lovely cheery atmosphere almost as soon as they stepped inside.