

Don't

by Vincent Paiement Désilets

I'm writing this with two remaining fingers, one dead friend, and three decades of regrets, loathing, and pain. You'll never read it—there's no such thing as time travel—but consider this a therapeutic exercise. A hopeless shot at inner peace, at settling the past. I've tried many times to write this. Must be my fiftieth attempt. I'd burst into tears, I'd shake for hours, I'd get lost in a confusing mist of memories, bite my cheeks until they bled. One night, I slit my wrists and soaked my sheet with blood.

You're young, healthy—you feel like nothing can kill you. Not only is it far from the truth, but you'll learn there are things worse than death. Things you never thought possible. You can't find them in science books and newspapers, but they exist. And they hurt. They ruin your life. This is the advice you never got.

Do *not* go into the deserted house on Willow Street that resembles a *burnt club sandwich* as you put it, with the roof that rises in the middle where starts the crack that divides the house like a huge, badly healed scar full of splinters and protruding nails, from roof to front porch, slicing through shades of brown, rust red, moldy green.

You're gonna enjoy the thrill, that's understandable. Anything seems like an escape from that boring suburban life. And you'll want to impress that girl. That's understandable too. But if you had known, before setting foot in that house, what would happen to her...

You'll do it anyway, of course. As in those horror films you like so much. You won't think twice before opening the door, with the broken lock that almost feels like an invitation. Or a trap. You'll wonder if it was a mistake, though, just a fraction of a feeling, right after you step

inside. You'll hope she didn't notice your hesitation. She would have mocked you, or worse, would have remained silent but labeled you a coward.

The first thing that will hit you is the smell. *Sour* is the word that will come to mind. Later, you'll find out the thing that took over the house is territorial. Very territorial. That smell is just one of the ways it lets you know that.

You two will prowl on the creaking wooden floor, survey dusty artifacts, intriguing vestiges of a life that once was, in the feeble moonlight, under the spell of the mood. You will revel in the forbidden feeling of the adventure, but glance back at every noise, then nervously giggle about it.

Don't go downstairs. And if you do, bring a weapon. But you won't. Watch out for the second to last step. It will break under your weight, and a shrill gurgle will answer you from the darkness of the basement. Don't bother with the light switch. It won't work.

As you'll step on the floor, you'll think you're walking on grass. Sticky, humid grass that will wet the soles of your shoes. The smell will be stronger than anywhere else in the house. Something will entice you to keep going, against instinct or reason, because you hate to leave things unfinished, places unexplored, mysteries unsolved.

She'll brush against your arm, walk past you, and that will bother you, but you'll also be relieved. You'll no longer be first. She will hold her lighter in front of her until the flame burns her thumb and forces her to let it die and light it again. Her face will turn toward you, in an orange glow, with dark shadows under her eyes. That's the last time you'll see her face.

The shrill will come again, this time harsher. You'll understand, right then, that it is its house. You'll both jump. She'll drop the lighter. You'll hear her pat the floor, search for it. She'll

scream. Something warm and wet will splash your face, and you'll know it's blood. Hers. You'll kick around, try to hit something. To help. Don't try.

Hold your breath. The smell will daze you, burn your nostrils and your eyes.

The thing will wrap itself around your arm. And squeeze. You'll punch it, try to take it off. Your mind will fail to make sense of what it is. You'll get a mental image of a worm, then a caterpillar. But you'll know it's something no one has ever laid eyes on. A parasite born into that house, that grew, that nested there. Your punches will weaken as the pain intensifies. Stop. If you keep going, your hand will enter its mouth and the teeth will snap on your wrist. You'll lose your hand. The thing will squeeze, cut the blood flow in your arm. Juice will run down your skin and scorch the flesh. You'll lose most of your fingers on your remaining hand.

What you want to do is bang it on the wall. The one on your right. You won't have the strength to swing your arm, but tackle with your hips. Use your weight to squeeze it against the concrete. Something on that wall will hurt it enough to make it lose its grip. Maybe a nail or a broken piece of wood.

Run. Don't look back. You'll see nothing, anyway. You'll slip on juice or blood or both and fall face down. Push yourself back up, quick. You'll be losing a lot of blood.

Keep running. Don't think about her. She's dead. Get out of the house without looking back. Don't think about her. Don't think about her smile or the day you met or the good times you'll never share with her. Don't think about the thing. When you'll wake up in sweat, when you'll still smell the stench or feel the burn or get tingles in your ghost hand, numb your mind. Drink, take drugs, watch movies, anything. But don't think about it.

You'll want to go back and burn down the house, but you'll never muster up the courage. Good. Don't go back there. Forget about the thing and what happened. You never will.