

LAST HOUSE ON APPARITION ROW

By

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A short story

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All that I really knew was that I was riding in the back of an ambulance, the sirens were blaring and I was injured. How bad I was injured I couldn't say. I was drifting in and out of consciousness. How it all happened was a point of contention I cannot recall. Strangely enough, while I did not remember the circumstances of the accident - did I say accident? It must have been an accident. Or how else did I get here, in the condition that I was? I did remember what I was doing before the accident, but whether it was seconds before, minutes before, hours before or even days before was largely a point of contention in my mind that I had yet to resolve.

What I was doing was what I did most every Sunday morning when the weather afforded. I was taking a spin in my Rolls Royce. It was not what you think. I was not a millionaire and my Rolls didn't set me back an arm and a leg. I bought it out of a classic car catalogue. It was a 1958 Silver Cloud. The photo instantly caught my eye. Something from a bygone era, a gilded age, aristocratic, opulent,. I liked that sort of stuff. I didn't know why. I was far from aristocratic or opulent. In fact I was the essence of modesty - modest home, modest bank account, modest lifestyle. Anyway, we decided to make the one-hour trip to Lindenhurst to check out the '58 Silver Cloud pictured in the ad. I brought my wife along in case we did buy it. She could drive our car back. She thought all along that it was an extravagance we could do without.

When we got there the Rolls was sitting majestically in the driveway in what I would consider a humble neighborhood, probably built before the war. I got out and gave it the once over. She sure was a beauty, two-toned, silver and black. I opened the driver side door and checked out the interior. Nothing stood out as being a problem, but problems don't always come with a neon sign. I thought to myself I just might be paying more for this baby than I bargained for.

From around the corner a voice spoke enthusiastically, "You must be Sanford Collier."

I said yes. We shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. We danced the dance for a while,

him not wanting to move off his asking price of \$18,000 and me pointing out minor flaws as if they were major problems, and offering \$12,000. In full disclosure he pointed out two mechanical problems he knew about. In full disclosure I told him I wouldn't be driving it that much. This would be a cream puff second car never to be driven for business or during the winter months. We dickered back and forth and finally settled on \$16,500 cash. My wife rolled her eyes and then drove our car back home. True to form the Rolls broke down on the ride back. Piston rods. I couldn't complain. She's been a good car ever since and the stares and double takes I got were priceless, as they say.

All that being said, I was in my Rolls, on a Sunday morning, poking around the seaside communities of Shore Point, Mistletoe and Hedge Grove looking for whatever caught my eye in the line of real estate. I was an investor, or at least that was what I fancied myself as. Actually much of my income came from a meager trust fund and some inheritance money. I dabbled in real estate, but in recent years turning over a property for profit had become a real challenge - low prices, flooded market and too many guys chasing the same rainbow. It was a game like everything else and those who play it best - by hook or by crook - came out on top. Anyway, it wasn't the same any more. I must confess that since I lost my wife last year my focus in life has dropped a notch. I still have a zest for living but without a partner it was harder to set a goal, and, if achieved there was nobody to celebrate with. In the past, after a sale, Catherine and I would throw a party with our friends, and just to impress, have it catered. Now, because one thing had changed, everything had changed.

She was just forty-four, three years my junior. We met in college then went our separate ways then reconnected at the wedding of a mutual friend. We seemed to complement each other. We gravitated toward the same lifestyle, mainly the country club lifestyle. We had a daughter, Beth. She was eighteen. She was still in a state of denial, not that her mother was gone but what that

meant for her life going forward. Come to think of it so was I, in denial. I just had given her a low-key graduation party and now she was on her way off to college where if nothing else a change of scenery would do her good.

We lived in a modest house in the seaside town of Bright Haven. I actually inherited the house from my mother and spent my high school years living there. Its most salient feature was a third floor attic, which was a guest bedroom, but now I use as my office. From the window, which we had enlarged, you could see Katchamaget Bay. Not many houses one mile from the ocean could boast that.

All the memories aside, on this particular Sunday morning I found myself in the shoreline community of Mistletoe. I looked up and saw a street sign that read Apparition Row. I didn't recall ever being on that street before. I didn't even know there was a street called Apparition Row. I figured, what the heck. Why not? So I turned right on Apparition Row. The first sign that confronted me was a sign that read, "No Exit." What else was new? I kept on driving. I knew the ocean was on the left and buffeted the back yards of all these houses. But as I continued down the road I realized there were no houses on this road, only mansions, or at the very least, estates, all with gated entrances and most with names like Whispering Wind or Heaven's Balcony or Stone Crest. That was when you knew you had arrived, when your house came with a gate and a name, as if a few idle million in the bank didn't already alert you. Anyway, I continued on, another mansion, another cockamamie name. And, another sign warning everybody, "No Exit." That was rich folk speak. Translation: Get the hell out of here while you still can. I wasn't intimidated. I kept motoring along in my Rolls. At least I looked like I belonged in this neighborhood. I came across a pair of deer feeding not far from the road. They looked at me as if to say, 'another day, another Rolls,' and kept on feeding. Then the road seemed to end and a cobblestone surface appeared. Was I in somebody's driveway? I kept going forward, looking for

a place to turn around when I spotted a gate up ahead. I pulled up beside the gate, no number just the name Fillmore. Beyond the gate a house rose up, which certainly qualified for the word mansion. It looked grandiose in every way except the yard looked like it hadn't been tended to in months, maybe years. No for sale sign but I decided to get out and have a look around anyway.

I thought to myself nobody could be living here so what would be the harm in looking around? There was a small pile of trash outside the gate. Kids probably. Maybe future honeymooners. Vandals maybe? I walked up to the gate and noticed it was ajar. That was my cue to enter. Just then I looked down and noticed a business card. I picked it up. It was a real estate card. It read, Halpern Associates, Colleen Henley, agent. And her number. Maybe it was for sale or about to be for sale. I stuck the card in my pocket and walked up the cobblestone driveway - full of branches, twigs and leaves - towards the house. I decided I would try knocking on the front door first. Then a second time only louder. Nothing. I turned the doorknob. It was locked. I repeated myself at the side door. Same result. I stood back and gazed at the house for a minute. It was certainly built to stand the test of time. The lower half was constructed of what looked to be brownstone blocks the size of cinder blocks. The upper half had an applied stucco in between vertical boards, Tudor style. Some of the windows had this crisscross wire mesh behind the glass. I'm not sure what the idea behind that was but I had seen it before on houses. Security maybe? I decided to keep walking around the house and see where my footsteps would lead me. They led me to the back yard, which had been undoubtedly manicured in its day but now was in a grand state of disorder. The two Golden Chain Trees seemed almost ashamed to be in blossom but the wisteria climbing the flagpole seemed to laugh it all off. There was a row of narrow pointed trees off to the east, possibly marking the property's boundary. The center of attraction was a large cement oval water fountain with stone inlaid, now drowning in murky water. Rising from its center was a copper gargoyle. But overshadowing everything was the view of the bay

and the sound of water lapping the shore. I decided to plow my way through the waist high grass to get to the water. As the grass ended I looked out across the bay. There, staring back at me was Jessup Island, which I was very familiar with and which I had visited many times in the past. I was trying to recall the last time I was there. It must have been ten years or more ago. In the foreground there was a small sailboat tied to a cement mooring. Maybe somebody lived here after all. I looked around and there on my right was a loveseat hidden in the tall grass. How serendipitous. I've never met a loveseat facing the ocean that I didn't want to take advantage of, so I walked over, planted myself down and contemplated the beauty of my surroundings, and, my next move.

I got to thinking, I had been around a lot of houses and most people leave an emergency key on the outside in case they get locked out. People get very creative where they put their emergency key. If they can get creative so can I, so I headed back to the house and the side entrance door. I don't know what gave me the right to try to enter this house. It was a private residence on private property and for all I knew somebody could be waiting for me on the inside or outside, and gun me down as a trespasser, and be well within their rights to do so. Nevertheless, I persevered on. I had it in my mind that maybe I had found a diamond in the rough, and if I could somehow buy it, it would be the highlight of my career. But even in its shabby state it was probably well beyond my price range. Still, I had to know what it looked like on the inside.

I began my search where the carport ended and underneath the portico style roof that connected to the house and the side door. I spent the better part of five minutes combing the vertical surfaces with no luck. I even looked under the doormat. Nothing. Then I stared at the nameplate, Fillmore. The L in Fillmore had an almost indiscernible fissure along its side. I pulled it back. Voila. Pay dirt. I reached inside, removed the key, inserted it in the lock, turned the key

and opened the door. I listened for an alarm. There was none. I had just passed go.

The Fillmore mansion was nothing if not dark. You see, apparently it had no electricity. Could the power company have cut them off for failure to pay their bill. That, to my way of thinking, was unfathomable. But the fact remained there were no lights. There was just enough ambient light from the outside to find the kitchen light switch and I flicked it without any results. I went to another room with the same result. Oh well, old houses and candles seem to go together. Maybe I could find a candle and match.

I wandered from room to room and took a panoramic look around. The rooms were large, the ceilings were high and the floors were wood, with undoubtedly expensive area rugs. And, the house was furnished. Either somebody was living there or had been recently living there. I found a room with an antique secretary and opened the glass top door and found a three-stick candleholder with candles. Down below I opened the swing out door and in one of the compartments found matches. Presto, light. Yes, this place was about as grandiose as I have ever seen: chandeliers, embroidered valances, drapery down to the floor, paintings, Victorian age furniture, inlaid paneling. Everything a millionaire could want. Oh yes, and one other detail: a statue of a cat in every room. Some were, I guessed, bronze and others were ceramic. Some were a foot high, others three or four feet high. It seemed somebody had a thing for cats. Not the worst obsession.

I counted seven rooms on the first floor, not counting the enclosed patio off the living room. What a view of the bay except for that protruding gargoyle from the water fountain. And last was the hall and stairs leading to the second floor. Foyer was probably a better name in mansion parlance. I'm not sure if it was the carved newel post, the ornate spindles, the solid mahogany handrail, the floral wallpaper, the double wide stairs or the large painting of Richard the lion-hearted (actually I wasn't sure who he was) but the whole scene was a smorgasbord for the eyes.

I glided, I mean walked up the stairs to arrive on a large landing with an oversized floor-to-ceiling window with a spectacular view of the bay, and a settee just waiting for somebody to take a load off, which I did. Suddenly, my cell phone was vibrating. It was my daughter, Beth, texting me that she wanted to spend the night at Celia's place. I would have to think about that one. Celia was her best friend. Anyway, I sat back and thought about what I would do next. I was in someone's house, illegally, sitting comfortably on their settee looking out at the bay and waiting for a man with a pistol to come out of nowhere and end my delirium, or a ghost to show up and scare me out of its private sanctuary. Seriously, this place even if it were a fire sale was light years beyond my price range. That being said, before I even checked out the upstairs rooms, I decided to pull out the real estate card in my pocket and call Colleen Henley and see if she knew what was up with the property.

A youthful voice answered. She confirmed my suspicions. The house was not for sale. It was in probate and by law could not be sold until it cleared probate. It belonged to the late Margaret Fillmore and now her son Peter was her sole heir. She went on to say that she spoke with Peter and as soon as her estate cleared probate he would be putting the property up for sale. She was hoping to get the listing. It had been appraised at 3.7 million but Peter was looking for a quick sale. She would like to show me the property but she didn't have the listing yet and that would be a breach of ethics. She had never been inside the house but heard that it was magnificent. Little did she know where I was presently situated. Just then, out of the corner of my eye, somebody had entered the back yard along the beach. I thanked Colleen and told her I would be in touch.

I rushed downstairs and outside and confronted a slim young lady who looked to be about thirty years old or more wearing a tank top and jeans. I said to her, "Excuse me, can I help you?"

She replied, "Who are you?"

I thought for a moment and said, "I'm the... caretaker."

She brushed the long, straight dark brown hair from her eyes and questioned, “Caretaker?”

I walked up to her and introduced myself to her.

“Hi, I’m Sanford Collier. As you can see the property needs some... sprucing up. The son, Peter, thought it might be a good idea.”

She said her name was Sarah and that she lived two houses up. She came here often and took the sailboat out for a sail. Peter said it was okay. We struck up a conversation. The next thing I knew she asked me if I wanted to go sailing with her. I blurted out yes before I thought it through. There were two life jackets in the bow and she insisted we wear them.

Once out on the water she told me she was staying with her folks until she got her life back together. I didn’t press her any further. She asked me if I was up for a trek out to Jessup Island? She seemed like she knew what she was doing and I agreed. I told her about a dockside restaurant on the island called Frankie’s. His specialty was... at that point she finished my sentence, “Lobster roll.”

“So you have heard of it,” I replied.

She said, “Yeah, only Frankie is retired. His daughter now runs the place.”

The *Ida Blue*, as Sarah called her, tooled surprisingly well across the water and we arrived dockside at Frankie’s none the worse for wear. I watched as she adroitly carried out her docking procedures. Something about her captured me. I admit I was smitten. We enjoyed a lobster roll lunch and ice cream for dessert. I chose strawberry. She chose raspberry. All my treat.

On the return trip back I prodded her for more information on Peter Fillmore without sounding too inquisitive for a ‘caretaker.’ All she would say was that he had tax problems and that the IRS would probably be grabbing most if not all of his inheritance. We pulled up on shore.

She tied the sailboat to the mooring, turned and said, “Thanks for a fun time. Maybe we can

do it again,” and waved goodbye as she traced the shoreline back to her house. I wondered if I would ever see her again.

Then I started to feel the vibrations increase as I suddenly realized that I was on an ambulance ride to the hospital. Now fully connected to reality, the medics ushered me out of the ambulance and into the hospital.

I was now in the emergency room curiously staring back at a police officer of all people.

The officer spoke, “May I see your ID.”

I fumbled for my wallet and when it didn’t come out quickly the officer reached in and took out my wallet, opened it up, looked at my driver’s license, then at me and said, “John Dern, you are hereby under arrest for staging an automobile accident for the express purpose of collecting insurance money. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be held against you in a court of law.”

Blah, blah, blah... I heard it all before. Yeah, I was John Dern. Yeah, I had a rap sheet. But what I wanted to know was, who the hell was Sanford Collier?

THE END.