

Frontiers of Terror

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Edited by
Bruce R. Gebweiler



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FIRST EDITION

This book is dedicated to my sisters, Taylor Gebweiler and Beth Gebweiler Stehno, who also love fiction and have encouraged me through the years to follow my dream. This book is also dedicated to my father, John A. Gebweiler, Jr. M. D., for helping to make Marietta Publishing a reality and who always inspired me to never give up.

INTRODUCTION

Horror is many things to many people. To some it brings to mind a raging madman with a large kitchen knife, or a noisy poltergeist throwing objects around a house in the middle of the night. Perhaps the horror of war and starvation, or the creature created in a hidden laboratory. Horror is many things. You could take two authors and give them the same plot and they would turn out two very different stories. We each have a unique perspective on what is horrible.

This is a collection of eighteen horror stories, written from very different points of view. The authors take you into their own picture of what is horror. I think you'll enjoy the ride.

As an editor and a publisher, I receive many stories from authors. Some are great. Most submissions are poorly written, or aren't original enough to make it into a book. At Marietta Publishing, I have published single author collections by Bill Walker, Tom Piccirilli, and Jeffrey Thomas, as well as themed collections such as the Dark Dixie series and New Mythos Legends. Over the years you build up a group of stories that you want to publish, but they don't fit a particular theme or niche in the genre. This is such a book. It covers horror from one end to the other with some surprising stops in-between. This tome is for the horror lover—the reader who loves it all and can't get enough of it.

For those of you who are not familiar with Marietta Publishing, we now have two web sites. They are www.stillwatersjournal.com and www.marietapublishing.com. Stillwatersjournal.com is a web magazine with fiction stories and non-fiction columns; marietapublishing.com has a bookstore that sells all of our products. We've been around since 1996 and we look forward to serving your cutting-edge fiction needs for years to come. Our permanent snail mail address is Marietta Publishing, PO Box 3485, Marietta, GA 30061-3485. If you go into your local bookstore to order one of our books, our distributor's are Ingram Book Distributors and Baker & Taylor Book Group. Please order directly from us at our web site for our limited edition chapbooks and books. Good old snail mail works as well for ordering.

My thanks go out to all the writers who were so patient with me while this book was being put together and to James Shimkus, Byron White, Allen Tower, Janiene West and Rowanne Moore for their help.

Happy Nightmares,
Bruce Gehweiler
January, 2002

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HOUSEBOUND

BRIAN McNAUGHTON

The children were more than usually fretful on the morning after Herb Wood murdered his wife.

“Where’s Mommy?” Heather said.

“I told you. I have told you five times.” He pounded the table. The wooden spoon in his hand pinched his palm. The sound was unsatisfactorily soft, not at all the brisk call to order he had intended, but the children winced. “She’s gone away for a while. She’ll be back.”

“She can’t just go away.”

“This isn’t like Mommy’s cereal,” the boy said.

Herb lacked patience with the children, but Laurel had been a buffer. “Can’t you give them something quiet to do?” he would say, or, “Isn’t it time they were in bed?” Now that he was a single parent, they were stuck with one another. He would have to try harder.

“You go out,” Heather said, “but Mommy never dies.”

He shot her a terrified glance that she returned with mild curiosity. *Does* she had said, of course, Mommy never *does*.

“Now you’ll have to stay home!” the boy said, and they both laughed piercingly.

It made no sense. He was too preoccupied with his poor health and mental lapses (What was his son’s name?) to be much of a father, yet they begrudged him the time he spent away. So had Laurel. She would fuss over him at the door, telling him he looked tired, urging him to go upstairs and lie down, claiming it was too wet or cold or hot to go out. After all, she would say, what was there to do?

What, indeed? He would walk along the towpath of the disused canal, cross the river on the decaying railroad trestle and thread his way among the ruins of the mills to the town common, where he would sit or stroll before going into the library to read. Sometimes he would try to take out a book, but he would be reminded that this was no longer permitted. He had a way of mislaying books.

Today, for once, he had a purpose. “No, I have to go out. I’ll get Mrs. Fox to look after you.”

He had risen from the table and was halfway out of the kitchen before he said that, knowing it would stir up a fuss. They screamed after him. He refused to look back, even when Heather shrieked that Sylvester (of course!) had dumped his cereal on the floor.

In the central hallway he furtively tried the cellar door. It was locked. He fumbled in his pocket to make sure he had the key. Like all the keys it was large and clumsy, as if made by someone who had eavesdropped on a locksmith. Laurel never tired—*bad* never tired, he corrected himself—of calling their house unique.

He glanced toward the kitchen, where the children had already quieted down. Heather stroked the table as if to soothe the inanimate wood, which seemed to mean more to her than her own father’s injury. He inspected the nip he had given himself with the spoon. He was sure he had drawn blood, but his hand was unmarked. It looked puffy, though, almost malformed. Time could have blurred its veins and sinews, made remembered freckles fade and hairs fall out, or perhaps he merely needed glasses to see its details,

but he blamed the house. Pesticides had poisoned the well, lead had leached from the pipes, the walls leaked asbestos, or microwaves from a nearby transmitter were jellifying them all: he had nursed each of these worries. Newspapers advised him that some houses trapped a deadly gas that percolated from the earth, and this was now his fondest fear.

Whatever the reason, his hands looked unwholesome. He lacked energy. He slept poorly. Sexual desire was a memory, and his memory lay in ruins. His teeth felt soft.

The children, too, had a pale and lumpish look. They ought to get out, they should be in school—Heather should, anyway, he was almost certain of that, but he knew nothing of such matters. Whenever he mentioned that subject to Laurel, she would change it. He could ask Mrs. Fox, but it would embarrass him to admit ignorance of his daughter's exact age, and hunting for her birth certificate would be useless. Nothing made of paper lasted long here. Although he had never found a trace of them, he suspected mice.

Heather would raise hell, of course. Setting foot outside the door, for everyone but him, was like being expelled from paradise. What did they do all day? He supposed that other kids watched cartoons, but his scorned television.

He had picked off an old scab. Everybody had television, everybody but them, and he had expected to be greeted as a hero when he lugged the unwieldy box into the house on Christmas Eve. For all the enthusiasm they showed, you would have thought he had brought home a drum of industrial sludge and dumped it on the rug. He felt as if he had committed a gross breach of taste that no one was rude enough to explain.

He himself had known, as soon as it was out of the box, that it looked wrong here: hard and sharply angular in a soft and rounded setting, a glittery intrusion of glass and plastic in an organic gloom. But it was the house that was wrong, not the set, the skewed house where no floor was level, no wall plumb, no angle flush. It sagged, it bulged, it quivered to every footfall, it throbbed and sweated. At night he felt it breathe, although reason told

him that he felt only his own breathing; for when he stopped, the house stopped.

The television set no longer sat in geometric judgment on the living room. No one had ever watched it. Like the locks, the electrical outlets were unique, and he had found no socket that would take its plug.



They thought it was easy for him to squeeze out under the tall sky, jangling with sunlight and wind. It was too big, too bright, too vivid. Nevertheless he held a firm conviction that it was good to get out, even if he had nowhere to go. Stagnating: he often told Laurel they were doing that, and although he had never met her challenge to explain what was wrong with stagnating, he tried to resist the process. He maintained contact with the world for all of them, bringing home odds and ends to tantalize or educate. He brought newspapers for Laurel, books for the kids. Sometimes he would happen upon a person who seemed at loose ends, whom he would invite home in the hope of enlivening their table talk. Laurel ignored the papers, the children glanced politely at the books before the mice got to them, and none of the guests ever said or did a single memorable thing.

Killing Laurel had been only the first step, and it was absurd for him to balk at the next one, a literal step through his front door. Even though his feet seemed like gnarls that had never been planed from the floorboards, he summoned up the strength to pop them free and lurch forward.

He breathed easier when he had hurried through the patch of naked sunlight beyond the door and found shelter in the woods. The dim damp comforted, the soft rot evoked his living room rug. Lying in bed at night he would sometimes sink to a level just beneath wakefulness, where he was no longer a man named Herb who lay beside a woman named Laurel in a protective box they called a house, but where he was the house itself, containing the Woods in the same unthinking way a person contains a pancreas or

pineal gland. In starlight or rain or snow he would be equally snug in the shadow of the pines, content to stay as he was for a hundred years or a thousand, thinking thoughts as complex and strange as the memorandums bats jotted on the face of the moon.



He came to the Foxes' yard, bare earth littered with toys and the rusted shells of automobiles. A skinny dog watched him mount the porch and tap on the screen door.

A woman with a baby in her arms hurried to hook the door against him. Mother and child asserted a clarity of outline that Herb knew he lacked, suggesting bronze statuary to his botched clay. He was glad the sun was behind him.

“Good morning, Mrs. Fox, I—”

“Miz Fox long gone. Where you been?”

Although he had forgotten, he supposed that Mrs. Fox had been black, too, and that explained this woman's hostility: she thought he could see only skin color. In fact his memory was so bad that he would have greeted any woman who answered this door as Mrs. Fox. He wanted to explain, but he doubted she would believe him.

He said, “I live nearby—”

“I know that.”

A little boy came to the door, goggled at Herb, and screamed, “Mama!” She swatted him and he disappeared. She said, “You got a way with dogs. Killer don't like strangers.”

Killer sat placidly beside him, gazing into the yard. He could have told her that animals generally ignored him, but this was the closest she had come to a friendly word, so he smiled and bobbed his head. He thought of petting the dog, but decided not to push his luck.

A girl in pigtails peeked from the shelter of the woman's skirt. She hid when he wagged his fingers at her.

“Mrs. Fox used to watch our kids sometimes. I have to go to town, and I wondered.... I can pay you.”

She shrugged. “Bring’em on over.”

“Mama, you done gone crazy?” The girl ducked skillfully as she spoke. Her mother’s hand swished above her head.

He almost laughed aloud at the thought of dragging the children so far from home. He said, “I thought you might come to my place and babysit for...” He drew a blank and improvised: “Sorrel and Holly. Bring your own kids, they could play together.”

She turned and raised her hand sharply before the boy and the girl could begin to protest, and perhaps they screamed less vehemently than they might have, but the baby began to cry.

“I wouldn’t go there.” She spoke loudly, so her children could hear. She bounced the baby to soothe it, but she only imposed a jarring syncopation on its shrieks. “You say Martha Fox done watch these childrens of yours? How old they be?”

“You know. Kids.” He gestured over Killer’s head to suggest his best recollection of their height. He snatched his hand back when the dog barked, but it was threatening a jay across the yard. Her question had discomfited him more than the dog. Shrugging and smiling, he backed down the steps, and he tried to forestall further questions with one of his own: “What became of Mrs. Fox?”

“Up and went, that’s all. I ‘spect the woods got to her.”

She slammed the door loudly and locked it. He overheard a spirited discussion. Killer whined and scratched at the door.

He breathed deeply of the moist and fecund air as he walked downhill toward the canal. That the woods might upset someone was so novel a thought as to be almost beyond comprehension until it struck him that she might have meant his family: the Woods. He dismissed the fancy.



The real estate lady, Mrs. Cutler, was the cleanest person Herb had ever seen. She looked as if someone had just scrubbed her with a stiff brush, clothes and all. Her remorseless grin bulged her cheeks like wax apples. Each brass hair had been buffed before being twisted into its allotted spot in the confection that crowned her.

Like a prisoner trapped by a searchlight, he was revealed to himself by her radiance. He saw that his pants were dirty, his shoes mottled and shapeless. He knew that his hair and beard blended into his brown jacket like a mold thriving erratically on his head and torso. He felt compelled to brush and pick, even though this drew attention to all his smuts and blotches, and to the pulpy grubs that were his fingers.

Mrs. Cutler was reluctant to leave her office unattended, but he had set her commercial juices flowing. Even this far from the city, she said, and whatever its condition, the house he described—old, quaint, unique—on a wooded site might bring ten times what he had paid for it.

He had no idea what that might have been. Words like deed, title and mortgage rattled around his head like ball bearings in a puzzle without holes. Tilt and jiggle his memory though he would, he found no image of such documents. They must once have existed, like his daughter's birth certificate and those embarrassing library books, but they, too, had probably gone to feed the mice.

The problem would solve itself if only he could get her moving, but she seemed content to sit and talk while waiting for a colleague to come back from lunch. For him, sitting here was torture. The contoured chair bore no relation to the contour of his back, and he had to grip it painfully to keep from sliding out. Compelled to pick at briars and smudges on his pants, he would let go now and then, catching himself only just in time to wriggle upright. His manner plainly disturbed her, but her grin blazed on.

He was hungry, too, after a long walk on an unfinished breakfast, so hungry he could hardly think about the business at hand. He had lost his wallet long ago, but he hoped he might have change for a candy bar. He tried to search himself, without releasing his grip on the chair, by pressing

his pockets against his flanks and thighs with his elbows. Mrs. Cutler pretended not to notice this new sequence of spasms. The search ended when he felt the shape of a key and was struck by the fear that the children might find a way into the cellar and discover their mother's corpse.

He told Mrs. Cutler that he could stay here no longer, he was desperate to sell, he would find someone else who would be willing to look at his house now, this minute. He stood.

He had blundered onto just the right line to take with her. Occupied with brushing lint and pine needles and nameless bits from his clothes to her beige carpet, he found her following him. He combed his hair with his fingers, even though some of it came loose and floated to the floor.

When she suggested he lead the way in his car, and he told her he had no car, her grin faltered. An American without a car was a kind of criminal. He avoided walking on the highways, where drivers would honk at him just to draw his attention to their mocking grimaces or obscene gestures. Overtaking a column of their glittery tin shells at a red light, he would be shamed by the thunk-thunk-thunk of lock-buttons as they protected themselves from a distasteful pedestrian.

Her grin snapped back as she led him to a vehicle as clean and shiny and metallic as her own hair and teeth and eyes. She opened all the windows and sat as far from him as the demands of steering would permit. He was not offended, because he was used to provoking similar reactions in the library and on public benches, but he was saddened by his inability to deserve better. He was selling his house, though, and the house was the problem. Soon he could move the kids into a new apartment that he would maintain spotlessly. He would get a haircut. He would see a doctor. He would shower every day. He would jog.

Following his directions, Mrs. Cutler at last stopped at the side of a dirt road.

"The driveway is—?" She made vaguely circular gestures.

"No driveway." He smiled. "No car."

“Quaint, yes, but the nearest supermarket must be ten miles away. How do you get food?”

“You’ll have to ask my wife.” The mention of food had distracted him. He hastened to add: “But she’s away just now.”

“Oh?” She insisted that he lead the way into the woods.

It was a good question: if Laurel never went out, where did the groceries come from? This morning he had found cereal in an earthenware pot in the cupboard, milk in a jug in the refrigerator, but none of the gaudy packages that food was sold in. Laurel never asked him to pick up this or that while he was in town.

She used to. A different Laurel, firm and shiny, bustled through the glints and sparkles of a different kitchen. “Would you pick up eggs and milk on your way home from work?”

That word raised even more disturbing questions. Work had once dwarfed him like an immovable boulder that he had tried to push every day. He had only glimpsed the rest of the world around its edges. Now he no longer worked. He had forgotten when and why he stopped.

He tried to picture the other house, but it remained vague as his memory of work, and not much more interesting. That other Laurel, with eyes more like crystals than hazelnuts, with skin more like ice cream than puffballs, had wanted to move to the country. He remembered a picnic at a spot she said must be enchanted, like the groves once sacred to Pan or Ashtoreth. The kitchen would go here, she said, the den would go there, he said, and it was as if they could see the walls around them and feel the boards beneath their feet. Why had the children screamed so? Or was it he who had screamed and pounded on a wall that yielded like mud until his blows firmed it sufficiently to scream and pound back at him? The past he could recreate from his memory was no more plausible than the cow he might make from the gobs of meat in a stew.

“Good Lord!” Mrs. Cutler said, looking up to find the house blocking their path, and her smile fell at last. She stood back and looked it up and down, fists on hips. She studied the roof. She shot a covert glance at Herb’s

hair, as if making a comparison. She said, “That roof—it isn’t thatched, is it?”

“That’s just a vine or something that got out of hand. I think it’s cedar shakes underneath.”

“Mullioned windows!” Her grin switched back on. “Casements! And little turrets and doodads. You know, it does have a certain Hansel-and-Gretel charm. But oh, my, it needs work!”

She was thrilled by the uneven planks of the door, the handcrafted irregularity of the hinges, and she exclaimed over the misshapen key he inserted into the asymmetrical keyhole. But she coughed uneasily when the door had been opened, and she hung back so long that he abandoned good manners and lunged inside ahead of her. Although it irked him to the point of tears, he was glad to be home, and he was suddenly so horrified by his intention to cut himself loose from the familiar comforts of this house that he nearly obeyed an impulse to shove her outside and slam the door.

She inched forward with a handkerchief at her nose. “Do you have water in the cellar?”

“No!” he all but screamed. Of course she would want to see the cellar. How had he overlooked that? His courage had fled, his grand plan for a new life was disintegrating, and all he could think about, absurdly, was food. He wanted to dash into the kitchen and plunder the icebox. He would have to offer something to his guest, though, and he sensed that a person as glossily sanitized as Mrs. Cutler would sooner be offered mud and pinecones than his anonymous foodstuffs, that she would be repelled even to watch him feeding on the lopsided bread and lumpy jam from his larder.

He was nearly suffocated by her chemical fog of perfumes and cosmetics in the cramped hallway, but it was she who kept complaining about an odor of dampness and decay.

Her remarks hurt, but he humored her. “The house could use an airing, I guess. It’s been a wet spring.”

“Indeed. May we at least have some light?”

He led the way into the living room and switched on a lamp. The dim

and yellowish light revealed Laurel, her bulk shrouded in one of her rough-textured gowns of interwreathing earth-tones, lounging on the similarly covered couch.

Although Herb had never believed in ghosts, he had sometimes wondered how he would react to one. He had imagined that he would first verify the reality of the apparition and then question it about the meaning of life and the nature of death.

He had been dead wrong. Presented with the ghost of his wife, he was paralyzed with terror.

Even so, he knew that his mind must be playing tricks on him. The ghost would be visible only to him, and he tried to pretend that he and Mrs. Cutler were alone. He twitched his hand in the general direction of the fireplace, hoping to draw her attention to that attractive feature, but no sound would pass his quivering lips.

“How do you do? I’m Jane Cutler of Alternative Realty. Your husband told me you were away—I mean, he is...?”

“Yes, that’s my husband.” Laurel raised her hand to touch Mrs. Cutler’s. “He tends to forget things. He says that’s because the house is contaminated with radon.”

Mrs. Cutler pressed her handkerchief more firmly to her nose. Laurel rolled her eyes suggestively as she said, “Don’t worry, he imagines things, too. Well. You’ve met him.”

He wanted to defend himself, but his tongue remained inert. He pressed his back to the wall. He was shocked to feel his body blending into the woodwork: shocked, but greatly comforted.

“Don’t do that, Herb! We have a guest.”

“I’m sorry—may I use your bathroom?” their guest said, gagging.

“Into the hall, first left.” Laurel asked innocently, “Do you feel unwell?”

Mrs. Cutler ran, handkerchief clamped to her face.

“You’re *dead!*” Herb whispered. “I killed you!”

“You dreamed it, obviously. For God’s sake, come out of the wall.”

He stepped forward. He felt the wood clinging to his back in viscous

strands, or perhaps his back clung to the wood that way, but the strands soon broke.

“How can I dream if I don’t sleep?”

“You only dream that you don’t sleep. You can’t hurt me, Herb. You should know that.”

In spite of himself, he was touched. This gross creature was nothing at all like the slim woman who had once asked him to fetch eggs and milk, just as he must be nothing like the energetic man who had once driven to work in a car, but he felt a surge of tenderness for her, for himself, even for the house.

“It was terrible—and terribly real. I dreamed that you flatly refused to sell the house, and I lost control completely and strangled you.” He took a deep breath. Dream or not, the disagreement was real. “Mrs. Cutler believes we could sell the place for an enormous profit. Houses like this are very much in demand, and—”

“Oh, Herb,” Laurel sighed, not even condescending to argue.

From the bathroom, Mrs. Cutler screamed.

He dashed into the hall, but he hesitated at the bathroom door. The plumbing often made horrid noises, as it was doing now. It sometimes did disgusting things. He hoped she would develop no unreasonable prejudice against the house just because of the faulty plumbing, but her screams suggested that she was beyond reason.

He rapped on the door, badly hurting his knuckles. In the living room, Laurel yelled; upstairs, the children began to howl.

“Stop that right now, Herb!” Laurel called in a shaking voice.

Their visitor was silent, unless she herself was the source of the gurgling he ascribed to the toilet.

“Mrs. Cutler, may I come in?”

He got no answer. He groped for the knob, but it had become a lump fused to the wood. The shape of a door was clearly visible in the wall, but he found no seam around it. Behind it he heard frantic sobbing and splashing. He heard one massive, sucking gulp, then muffled thumps descending

through the pipes that ran under his feet. He cursed in despair as he caressed the injured door with his injured knuckles.

The false door unexpectedly opened, and he stumbled into the bathroom. It was quite empty. He stared at the toilet bowl, a quivery oval that looked more like congealed albumen than porcelain. The water, agitated at odd intervals by rising bubbles, was pink. He flushed the toilet until the water cleared.

Standing here and looking for a missing person jogged loose a fragment of a forgotten puzzle involving a hiker who had wanted a bath before dinner. He began to feel a certain exasperation with Mrs. Cutler, as he might with a mystery novel that had beguiled him for a few pages until he remembered that he had read it before. Even though he had forgotten the solution, it seemed a waste of time to continue.

His malaise had unaccountably vanished, and he returned to the living room with a positive spring in his step. The children were playing an especially noisy game upstairs, apparently competing to see who could most loudly shout, "Yum!," but he made no effort to quiet them. The house looked better. The walls stood straighter. Laurel looked healthier. Her hair shone. Her autumnal dress clung to a figure that was coherently female.

Although Mrs. Cutler's keys had been in her handbag, and the bag had gone with her, Laurel dangled those keys from her fingers. The missing woman's jewelry and peach polyester pants-suit, along with such other inorganic items as her dentures, gallstones, shoe-nails, bra-hooks, coins, credit-cards and brassy wig, now cluttered the coffee table.

"You'd better put all this stuff in the canal with her car," Laurel said. When he looked blank, she said, "Don't you remember how tiresome the police were, the last time you left a car out front?"

He took the hand she extended. Their wrists flowed together into one long limb, with only a shapeless thickening to mark the point of their hand-clasp. She drew him to her and said, with the mouth that was his ear, "I know how hard it is for you to break loose and go out into the world. It

hurts us all. Like giving birth. And it makes you tend to forget how much a part of us you are.”

The brown and orange and red of the carpet and couch blended into those of Laurel’s dress and ran like fire up their common limb. For a moment Herb and Laurel and children, house and furnishings were one, one that had abided here long before the Woods ran afoul of it.

Herb tried to cling to his renewed knowledge, but he knew it could not survive the next excursion beyond the front door. He concentrated on gathering up Mrs. Cutler’s indigestible relics.