“A literary treat!” — Cemetary Dance

Stories by:

Mark Justice
Jonathan Maberry
Bob Freeman
Lucy A. Snyder
Nate Kenyon
Steven L. Shrewsberry
Michael Laimo

Maurice Broaddus
Gary A. Braunbeck
Brian J. Hatcher
Mary SanGiovanni
Rob Darnell
Nate Suthard

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A House is Not a Home

Maurice Broaddus

Maurice Broaddus is a writer, scientist, and lay leader at The Dwelling Place Church. He’s been published in dozens of markets, including Apex SF and Horror Digest, Horror Literature Quarterly, and Weird Tales. Learn more about him and read his blog at www.MauriceBroaddus.com.

Preston Matthews climbed out of the car and felt every bit the trespasser. The full moon bathed the yard in pale light and threw the house into a foreboding relief. Thin blades of grass protruded through the cracks of the concrete slab in the middle of the small yard.

“A carriage house originally stood there,” Sakineh Obaob said. “I bet it had stone around its base, too, to echo the house.”

“Someone probably stole it.”

“It’s not much to look at, I know,” she said, “but you have to have vision.”

The city of Ceredo offered many quaint homes with interesting architecture, and varying states of disrepair, far from the cookie-cutter neighborhood where they currently lived. The trim was painted a muted brown in forlorn contrast to the dull green of the rest of the house.

“Mama always said be wary of homes with their own names.”

“Really? Is that was mama said? Ransdell House doesn’t exactly ring with terror.
Besides, you know what they say—you visit a house during the day to see what the realtor wants to show you and at night to see what they don’t want you to see.” Sakineh pressed her petite frame alongside him, coaxing a begrudging squeeze out of him. Her features were exquisite and delicate: lips painted too red for her face, wide brown eyes that took in as much of life as they could, the gentle bob of her small breasts.

“Really? Is that what they say?” Preston’s heart wasn’t in his reflexive sarcasm. She’d already won him over.

“You just have to look beyond the . . . old. Plus, he only wants thirty thousand.”

“How do you know?”

“I asked him.”

“There’s not even a for sale sign up.”

“Just because there’s no for sale sign doesn’t mean it’s not for sale. I asked a realtor, he asked the owner.”

“The same realtor that’s supposed to be meeting us.” Preston stared at her with justifiably skeptical eyes. He was familiar with the coming song and dance. They were both artists, Preston a musician and Sakineh a painter, so they understood the need for impulse in the creative instinct and process.

“Yes. No. I picked up the keys this morning. Come on. You’ll just love the living room.”

“You’ve already been in.”

“No. Yes. Last week, when I first saw the place.”

“You mean, when you drove by?”
“I couldn’t wait.”

“You broke in?”

“Does it look like anyone lives here? Or cares?”

“This is supposed to encourage me to buy? The house has already driven my wife to B & E while my would-be apathetic neighbors look on.”

“C’mon, you’ll love it as much as I do.” Her perkiness bordered on abusive.

They strode the length of the stone-wrapped porch and slipped past the dripping water from the leaf-clogged guttering. Old paint chipped from the house like a teen with bad eczema. Preston wondered how many pencils he could fashion from all the lead in the old paint.

“Luckily, it was built to last. They don’t make ‘em like this anymore.”

“They couldn’t afford it. That’s a 15 to 20 thousand dollar roof job.”

“See, you can’t wait either.” Sakineh, much more in the spirit of things, made quite the production of finding the right key. Subtle she was not: big house, lots of locks, lots of keys, lots of mystery. When she found the right key and opened the door, it only swung about a foot before it jammed on swollen tiles. “We can fix that.”

A mound of envelopes climbed toward the mail slot of the side door. Many of the letters had molded together into a single, fibrous paper tumor. Preston flipped through the loose ones, ignoring his internal alarm at the impropriety of treading on the ghosts of occupants past. Rarely were any two envelopes addressed to the same person: mostly bills, the occasional summons, a few government agencies in search of people in order to justify their existence. Ransdell House had been many things to many people
over the years. He could taste the mold in the air. Black spots peppered the peeling wallpaper like liver warts. Black cracks veined the exposed plaster of the walls. They walked around the large living room that ran the length of the house. Pocket doors would have broken the room were they not permanently stuck in their coves. One of the rooms would make the perfect studio. Moonlight poured in at odd angles from the windows, but with so many odd nooks and crannies, the shadows created pockets of sadness, isolation, darkness. The stairwell wound into the upper shadows.

“Why is there a bathroom in the living room?” Preston asked.

“It’s not in the living room, it’s off the living room. Look at the wall line,” Sakineh pointed. “It’s not supposed to be here.”

“Someone came along and decided that the middle of our living room could be a good place for a toilet.”

“Our living room?” Sakineh smiled.

“Big picture, honey, stay with me. Toilet.”

“When I talked to the realtor, he said, off the record, that Ransdell House used to be a stop on the Underground Railroad.”

“I bet every house up for sale makes that same claim, honey. History jacks up the price.”

“It’s supposed to be haunted.”

“Really? By who?”

“Slaves and stuff.”

“Now we’re talking. Think the owner would come down on the price? I mean, if
we have to deal with unwanted co-tenants. . .”

Sakineh punched him lightly on his arm. “This is fun, in a forbidden sort of way.”

“What? Exploring without someone’s permission?”

“Come on. You’ve got to see upstairs.”

The stairs smelled of urine, a DMZ where homeless piss met the methhead shooting gallery. The master bathroom, with a thick, cast-iron tub with claw feet squatting in its center, overlooked the back yard and the alleyway. Two of the three bedrooms faced the front of the house, the third room, off to itself, faced the bedroom window of the neighboring house. Though it led out onto its own balconied porch and would catch the sun each day, the room was grey. Heartbreak hung in it like the memory of a child’s death.

“We could make cathedral ceilings in our bedroom. And look at that molding.”

“Look at that mold.”

“We can antique together for Victorian furniture.” She twirled her arms in a spinning dance of bliss. “You know, period pieces.”

“Because it’s always been my dream to fill my home with uncomfortable museum pieces.” Even as he said it, Preston couldn’t imagine their stainless steel appliances or modern furniture in this place. They now seemed so passionless and sterile.

“Think of how much of this we can do together. Can’t you just see us wallpapering, painting and having paint fights, truly gutting this place.”
“I don’t know. A house like this needs to be restored. This history alone demands—” Preston found himself caressing the intricate woodwork of the banister as they retreated to the top of the stairs. Plaster had fallen free from several spots along the wall, the exposed lathe like the emaciated ribs of the house. “—respect.”

“Or.” Sakineh pressed close to him. “We could start from scratch and make this place our own. New couple, new history. We could spend a month ‘initiating’ each room.”

Preston knew she wanted a child even more than he did, but years of trying had proven fruitless. Maybe a new beginning was what they needed.

“You make a fine argument, Sak. The roof’s fine. Foundation’s solid. As long as you’re not looking for any casual amenities like air-conditioning, copper plumbing, wiring that’s not . . . oh my God. It’s cloth wiring . . . patched into newer stuff.”

“We can fix that.”

“Yes. I suppose we can.”

Sakineh pulled away from him. “Did you hear that?”

Preston cocked his head, sorting the silence. A susurrus of whispers accompanied a dim scraping. A wan light flickered to life, illuminating the outline of a doorway along the ceiling, an attic perhaps. Meth heads probably broke in to get high. Preston and Sakineh lingered momentarily, paralyzed by indecision mixed with curiosity. The light snuffed abruptly. He pressed his finger to his lips, took her by her hand, and they backed unsteadily down the stairs. The scrape returned, slithering from the depths of the murky darkness, slowly resolving itself into the sounds of clanking
chains. Metal strained against metal, faint at first, then growing ever louder, like shackled arms flailing in the night slowly gaining their strength.

They skittered down the steps, desperate to re-trace their steps but getting turned about in the gloom. A series of rooms ran parallel to the long living room as they wound through the house. The tile wainscot rose high along the wall of the dining room, the hand-drawn floral bouquet wall treatment above it, too much an estranged affectation. The further back they ran, the more the house recalled a stirred vitality, as if it remembered days past.

The corridor slimmed. Preston realized they had wandered into the pantry. His fingers scrabbled for the doorknob he sensed led to the kitchen and an exit. Heavy footfalls, like soldiers’ boots, tromped along the floorboards above them, stopping and resuming their pacing as if searching for something. Or someone.

Preston’s hand shook as he latched onto the recessed, almost hidden, handle. They tumbled into the waiting maw of darkness. The wall of spider silk they brushed through informed him of his miscalculation. Sakineh stifled a startled yelp. The basement steps strained with a dull groan under their weight. He turned to return the way they came, but the steady tramping of boots patrolled right outside the concealed door. Preston and Sakineh retreated further into the darkness.

The basement walls seemed carved out of the earth itself, dredged clay and clotted material forming the walls. Sakineh’s hand tightened on his. He felt the sudden presence of others. They kept moving closer, shadows in the night, quiet but pressing ever nearer. Preston had trouble breathing as the bodies huddled against him. Some
shivered—despite the warmth of mashed bodies crammed into the aperture—weak with sickness, judging from their thick sweat and muffled coughs. Flies circled the piles of waste buried in corners, the smell of stale urine assailed his nostrils. Preston dry-heaved, though his empty belly had nothing to recall, his body contented itself with heady waves of nausea. His eyes had not adjusted to the deepened darkness; he knew only that dozens of people lined that passage with him. The temperature climbed steadily in the crush of bodies. An elbow poked into his gut. The air soured as they breathed the desperate gulps of their neighbor’s exhalations. A knee found purchase in his groin as the owner jostled for position. Muffled cries haunted the darkness. Slowly shuffling forward, they squeezed past other sweaty bodies, in small steps toward freedom.

The suffocating smell of unwashed bodies, the thick and gamey body odor of field workers, coated his throat. The pressure to scream built in his chest. To just cry out, if only to be heard, to release the pent-up terror. Flies buzzed in his ears, about his face, with him unable to shoo them off because of his pinned arms. The occasional scrape of metal against stone, or echoing jangle of a loose chain managed to cut through the expectant din of murmurs. The steps became fewer. More and more of us crammed into the small space. Preston struggled for each breath of fouled air.

Preston spied a lookout window along the top of the basement. He lifted Sakineh, holding her steady against the bodies smashed against him, hot, moist, clinging. Weak arms grappled at him as if not wanting them to escape. Or, rather, draw notice to them. Sakineh crawled out of the window, with Preston following, and they
ran into the night.

That night, from the security of his own bed, Preston dreamed of chains and darkness.