

Clownette

By Terry Dowling

I've always had a love-hate relationship with Macklin's. When the place is full, when there are conventions or tour groups booked in, then relatives, friends, and discount regulars like me get offered the Clownette. There's no other choice.

Not that it's a bad room. There are darker, far worse rooms at Macklin's, many with brick-wall views. The Clownette opens onto a back lane, true, but it's on the top floor and there's sky and light. That's the upside. That's by day. At night—well, it changes.

And this time, for maybe the eighteenth, nineteenth time in six years, it was a full house and the Clownette or nothing.

No big deal, never a big deal. But there's always ten, twenty seconds or so when it almost matters a lot. I could trek over to Wright's or the Walden; they have budget plans as well, not that that's any kind of issue with my Hopeton's expense account. But, taking the good with the bad, there's something about the Clownette. Once those ten, twenty seconds are done, you see it as clear as day. You get the sky and the light—at least until nightfall. You get to check out the latest additions to the décor. You get to see the face, the "Motley," the Macklin Hotel's very own Shroud of Turin right there in the wall.

Dry-staining as art. A platter-sized discoloration that spoils the room, does so crucially for some. And it does look like a clown in a sketchy, man-in-the-moon fashion, with blotchy there-but-never-quite-there features. Paint it over as often as you like, the Motley creeps back, pushing through bit by bit, first as the barest hint of shadow, then as a chain of dusky fractals linking up. And once they connect: hey presto! Peekaboo! Bozo in the wall!

I took the news about the hotel being full with passable grace, expecting one of Gordon's usual quips. "Off to see the Wizard again, I'm afraid, Mr. J." Or "Tell me again, Mr. J., how you always wanted to join a circus as a kid!" Or, perfectly po-faced, as if taking the straight part in our long-standing, front-desk, double act: "So he misses you, Mr. J. You see the kid, he says, you send him right up."

Six years of staying at Macklin's, and to Gordon—and the Motley, to hear Gordon tell it—I'm still the kid!

None of that today. Maybe there were things on his mind. Maybe he'd had bad news. He just gave me a warm-up smile straight out of Hospitality 101 and handed me a new-style magnetic key.

"Made some changes since your last visit, Mr. Jackson," he said.

There it was again, the Mr. Jackson! I'd thought it had been a natural enough slip when he'd said it the first time, some automatic holdover from dealing with too many new guests at once.

Thrown by how correct he was being, I was an extra second or two answering. "Don't tell me it's gone!"

"No, sir. I meant the key. The wall's been painted again since your last visit, but you know how it is."

Sir? Mr. Jackson; now sir!

"Wouldn't be the same without it, Gordon," I said to keep the patter going, trying for a handle on what was amiss here. These Gordon glitches overshadowed getting the Clownette, stopped me switching modes and welcoming the news that my special contingency plan for this particular "Meet the Motley" visit could be put into effect after all. Maybe the staff were being assessed. Maybe there were new owners, time and motion people on the premises, efficiency appraisals and staff cutbacks looming, even video surveillance right now. I'd seen it in so many other places: three-star establishments trying for four-star status. I forced myself not to look for cameras.

"Guess I'm off to see the Wizard then!" I said, making one last attempt to rebuild the old Gordon Maher and Bob Jackson bridges, and the smile did widen a bit, though a wink would have helped enormously.

I'd ask about it later. Now I reached for my bag.

"Let me get someone to help with—"

"Gordon, how many years have I been coming here?"

"A lot, Mr. Jackson."

"Then you know the drill. This front desk is yours. This bag is mine. Want to swap?"

The silly Gordon grin switched up a notch, seemed almost normal now. Much better. *Call me Mr. J.! Just once! Call me the kid!*

"No, Mr. Jackson."

Damn! One more try. "You still sleep over on-shift?"

"Sometimes."

"Then how about we swap digs? *You* can have the Clownette?"

"Never again, Mr. Jackson!" Gordon was really grinning now, as if finally braving the old Jackson-Maher routines in spite of himself.

"Then off I go."

Let the unseen time and motion gremlins add compassion and humor to their ticket and we might save Macklin's yet, keep it a strictly three-star haven in a cold and busy world.

I took my bag across to the elevators, rode one to the fifth floor, then followed the long, softly lit corridor toward the rear of the hotel and Room 516.

Other hotels had trained me well. I swiped the card in the new magnetic lock and pushed back the familiar old door.

And there it was.

Both parts of the 516 experience for me. First the "Rush of Weird," as I called it, the deep-anxiety, almost-dread stab of whatever it was I felt whenever I first opened the door on any visit. More than the Motley itself, it was *that* feeling that struck the brain, poleaxed the spirit, made me want to turn and run. It only happened on that first opening of the door during any stay.

Then there was the face.

Beyond the old queen-sized bed I knew so well, left of the same curtained triple windows, it blossomed against the load-bearing wall that somehow kept bringing damp up from the core of the old building, one and a half meters above the floor on the only wall not papered over, *never* papered over.

The Motley. Seven main blotches, enough of a man-in-the-moon soot-smudge face, but nothing that definite, just a grey-scale glitch in the latest color field.

They'd tried covering it with paintings, mirrors, other decorative features, but that's where things became truly wacky. It wasn't that screws and bolts gave, nothing as simple and conclusive as that, or that the damp leached out to create penicillin fields. It wasn't that furnishings placed in front soon had sprung backs and internal mold. This was *dry* staining—*dry* to the touch, no damp smell at all.

The Motley moved.

Put something in front, a painting, a cupboard, and within the week, sometimes overnight, Bozo would be starting to peer over the top or around the sides. A few more days and it was out of hiding altogether. Remove the obstacle and gradually, over days, nights, a week or two, back it went to its original position—but without any sign of a relocation trail. That was the real wonder of the thing for me.

Experts spoke of microclimates, of internal convection variables in the space between the stain and whatever fronted it, rerouting the damp-track, some central-core problem, whatever. No rising damp anywhere else in the building. No explaining the lack of residual staining left behind when it did relocate. It just—moved.

Make it a discount room, they said, or a freebie. *Not* a storeroom. Keep it open and airy. Count your losses. One room out of nearly sixty wasn't bad, considering.

Which is what Macklin's was given in lieu of any kind of adequate scientific explanation.

There'd been a fleeting Indian summer of notoriety: a month or two of minor tabloid features, even a guest spot on Ross Haslan's *Mysterious Houses*. But that kind of publicity drew the weirdos, management quickly discovered. They issued a press statement saying that modern damp-proofing techniques had fixed the problem. When journos phoned and the weirdos enquired, they were told the face was gone.

But here it was in all its dusky, smudgy, chimney-soot glory. And, oddly enough, management had found a winner with the latest color scheme. They'd painted the wall a soft tan, quite a nice contrast to the three papered walls with their familiar, muted yellow-and-white pattern. The blotches were less intense, less ominous somehow. I'd been here for olive, russet, even for an overkill chocolate brown. But darker colors had made the blemish seem more intense—another trick of the staining, the lighting, Room 516's Turin Effect, as if the Motley was determined to secure its place in the world.

My thoughts were definitely elsewhere, so the knock at the door startled me.

I hurried to answer it, first peering through the spy hole to see who it was. When no one was visible, I just assumed there would be fresh towels left on the floor, or a fruit bowl, something that hadn't needed personal attention.

But when I opened the door, there was nothing. *Seemed* to be nothing, for when I glanced down the hall toward the lifts, there was Gordon standing right there, a few steps back from the doorway.

"Shit!" I cried, badly startled. Then I saw the bottle of wine he was holding out for me to take and immediately flashed the best smile I could manage.

"Look—er—Mr. J.," Gordon said. "About before. I'm sorry. I just wanted to give you this. With my compliments."

"Gordon, what's going on? Are they doing staff evaluations? You were so formal down there."

"That's it." He cast a quick glance back along the corridor. He was still edgy.

"Is your job at risk?"

"Maybe. Not sure. Something's happening, Mr. J. They won't tell us. We just need to be careful. I—wanted you to know."

"Well, hey, thanks, Gordon. I was worried. Hope it goes okay for you."

"Thanks. Thanks, Mr. J. You want anything, you just call down to the desk."

"Will do. Thanks for this."

He smiled, nodded, then turned and headed for the lifts.

I locked the door and went back to laying out my things. I felt a lot better about the business at the front desk now, though something still felt wrong. But what? What?

Then I knew.

Gordon hadn't wanted to be in line of sight of the open door. He was scared of the Motley!

I could hardly blame him. Some people flatly refused to stay in 516. With its Rush of Weird and its "what-do-you-see-in-this-picture" Rorschach feature to grab your attention, the room had a survival potential of five guests in ten. Gordon had given me the statistic on my third visit. Once the stain was seen as a face, he'd said, five out of ten first-time occupants refused to stay. I just hadn't for a moment considered that Gordon might be one of those who found it too much.

Who could blame him, any of them for that matter? In daylight the Motley was fine. Once your eye had resolved it as a face, it was a bit like having one of those cardboard cut-outs of cops used as thief deterrents in stores constantly staring at you. But at night—a few of the more forthcoming refugees from 516 had admitted—especially once the lights were out, it just became too much. *Knowing* it was there, leering in the dark, big blotchy grin twitching up, smudge eyes staring.

The remaining five guests in ten did better apparently, and I was a borderline member of that line-up. We

endured it, were either too drunk, too stolid, or too budget conscious. The last two probably did apply to me, but only if you added curious to the mix. With my plan for this latest stay, I was probably closer to the journo/weirdo margin than I cared to admit.

The Motley fascinated me. I'd balked at the front desk, sure, hesitated that ten to twenty seconds, but that was because of the anticipation, the weird feeling I knew I'd have when I first opened the door. That was because of—something. It didn't last more than a few seconds, otherwise no cut-rate plan on earth would have made me keep taking the Clownette. It was the love-hate, yes-no of it for me, the whole complex mix of "What's going on here?"/"You won't get me this time!" bravado and determination.

I smiled at how intense I was being. These were pretty much my usual daytime observations for 516 anyway, the ones I always had after I'd first felt the Rush of Weird again, but the business with Gordon—parts one *and* two!—had thrown me.

I checked my watch by the digital clock alongside the bed. Three forty-five on a bright, sunny afternoon. The Motley was in its day phase, its blotches so ordinary, so formless, like any of the other countless stainings in countless second-rate hotel rooms across the country, across the world.

I smiled at a wordplay that was suddenly there, paraphrasing the famous movie line.

Of all the grin joints in all the world, why did you have to walk into this one?

There was nothing like a face now, certainly no more than in any other set of stains in any other place. The day was too sunny, too bright.

And, to be fair, the features probably didn't get any more definite after dark. Not really. It was more to do with the ambient lighting, how the shift to evening let the room's lighting focus the observer's eye differently.

With the Rush of Weird behind me, I could deal with all that. I shifted my bag to the stand beside the bed and went to say hello.

"Tonight, Mr. Motley," I said, running my hand over the sooty spread of blotches as I always did, "we're going to try happy trails together. See if we can make you move a bit!"

There. Intentions declared. Our latest meeting formalized, everything stated up front. I sat on the edge of the bed then, studying how the smudges sat in the tan. Just an overnight stay, but somehow I felt this visit would be the one!

I *wanted* the Motley to move, wanted to be the one to make it move—see what Gordon and other hotel staff said happened.

"Guess we're just at that stage in our relationship, Mr. M.," I said, then went down to the bar to get a drink.

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The sunlight was well and truly gone from the back lane when I returned at five thirty, and the Motley had

fallen into shadow with the rest of the room's features. No face. Nothing like a face yet.

But I knew only too well how to hasten Bozo on his way, knew from experience to draw the curtains and switch on both bedside lamps to compensate.

The result was instantaneous and surprising, even reassuring in a way. The fall of artificial light in the room was such that the main features were evident almost immediately, first as the eyes and brow line, then, bit by smudgy bit, the grin, which always surprised me by how wide it actually was, how completely it had been there all along, waiting to be stitched up by just one more blotch resolving. Slowly, finally, the nose and cheeks emerged, cohered—there were no other words for it. It probably had more to do with an observer's brain providing whatever "nosing" and "cheeking" was needed, a few key bits of recognition cuing the rest.

Again I had to smile at what a good job we did when it came to haunting ourselves.

On other visits, I'd switched off the bedside lights, gone out to a movie or a restaurant, taken my time, then returned close on bedtime and slept through. I was still deciding how to fill this particular evening, but first there was work to do.

I set about moving the television cabinet out from the wall, disconnected the antenna cable and power lead, and dragged the unit across the carpet until it was in front of the stain. During my last stay in 516, I'd worked out that the cabinet with the black Akai television itself wasn't large enough to hide the Motley. But replacing the television with the large square painting above the bed would do the job nicely.

Unlike many of the more modern hotels and motels, Macklin's didn't bolt their prints to the walls. The copy of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* hung by wire on a wall stud in the traditional manner, so it took surprisingly little time. I set the television on the floor, then placed the framed print on top of the cabinet so it was facing the wall. It covered the Motley completely.

Operation Happy Trails had begun. On the one hand I knew that nothing could come of it in the time available. I could hardly expect it. But on the other, there was a strange feeling that anything could happen. At least I was giving it a try, taking my relationship with Bozo to a new level.

I took the reports for the next day's sales meeting from my briefcase, called "Lazarus, come forth!" to my hidden roommate, then set off for Saffron's. No movie tonight. I'd read the Deane and the Warnock proposals again over dinner, have a few drinks, and turn in early.

I bid Gordon goodnight as I crossed the lobby. He flashed his smile, waved, and called, "Have a pleasant evening, Mr. Jackson!"

I smiled back. We were doing well. We were fellow conspirators now. Maybe we'd get a chance to laugh about it over a drink someday.

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I was relieved to find Carmen at the front desk when I returned around ten. It had always been "Mr. Jackson" with her, so when she wished me a pleasant evening the world felt back on track again. I was

surprised at how much I needed it right then.

My room was as I'd left it, of course, which suddenly made me wonder what other guests got up to in their rooms. I had plenty of horror stories from other establishments, and Gordon had shared some of Macklin's with me: about guests painting the walls with their feces, jumping into completely filled bathtubs, playing autoerotic hanging games from the pelmets and light fittings. Bob Jackson rearranging a few pieces of furniture was rather small-time in that larger scheme of things.

With the television cabinet borrowed for other duties, I had no choice but to turn in, though falling asleep took some doing. It only served me right, of course. Try as I might, I kept thinking of the Motley there in the darkness, grinning away. It'd been—what?—at least seven hours now, probably more. In a single night I could hardly expect anything. But what if there *was* a trace, some sign?

I switched on the bedside lamp. There was nothing visible around the edges of the painting that I could tell, but there simply wasn't enough light to be sure.

I reached along the headboard and switched on the main room lights. Nothing. The Motley was still in hiding.

I was tempted to leave a light on, but there was my nine-thirty sales meeting to consider. This would have to be just a rehearsal for the Happy Trails outing I'd originally planned. I'd try the whole thing again when I was in town for more than an overnighter.

I felt much better once that was decided. I switched off the lights and actually managed to doze for a few hours.

But just a few hours.

Something woke me at 1:47—a sound, a movement; I couldn't be sure.

The sense of the Motley's presence was stronger than ever. All imagined, no doubt, but such a thing had never happened before.

I didn't turn on the light this time, just lay in the dark thinking. The whole thing with Gordon had me again. There'd been something about him, the intensity. I couldn't shake it. It wasn't the "Mr. Jackson" or the "sir" business. That was easy enough to understand once staff appraisals were factored in, or the possibility of some influential guest complaining about too much familiarity among the staff.

It was *how* he was when he'd given me the wine. It should have made things better—that was clearly the intention—but it hadn't. It was like being with someone who thanked you too much or apologized too many times or asked if there was anything he could do once too often. It was overreaction.

That was part of it, most of it! Just a few words out in the hall and he'd said Mr. J.—what?—three, four times? As if overcompensating. As if he'd remembered to do it all of a sudden.

And there was something else, a body-language thing. Aside from the edginess, the anxiety, there'd been something about his eye line. His gaze had been wrong. What had those sales-training videos said? True friendly gaze went from the eyes in a triangle *down* to the smile. Formal business gaze went *up* from the eyes to a point on the forehead.

Hard to be sure now, but maybe that was it. Gordon may have been genuinely worried, but something

had made him seem detached as well. Not sorry at all. It had happened all too quickly.

Another thought struck me then. Gordon had been standing to the side of the door, hadn't wanted to look in and see the Motley. What had he told me down at the front desk when I suggested he take 516? "Never again, Mr. Jackson!" That word! *Again!* Had he recently spent a night in the room? Had 516 done something to his memory, his way of looking at things? His personality?

Ludicrous, ridiculous, but the craziest things made sense in the small hours. And such late-night thoughts always seemed to drag their own wacky logic along with them. It worried me. Too much fear could trigger—what were the terms?—a behavioral shutdown or a post-traumatic adjustment of affect, a way of dealing with severe personal crisis. I'd read about that somewhere. Maybe this was something like that.

I smiled at myself in the darkness. I was haunting myself, using 516 and the Motley to do it.

Still, at 1:53 in the small hours, with newly limbered night at the windows, it did make sense. Provoking the Motley no longer seemed such a good idea.

I was half-asleep, being irrational, but enough was enough. I switched on the bedside light, got out of bed, crossed to the painting, hefted it, and prepared to set it on the floor. Before I could do that I dropped it in astonishment.

The Motley wasn't there!

I stood staring at where it had been, *should* have been, *had* to be! Then I broke free, stumbled across the room, switched on the main lights, and rushed back to the wall.

Not a trace. Not a sign.

It was gone!

Which wasn't possible. Not like that. Not after so little time.

It was 2:09, but I did the only sensible thing. I took a shower, turned it to cold at the end so I was completely awake. Then I made coffee, strong and black, and sat on the edge of the bed sipping it, relearning the room and trying to eliminate the things that almost make sense at that hour, can make too much sense if you're not careful.

"Serves you right, Jackson," I said, as much to hear a voice as anything. "Now you either call it quits and find another hotel or you work through this like an adult!"

I set my cup on the bedside table, went over to the television stand, and pulled it out from the wall.

Nothing. Not a smudge, not a hint that I could see. The tan was unblemished.

Which was impossible.

Maybe it was me. A vision thing. But after ten minutes of sightings from various points in the room, I was back sitting on the bed staring at the blank wall.

What to do? I could phone Rhonda or Bruce or Katie half a continent away, have friends talk me

through this. Better yet, phone down to Carmen at the front desk, get her up here, let her be a witness to the whole thing.

I didn't, couldn't. Not yet.

What if the Motley reappeared just before she arrived? That's how these things happened, didn't they?

It was that certainty—absurd, laughable, vivid at this hour—that stopped me. Not because I truly believed it would or *could* happen, but because the certainty itself felt so real, had me so completely.

I couldn't help it. What if Carmen came up and the smudges *did* re-form just as she knocked at the door?

It took me back to my thoughts about Gordon staying the night in 516, being changed by the Motley. Maybe it adjusted your mind, how you saw things. That was it! The Motley was still there, had worked its special Bozo magic and done something to my ability to see it!

I grinned, laughed, was still able to, thank God, tracking my growing fear with an equally impressive detachment. I needed to act, do something.

"Clever, Mr. M.," I told the blank wall. "Seems this round might go to you unless a little Jackson finessing can save the day."

Save the day? I immediately corrected myself. *Save the night!* That was more like it, but definitely the wrong thought right then.

I grabbed the phone handset from the cradle by the bed and pressed the key for the front desk.

After a ten-second delay, Carmen answered. "Reception?"

"Carmen, it's Bob Jackson in 516."

"We don't talk to you."

I froze where I stood.

"What? What did you say?"

"I said: 'Yes, Mr. Jackson? How can I help?'"

"No, what did you just say before that?"

"I said, 'Yes, Mr. Jackson?' Is there something wrong?"

Sure is, kiddo. I've spooked myself good!

But no point pushing it. *It adjusts your mind.* "Ah—look, I know it's late, Carmen, but I'm really not sleeping too well. Would you have any sleeping pills down there?"

"Of course, Mr. Jackson. I can't leave the desk—"

"That's okay. That's fine. I'll be right down. Thanks, Carmen."

I fumbled getting the handset back into its cradle, fumbled pulling on my clothes.

What had she said? That other comment? So odd, so truly strange.

And now there was the prospect of actually leaving the room. Everything could change. Most certainly would, I was certain. That's how these things worked. I'd go down, get the pills, and the Motley would be back on the wall when I returned, grinning at me, its own Happy Trails maneuver wonderfully complete. *Not a bad trick, hey, Mr. J.? Motley one, Bob Jackson nil.*

I had to take charge, go down, anchor myself in the ordered, everyday world.

I grabbed the magnetic key from the nightstand and stepped out into the hall, waited till the door clicked shut behind me, then headed for the lifts.

And discovered Motley's next piece of trickery!

The corridor seemed longer, impossibly extended.

Adjusts your mind! How you see things.

My night logic snatched at it. Not surprising, not so strange, I told myself, dragged from sleep like this, primed with weird thoughts. Just another optical trick.

The setting encouraged it. By their very nature, hotel corridors exist in a state of timelessness. Day or night, the lights are always on. The carpeting steals sound. Every footstep is snatched away the moment you make it. You pass other rooms as if you never exist. And the doors! Blind, replicated, one after the other, just their vacant spy holes tracking you sightlessly like the eyes of figures in portraits.

Another key factor right there.

No portraits in hotel rooms or hotel corridors. Always landscapes, abstracts, vistas, safe, Impressionistic pieces. No one wanted eyes watching them in hotel rooms or down those long hallway approaches. Which explained 516's five refugees in ten, why the Motley had the impact it did. Of course! The portrait effect!

Almost at the lifts, I noticed Room 502 with its double spy hole: one at the usual eye level, one lower down for guests in wheelchairs, children, shorter people.

My rational mind understood, but the night terrors had me.

Being watched by something doubled over, folded on itself.

I laughed—my struggling, rational self did—and laughed again. I was imagining a third spy hole way down at floor level. For the snake, I thought. Or Randion the Living Torso from that old Tod Browning movie!

Crazy. All crazy. But what you did to cope. To turn it and make it right again.

Then I was safely past. I pressed the elevator call button, heard one, possibly both of the carriages

responding, climbing the long dark throats of the old building.

One car signalled its arrival with a soft chime, a sound quickly snatched away by the carpeting. The doors slid back. I stepped into the plush interior and descended to the lobby, which seemed stark and overlit after the dim infinite corridor up there.

"Mr. Jackson," Carmen said from behind the reception desk. "Sorry you're having trouble sleeping. This should help."

She handed me a sleeping pill in its foil wrapping.

"Thanks, Carmen. I'm probably just overstressed. Got a big meeting tomorrow." *What was it you said before? What?*

"What time did you want to be woken? Just in case?"

"Good point. Make it 7 A.M., okay?"

"Seven it is. Good night, Mr. Jackson."

"Good night, Carmen. Thanks."

It was easier going back, riding the lift up into the night, reaching the quiet fifth-floor elevator lobby, finding the hallway its normal self again. It was as if everything had been reset.

Not completely reset, thank goodness. When I swiped my card in the lock and pushed back the door, there was no Rush of Weird.

But the Motley was back on the wall!

Of course it was, back where it should have been, no doubt had been all along.

No more games. No more tricks. I rehung the Van Gogh print above the bed, moved the television cabinet back to its original place, reconnected the leads.

"You win this round, Mr. M.," I said, feeling exhausted, beaten, and yet strangely elated by the whole thing. Collateral damage, I told myself. Waking like this. Being primed. Seeing things.

I probably didn't need the sleeping pill, but when I was back in bed, ready to settle again, I popped it from its foil and swallowed it just the same. I was asleep in minutes.

And awake again at 3:17. The Motley woke me.

It was leering, shimmering on the wall, having itself a merry time! But glowing! Shining somehow!

Never knew I could be a night light, did you, Mr. J.?

I lurched from bed, leaden, dizzy but driven, and lunged at the wall.

Wrong way! Wrong thing to do, I knew, even as I did it. Should have turned on the light first! Should have kept away!

But it was panic. What passed for it in my drugged, terrified state. I went reeling, fell at the wall, with arms raised to stop myself.

But it wasn't there.

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Now everything is different, of course. Not just because it's the view I've never had—looking *out* from the wall. It's because there are so many of us trapped in here, crowding behind, all in our turn, so needy, so frantic to look out again. It's knowing that the next too-curious guest will force me back into that darkness, that *all* the Clownette's guests checked out—just as I had, some tricked-up version of me—and that out there in the world a brand-new Bob Jackson was probably farewelling a brand-new Gordon and whatever other bits of itself this dark place has managed to squeeze through.

I'm beyond the revulsion and panic, the rage and disbelief. It adjusts your mind. Now there's just the numbness and despair, the agony of waiting. Feeling them crowding in behind, touching, snatching, muttering.

At least now I know what the sensation was whenever I first opened the door to 516—all that's left of a scream from a place where screams can no longer be heard.

Housemaid or guest, housemaid or guest—that's all that matters now, knowing that the day will come when Macklin's has a full house again and the scream is mine.

The End

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