

MUST SEE TO APPRECIATE

Scott Nicholson

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Scott is the author of six thrillers, five screenplays, numerous short stories and writing articles. He's also a freelance editor and award-winning journalist, which means he pretty much lives off words. Hobbies include raising goats, tending an organic garden, swimming, ghost hunting, and playing guitar, but his favourite activity is writing love letters in invisible ink. He is vice president of the Horror Writers Association and is currently adapting his latest book *They Hunger* as a graphic novel. His carefully disheveled Internet persona is found at hauntedcomputer.com

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This was the part that Reynolds hated the most.

The deal was so close he could almost smell it. The fish was nibbling, practically had the worm between his nubby gums. Reynolds had wowed the mark with the double bay windows, the parquet flooring, the loft bedroom with skylight, and the view of the Appalachian Mountains stretching a blue hundred miles in the distance. Custom cabinets and a cherry stair railing hadn't hurt, either, and the deck was wide enough to field a baseball game. Surely that was enough to convince anybody that this twenty-acre piece of real estate and 7,200-square-foot floor plan was the steal of a lifetime, especially at the sacrificial price of four hundred grand.

But the mark wanted to see the basement. They *a/ways* wanted to see the basement. It figured. Reynolds was stuck handling the only haunted house on the local market, and these idiot buyers didn't make the job any easier.

"The bulb's burned out in the basement, David," Reynolds said. "Had the caretaker up here the other day, and said he'd get around to changing it. You'd think he'd carry one in his truck, you know? Good help is hard to find around these parts, David."

Maybe he shouldn't have said that last bit. This buyer was from Florida, and might think that poor work habits were an Appalachian

trademark. Reynolds looked David in the eye and smiled. It was Reynolds' plastic smile, the closer smile, the glib smarmy hypertoothiness that he'd learned in salesman school.

The man reached into his back pocket and pulled out a flashlight. "I used to be a builder," David said. "You can tell a lot about how a house is put together by looking at the floor joists. A house needs a good foundation, especially when it's clinging to the side of a ridge."

Damn, Reynolds thought. "David, you're a man after my own heart. A real fixer-upper, I'll bet. Not that you'll need to do much work on *this* house."

Even though every corner is slightly out of square.

Reynolds thought about slapping David gently on the back to punctuate the statement, then decided against it. David seemed more like the firm-handshake, no-nonsense type. A tough sell. A man that was hard to sucker. The kind of man who wore a little tape measure on his belt.

Reynolds headed toward the door that led to the basement stairs. The chill crept over him as he palmed the door handle. He put an ear to the door, pretending to check the hinges when actually he was listening for the spook. Damned thing had cost him a commission three times already. He made a show of looking at his watch. "You said you had to meet your wife at the airport?"

"Yeah," David said, studying the blown gypsum ceiling for cracks. "But there's plenty of time."

"Traffic can be a bear around here. You may have noticed that all the roads are twisty, and you're bound to get behind some flatlander tourist—no offense, mind you."

David stepped to the basement door. "I'll manage."

"David, this is a whole lot of house for the money, David," Reynolds blurted. Had he said David's name twice? In realtor finishing school, he'd learned that you used the name of the potential buyer as much as possible. But maybe he was overdoing it. He was losing his concentration. Sweat pooled in the armpits of his shirt and stained his serge jacket. He lightly bit his lip to bring himself under control. The bite turned into a disguising smile.

David smiled back. The man was too patient, in Reynolds' opinion. One of those forty-somethings who had already finished his life's work, his

bank account probably set for the downhill run. Had a kid at Duke and one in an academy somewhere, a tennis-playing wife who probably came from old textile money. Reynolds saw no troubles in that tan, placid face, and a flare of jealousy rocketed across his heart.

But it wasn't David's fault that Reynolds dropped eighty grand in a sour time-share deal. No, not time-share. *Interval ownership* was the new gold-plated term for it. But by any name, Reynolds was in the hole and had a lot riding on this sale. Haunted house or not.

David switched on the flashlight. Reynolds turned the knob and let the basement door swing fully open. The hinges creaked like an old woman's bones.

"Going to need a little oil there," David said, playing the light over the hinges.

"Y-yeah," Reynolds stammered, as the cold crypt air wafted up from the basement and bathed his skin.

"You going first?"

"You're the guest."

"But you know the territory better."

"Yes, yes, of course, David."

Careful, Reynolds chided himself. He was oh-so-close to nailing this one down. All he had to do was smile and walk down the stairs, let David have his little look, rap on a few floor joists, kick the support beams, and they'd be back in the office in no time, running some numbers and working up papers. And Reynolds would be rid of this house forever. All he had to do was finish the tour.

He surreptitiously wiped the sweat from his brow and stepped past David into the murk. His feet found the steps and he laughed aloud, trying to hide his nervousness.

"What's so funny?" David said.

"I forgot to tell you, the basement's half-finished. The previous owner was converting it into a rec room. Talk about your amenities, David. Only a little bit of payout, and you can have the perfect little hideaway. From the

wife and kids, know what I mean?”

“I like my wife and kids,” David said. “What about the previous owners?”

Damn, damn, damn. They *always* asked that question. Reynolds cleared his throat and continued down the roughed-in wooden stairs, following the flashlight’s beam. The darkness swallowed the light ten feet ahead as hungrily as the crawl-space swallowed the sound of their footsteps.

“Well, David, the previous owners were—” This was the real no-no. The one thing he’d learned was that you didn’t talk about people who had died in a house, especially a house you were trying to sell. Buyers were superstitious.

“—the previous owners were old, and this was a little too much house for them. They bought into a sweet condo deal on the coast.” Reynolds found lying distasteful. Sometimes lying was difficult for a salesman to avoid. But he preferred the more sophisticated methods of distraction, bait-and-switching, and blinding the customer with useless but eye-catching extravagances.

A nice window treatment kept them from noticing that the window was broken. A crystal chandelier hid stains caused by a leaky roof. A gilt-edged and wall-mounted mirror kept them so busy looking at themselves that they failed to see the odd shapes hovering in the alcove.

David shined the light into the belly of the house as they reached the smooth concrete floor at the bottom of the stairs. “Going to need a few strip lights down here.”

“Great place for a pool table and a big-screen TV,” Reynolds said, looking around warily.

David studied the plain gray walls, the nails visible in the sheetrock. “Smells a little musty,” he said.

“Yeah, been closed up too long. You get a little air in here, it’ll clear up in no time.”

It’s just a little decay. And that odor that never seemed to go away completely. Nothing unusual.

David sniffed again. "Sure there's no mice?"

Mice? *Everybody* had mice. But maybe David didn't tolerate mice. Some buyers were like that, even a man's man like David.

Everybody's got their own little quirks, don't they? You, for example. Acting like a big-shot wheeler-dealer, cool as a termite, like you could care less whether anybody ever takes this dump off your hands.

"Look how solid this construction is, Dave," Reynolds said, sneaking a peek to see if David minded the shortened form of his name.

David pounded on the sheet rock partition wall and frowned. "Sounds hollow."

Reynolds licked his lips. The spook should be here by now.

"So, why are the owners selling?" David asked. He shined the light into Reynolds' face, causing him to squint.

"Uh ... they wanted to move to a warmer climate. These Appalachian winters can be tough."

Oops. You need to sell them on the summers, when the air is fresh and the shade inviting and the cool creek bubbling beside the house is an asset, not an ice-coated hazard. Play up the investment angle, too.

"They move to Florida?" David asked, investigating the galvanized ductwork that ran beneath the flooring. Yellow insulation filled the gaps between the floor joists.

"Sure. Doesn't everybody?" Reynolds chuckled. He kept his eyes glued to the bouncing circle of the flashlight beam, though the thing he really wanted to see was probably hiding in the darkness, mere inches from the edge of light. His dread was nearly matched by his curiosity.

"You wouldn't be lying to me, would you, Reynolds?" The light exploded in his eyes again. "About somebody living here?"

He blinked rapidly. "I don't know what you're talking about, David. Now, we need to be getting back. Afraid I've got another appointment."

The light remained on his face. Reynolds could see nothing of the man behind the bright wash.

“Haven’t you seen enough?” Reynolds said, a little bit of the hey-old-chum tone still working its way into his voice. He decided to give one last try at turning over this property. “You just can’t find places like this anymore. More than a mile from the nearest house. You don’t have to worry about the neighborhood brats bugging you.”

“I like kids,” David said.

“Sure, David. And your kids will love it here. Plenty of room to play, hike, or just scream at the top of your lungs if you feel like it. You can scream for days and no one will notice.”

“And why would somebody need to scream? Is this place occupied or something?”

David’s words were eaten by the shadows. The stillness of the basement was broken only by Reynolds’ ragged heartbeat and breath.

“Occupied?” Reynolds said, not even having to pretend to sound startled. “This place isn’t occupied.”

“You wouldn’t lie to me, would you, Reynolds?”

He wasn’t lying. The house wasn’t haunted. Rather, it was ... what was that phrase? Oh yes, *multi-dimensionally possessed*.

Still, beads of sweat erupted on the high bare plane of Reynolds’ forehead. The light mercifully fell away and raced across the smooth white-gray of the cement.

“David, David, David,” Reynolds tutted, recovering somewhat now that his face was hidden by the darkness again. “I’m not a high-pressure kind of guy. If you don’t want the house, that’s fine with me.”

Well, not all that fine, because then I might have to drape a rope over the ductwork and twist a little noose and take myself a midnight swing.

Not many buyers existed for a palace like this. While the layout was great, the house was a little too angled. You stepped inside and you felt

uneasy. The walls listened and the electrical sockets were tiny black eyes and every single nail and screw and chunk of spackle whispered and every board groaned, even when the wind was still.

Surely David had sensed it, too. That's why he'd asked the question. It's the kind of house you'd *expect* to be occupied.

"I'll have to put some deadwood braces between those joists," David said. "They're starting to bow a little."

Reynolds smiled to himself. David had spoken possessively. The deal was all but sealed. If only she would stay away long enough to get David back up the stairs.

"Uh, David? Don't you have a plane to catch?"

"Huh?"

"Your wife. You said you were picking her up at the airport."

"Oh, yeah. Guess I've seen enough, anyhow." David headed for the stairs.

Reynolds' heart flipped for joy. He didn't even mind that David had left him in darkness. He hurried after David.

That's when it came out, built itself from the bricks and mortar of nightmare. Nailed itself together with the claw hammer of insanity. Staple-gunned its mockery of flesh into form.

It was *her*.

She looked him in the face, her eyes deeply bright and strange, her mouth curled into a smile. "You're *real*," she whispered, no fear in her voice.

Reynolds drew in a sharp breath, then swallowed the scream that filled his lungs. The basement air tasted of fiberglass and tomb dust. David paused on the stairs, then whipped the light around.

"What was that?" David asked.

"Nothing," Reynolds said. "Nothing but a bunch of nothing."

David thundered down the steps, splashed the light around in the corners of the room. "I know I saw it."

Reynolds adjusted the necktie that seemed to be choking him. "Listen, David my man, you've seen all there is to see."

"Except the breather."

"The breather?" Reynolds shrugged innocently. The last three prospective buyers had said nothing, only shivered and hurried up the stairs. None of them had returned Reynolds' follow-up phone calls. But David seemed to be immune to the skin-crawling sensation caused by the basement's tangible tenant.

"I know there's a breather here," David said, sounding like all the other pompous out-of-staters who thought money gave them the right to bully around mountain people.

"No breathers," Reynolds said. "Breathers don't exist."

"Most of the summer houses in the Appalachian Mountains are supposed to be empty. I'll be damned if I'm going to own a house that has a restless spirit banging around. Where's the peace in that?"

The woman stepped into the flashlight's beam. Reynolds stumbled backward, bumping into the bottom step and nearly losing his balance.

"I see you," she said, reaching out her hand as if to touch an expensive fabric. "I *knew* this place was haunted."

David splashed his beam of light on the breather. Her satisfied grin absorbed the light, sucked it into the netherwhere of her chest. The dim basement grew even darker, became the pit of a hell so bleak that even fire could not draw air. The only luminescence came from the strange glowing eyes of the human, floating like the lost moons of insane planets.

Reynolds fell to his knees, his only comfort the hard, cold concrete. He hated this next part. The only thing worse than losing a sale was watching a fellow ghost have his very foundations rocked. The prospects either went insane or found a religion that worked, but either way Reynolds remained stuck with this damned piece of overpriced unreal estate.

The woman flipped on the overhead lights and punched at her cellular phone, her breath as sharp as a winter wind in her excitement. "Meryl?" she

said into the phone. "You know that house I just bought? It's *haunted*! Oh, this is just so *terribly* delightful."

David backed up the stairs slowly, disgust and horror etched on his face.

"Jackie's going to simply *die* with jealousy," the breather prattled into her phone. "We'll get together for a seance soon, I promise. Right here in the basement, that's the cold spot. Of course, I'll have to redecorate first."

Reynolds drifted after David, who had already reached the top of the stairs. "David. It's not what you think. I can slash it to three-and-a-quarter, David. But the offer's not going to be on the table long."

David was pale, shocked, too recently dead to comprehend all the workings of the immaterial world.

"Excuse me, I ... I have a plane crash to catch," David said, looking down at his hands as if expecting to see an owner's manual for his amorphous flesh. Then he shimmered and whisked across the room.

"Call me?" Reynolds said weakly, but David was already through the wall.

Reynolds succumbed to the sideways gravity and the interdimensional currents dragged him to the basement stairs. He sat on the hard wood, mingling with the dust that the breather had stirred with her industrious cleaning. Her words echoed off the concrete walls, frightening and shrill.

"And black velvet drapes," she said into the phone. "No, there are no windows down here, but drapes are called for all the same. One can't have a seance room without black velvet drapes. I'll have some crates of candles shipped in for the occasion. Oh, this is going to be simply *divine*."

Reynolds rubbed at his weary eyes and looked up at the beam where he had draped the noose. The wood was slightly splintered from the friction caused by his body weight. Eighty grand in the hole hadn't been worth killing himself over. Not to get trapped in a hell like this one, where he had to close a final deal before being allowed to rest in peace.

"Oh, I'm certain he'll be back," the woman said. "He had that look. You know, the one your second husband had? Yes, the 'doomed puppy dog'

look.” Her laughter hurt Reynolds’ ears.

Reynolds stood and brushed the cobwebs from his sleeves. No use hanging around here. He’d be summoned back soon enough. In the meantime, self-pity wasn’t going to get this house moved. He’d learned that in salesman school. The only way to unload property was to circulate, press the flesh, talk fast and smile faster.

Maybe the breather would take a vacation, fly down to Florida, go on a tour of America’s haunted houses or something. A window of opportunity would open, another mark would want to be shown around. All Reynolds had to do was keep the old confidence, comb the hair over his bald spot, and act like a generous uncle who wanted to make someone’s American dream come true, and maybe soon this house would be somebody else’s problem.

She’d said he looked a doomed puppy dog. What an insult. The living had absolutely no sensitivity. Well, at least *he* didn’t lurk in dark basements hoping to catch a glimpse of the other side.

Reynolds tried on a glib smile. His ‘closer face’. A good salesman didn’t stay down for long. He whistled as he drifted through the wall and under the moonlight in search of buyers.

A sucker was born every minute, he reminded himself. And just as many suckers died.