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MY MOST FRIGHTENING EXPERIENCE : A HALLOWEEN STORY IN MONTEVALLO

by Marshel Roy Cunningham

My love of history began when I was a child. Maybe it was the arrowheads I would find in our back field along Shoal Creek. Maybe it was the broken pieces of mule chains that would wash up in the red gullies on our farm (now Orr Park) after a summer storm. Or perhaps it was the square nails I would dig out of tin buckets sitting in dark corners of the hay barn. I became a hunter and gatherer of old things. My grandmother gave me the blue fruit jars discarded in her basement. To me, anything old was valuable. Knowing this about me will help you to understand what led me to experience the most frightening event of my life.

Miss Dearborn lived in one of Montevallo's old Victorian homes. That was not her real name. I'm not telling you her real name. Some of you may have heard of her. Some of you might have been friends with her. I don't want anyone to know who she really was. If there ever were people named Dearborn who lived in Montevallo, it was not them. I'm making the name up. Don't ask me who she really was, because I won't tell you.

I got to know her because one of my grandfather's cousins, Miss Ella Peters, knew her. They would talk family history and Montevallo history and Miss Dearborn discovered that Cousin Ella had given me her father's old hand written ledger with notes about Shelby County people. Several genealogists knew I had the book. Miss Meroney knew I had the book and never liked me because I wouldn't loan it to her to use in the history of Montevallo she was writing. I didn't care if she liked me or not, because, first of all, I was a teenager, and second, Cousin Ella had given me the book with strict instructions that it was never to be loaned out or leave my possession.

Miss Dearborn asked Cousin Ella if I would come by for a visit and allow her to see the ledger. I wanted to see the inside of her old house so I thought that would be a fine idea. Besides, like Mr. DiOrio (my Latin and French teacher at the college), I had the condition Dr. Eva Golson called "grandmother complex." We both loved old ladies. I wanted to meet Miss Dearborn to see if she had any good stories about my family, or old Montevallo, or anything about the past that might be useful to write in my own ledgers which I was creating.

I was not disappointed. Miss Dearborn was my type of old lady. She knew a lot about a lot of things historical. She read each page of the ledger and knew several of the people Cousin Ella's father had mentioned. I was in genealogy blue-haired old lady heaven. I cannot describe her as a chatty type of woman, but she was educated and friendly enough for me, and apparently approved of me and my love of history.

All of the furniture in the room was what I considered to be "antique," so I said something about how nice it would be someday for me to have a house like hers. I think I used the magic word "heirlooms" and that set us off on a piece by piece house tour of her oak tables, needlepoint chairs, and mahogany etageres in the rooms.

The drapes were very heavy for the 1970's, the carpets a little worn, and the sofas overstuffed (probably 1930's), but even as a teenager I could pick out the 1840's Empire mixed

in with a few pieces she had gathered that had been cast off "from the early days of the college."

After we walked the first floor, we got to the stairs. Miss Dearborn told me I could go up and explore the rooms if I wanted to, because there were some very nice old things up there, but she said she would just wait downstairs. I concluded that she rarely if ever went up herself, as she had a downstairs bedroom, and there were at least sixteen steps to climb since the ceiling was twelve feet high. Miss Dearborn had relatives in another state, but Miss Ella had told me they were elderly and no longer visited her. Miss Dearborn lived quietly alone, and her furniture had not been moved or replaced during my entire lifetime. I was ready for a time-capsule adventure.

It was darker upstairs because the blinds and drapes in most of the rooms were partly if not completely closed, but my eyes adjusted and I was able to see well enough. All the beds were made up and a bit musty since no one had slept in them for twenty years or more. Framed prints of flowers hung on the walls, but I did find three or four portraits in charcoal whom I supposed were her deceased family members.

I sat down at an Art Deco vanity, the kind with three mirrors. I noticed the silver in the mirror had begun to peel, and in the reflection of the room behind me, I was startled to see someone walking down the hall past the door. I thought maybe Miss Dearborn had decided to come up after all, but when I went to the bedroom door, there was no one in the hallway.

I dismissed it as nothing but my teenage imagination, and entered the next room, which had a massive tester bed with a matching marble top dresser. The marble had black and gold veins. There were a dozen empty or half empty perfume bottles sitting against the mirror. I opened one; the clear liquid inside had a faintly sweet smell.

As I walked out into the hall, I was sure this time I saw a shadow-like form enter another bedroom, even though the door to the bedroom was closed. I admit I had a full body chill and my eyes watered. I had not expected this to be a part of the upstairs tour. This was the end of it for me. I lost all interest in any further house exploration and made a quick retreat to the staircase. I had no desire to wait around for a possible third encounter.

I don't know who or what was in the upstairs hallway. I have no explanation for my being able to see what I saw. I only know that whatever it was, it was very real at the time.

The stairs were steep so I got a firm hold on the rail, and glanced quickly down the hall before sliding my hand down the bannister. Miss Dearborn was calmly sitting in the chair at the bottom of the stairs.

You have heard of people who have a face you can read like a book? I must be one of those people, because when Miss Dearborn looked at me she seemed to understand all the emotions running through my mind.

"You saw her, didn't you?" she asked.

I closed my eyes and managed a faint "yes" in reply. (The End)