

The House Hunter

by Christopher Peter

I blame the houses. At least one a day; three or four or sometimes five at weekends. I'm getting sick of them to be honest. Ever since Mel and I resolved to escape our miniscule flat and hurl ourselves onto the slippery bottom rung of the property ladder, it's been houses, houses, bloody houses every single day.

There's always something wrong with them too. I'm constantly amazed how so many things can be not *quite* right with a place. Too small, wrong location, needs too much work, wrong – I don't know – smell, *feel*. None have felt like they could really be our home.

Except one, that is, and that's the one I dream about. I mean, literally.

It's just weird. I'm standing there, outside. It looks pretty ordinary, detached, nineteen-thirties perhaps. Slightly shabby, neat garden. But right away, even in the pale jaundiced glow of the street light, I know it's basically perfect. The right road. Room for improvement, but not too much work needed. Extension potential. We could live here, Mel and I, we really could. Bright domestic daydreams start to play across my mind.

It's not until I'm inside that I realise something is wrong after all.

I don't believe in ghosts. Never have. So why I am so totally, stone cold certain that there's one inside that house? The place is in darkness of course. The silence enfolds me, throbbing in my ears; but there's the faintest frisson in the air, like static electricity, as I wander through the downstairs rooms. And the smell ... old woman. Very old; dust and disinfectant and cloyingly flowery perfume. I remember my Great Aunt Ethel who used to grab my arm with skeletal vice-like fingers and plant a slopping kiss on my cheek.

I feel like my feet are encased in concrete shoes as I drag them across the scarred hallway carpet. I can see the staircase, dissolving into inky blackness. I don't want to look there but I do.

A pale shape oozes out of the gloom on the stairs. Nebulous at first. Then I can see her face, big and square, almost masculine, framed by a haze of white hair. Her eyes, vivid blue, widen as they seem to focus on me. Can she see me? Surely she can't see me?

I fight to breathe but the air is treacle as I slowly back away towards the door. This isn't fair, I find myself thinking; this house is perfect but for *her*.

There's another sound, someone singing, a buzzing cacophony; and as always it takes a few moments to realise it's my bedside alarm clock and I'm awake, gazing feebly at my own bedroom ceiling. First disorientated, then angry that I've had that stupid lousy dream yet again.

It's Saturday, so an hour later Melissa and I were in the car, on our way to another viewing. She was driving and chatting while I unfolded the house details and started reading. Then I saw the photograph and felt my heart freeze.

She glanced over. 'Phil?'

'Oh my ...' I swallowed. 'Mel ... It's the house.'

'Yeah, Sherlock. What do you mean?'

'My dream ...?'

'What? Not the *ghost* dream?' She laughed. 'What's got into you?'

'But it's the same house.'

'No it's not, you idiot. Coincidence. Your dream house isn't real, right?'

Wrong. As we rounded the last bend, there it was, shaded by great oaks, dappled in the yellow morning sunlight. It looked every inch as dreamily perfect as I'd always imagined, and at that moment about as haunted as our car. As soon as I saw it I felt myself relax, my muscles melting into goo. Maybe it would be

all right after all. I had no idea how I'd already seen it in my dreams, but that no longer seemed to matter. By the time I stepped out of the car onto the gravel driveway, my mind had already begun to concoct some vague pop-psychology theory that the 'ghost' was nothing more than a manifestation of my naturally cynical subconscious, unwilling to admit to this kind of happy ending.

This optimistic conviction lasted roughly five seconds, until I looked up.

There she was, framed in an upstairs window. I blinked; still there. Her face, big and square, almost masculine, framed by a haze of white hair. I looked away; then back. Vivid blue eyes widened as they focussed on me.

I tried to speak but my tongue had swollen to fill my mouth. I wanted to point but my arm hung uselessly beside me.

Mel didn't seem to notice; and at that moment her phone tinkled. 'Hello? Oh – hi Mrs Granger ... yes ... oh, really?' She listened in silence for a few seconds, standing with one hand on the car door. 'Look, I ... can I call you back? OK, thanks, bye.'

She slowly lowered the phone, then stared up at me with an expression I couldn't quite read. It unnerved me. 'Um ... Mel? Who was that ...?'

'Mrs Granger.'

'Who's ...?'

'The vendor. She lives here.'

'OK ... but ...'

'Seems you were right, Phil. Apparently this place really is haunted.'

I let out a long sigh. 'Right.'

Mel gestured up at the window. Unwillingly my eyes followed. The old woman was still there. Now she was holding something small and black.

'She says she sees the ghost a lot,' Mel continued. 'Says he's here most nights.'

My brain finally caught up with what the old woman was holding. It was a phone.

Mel was still gazing at me. Almost like she'd seen me for the first time. Eyes wide, just like Mrs Granger's.

'Phil ... what the hell's been going on?'