

DOLLHOUSE



Popcorn
Paperbacks

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy winds and downy flake.

The woods are lovely dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.
-Robert Frost

1

The distant thunderclap cut like a knife. Snapping her eyelids back, Darla awoke from the deepest sleep she could recall. The fog in her mind kept things from being clear. Gripping the pillow, she squeezed it, listening—the room was barely visible, light cast from behind her. Her thoughts began to race about what that clatter could have been. As her eyes adjusted, Darla saw the room she was in, and it wasn't hers. Rolling onto her back, she scanned the room—no recognition of the ceiling, the blue walls, or the bed she lay in.

BANG!

The same clatter brought Darla lurching upwards, clasping her gray knitted cardigan shirt with her left hand against her chest. Her eyes were wide and terrified. Turning to her left, she saw a window allowing in the natural sunlight, nearly blinding her. Predictable questions ran through her mind. *What's going on? Where am I? How'd I get—*"

Muffled voices abruptly rose from outside her bedroom door. Darla snapped her eyes and attention towards it, listening in. She couldn't quite make out what it was—the voices were unfamiliar. A fiery yell barrelled from outside her room, followed by:

BANG!

The sound of the impact resonated in her chest, making her stomach jump. Her eyes finally adjusted to the light in the room. Darla peeked outside the small bedroom window. She was in a house surrounded by dark trees stretching as far as her eyes could see. Her heart was beating double-time—her breathing, rapid. Taking her feet off the bed and resting them on the cold wooden floor, the edge of her right foot nudged her shoes placed neatly side by side. Slipping them on, she made her way to the door.

BANG!

Again, it roared. Darla tiptoed over, leaned in, and pressed her ear against the door. The muffled voices still spoke. From what she could gather, it was two men. “My captives?” Darla questioned. Pondering, she tried to think of her last memory. The vision of her children, Luke and Olivia, brushing their teeth came to mind. But that was it. Nothing equalled her waking in this bed, in this room, in this house. A debate raged in her mind: Should I or should I not go out there?

Darla retraced her steps. She went around to the opposite side of the bed and the window. Looking for a way to open it, to her surprise, she found none. The window was just that—a window. It had no handle to grab onto to slide it open. Pushing it also proved useless. The windows were not made to be opened.

Another clatter broke out, followed by, “FUCK!” from one of the men. Taking a breath, Darla made her way back to the door. She leaned in again, trying to make out what the two men were doing. The debate no longer raged in her mind. One answer stood clear as victor.

Taking a deep breath, Darla grasped the knob of the bedroom door. Twisting it, she pulled it open a sliver. Light washed over Darla. Peeking her head through the gap, she saw a hallway full of doors, all white with black numbers hanging in the middle. Darla caught the number on her door as she turned and gazed up. Room 5.

“Fuckin’ hell!” she heard.

Darla’s gaze followed the hallway to an open concept living room with two men—one tall and one short—standing side by side. The taller stranger held a black stool in his hands, both hands clasped tightly around the legs. The shorter man had his arms crossed as he stared out the window. Squinting, she tried to see what they were viewing. From what she could gather, it was just more trees on that side too. The taller man then lifted the stool like he was the

crept back to the blue door. Her gaze was fixated on the men in the living room. She saw the taller man pick up the stool again and raise it above his shoulders just as she reached the blue door. With her eyes still focused down the hallway, she moved her hands behind her as she felt for the black handle. Grasping it and twisting, she felt the door slowly open. As the tall stranger swung and hit the window again, Darla opened the door and snuck inside, pushing the door shut behind herself.

Once inside, she found she was in a bathroom, bright light streaming in from a skylight above her. Stepping to the middle and looking up, Darla saw blue sky and the tips of tall pine trees dancing and swaying in the wind. As she looked around, she saw no light switch. There were no cupboards and only a few towels stacked on a shelf beside the bathtub. Everything, except the towels, was blue.

The room—this whole place— nothing made sense.

Pausing her search, Darla looked down and found she was wearing a gray cardigan sweater with a white T-shirt underneath, dark blue jeans, and white socks. Sticking her hands into her pockets and swishing her fingers around, she pulled out a photograph. Holding it under the skylight, she saw the smiles of Luke and Olivia with their arms around each other. Her late husband, Evan, was behind them—all with gleaming smiles. It was her favourite photograph of

them, on a trip to visit her relatives in Haiti. Seeing this picture, Darla hoped that maybe this would trigger a memory of how she'd arrived, but nothing came to her. One thing she did know though was that was by far the strangest thing to happen to her in all her thirty-three years.

Darla decided she had no choice left but to confront the two men. She took slow and tentative steps to the other end of the hallway, where both men still had their backs turned to her. The taller man lifted the stool upwards, taking another few strides forward before once again driving the stool against the window. This would be the last time he would do so as the stool blew apart on impact. Two legs flew to the floor as the other two stayed tightly gripped in his hands, the seat landing and spinning like a plate by his feet until it lost all momentum. Neither spoke. The shorter fellow stayed still with his arms crossed, and the taller man tossed the remaining legs against the wall in frustration. Darla then took her final step and the floor creaked.

2

She froze, and both men turned. There, Darla stood, pressing her back against the wall. Both men stared at her, though they didn't say anything at first. She stood still, stiff with fear. Her eyes slowly roamed the eerie, bare space she found herself in, seeing a living room with a large gray clock on the wall as she looked for potential routes of escape. To her right, there was a kitchen with an island counter in the centre and a couple more of the black wooden stools around it. To her left, a four-step staircase led down to the middle-section of the house. It was there she saw a red door. The men must have been able to tell that she was both terrified and confused.

Though there was only silence, body language proved to be the louder than anything in the room. The taller fellow cleared his throat, causing Darla to catch his glare. He stood broad-shouldered and looked to be in his early sixties, weighing a good two-twenty, and his long white hair was

parted around a weathered face. He looked to be the type of man that had many stories to tell.

“Hello,” he said, but only silence followed.

Darla didn't have her breathing under control. Her heart was pumping at a rapid pace, and a cold sweat was brewing. The shorter man took a step forward, giving her an almost robotic smile. He was square shaped wearing a green sweater and blue jeans, and he looked to be in his late thirties, give or take, with thick dark eyebrows that nobody could miss. He gave her an awkward wave. “Hello, I'm Jesse,” he said.

Darla stared at him, terrified, seemingly unable to speak.

“And I'm Ken,” the taller man added.

“Wh-why do you have me here?” Darla asked, finally building up the courage to speak.

“Have... you... here? You've got the wrong idea, Miss. We didn't kidnap you or anything,” Ken said, giving her a strange glare as he combed his white hair back with his fingers.

Jesse took one step forward, and when he did, Darla took a step back. He stopped, raising his left hand calmly. “Ken and I just met. We've both woken up without a clue of how we got here. Would that be the case with you too...umm...”

“Darla,” she answered with regret. “My name is Darla.”

Jesse continued, “We tried to open the door, but it seems to be locked. The knob won’t twist, and the lock above won’t slide. And the windows...well, they just won’t open. As you undoubtedly saw, we’ve even tried breaking them—”

Ken interrupted, looking over at Jesse with a frown. “*I* tried breaking them; it was useless. Bulletproof glass, I reckon. Check out the door, though. See for yourself,” he finished. Jesse nodded, and turning to Darla, he gave a slow grin.

Darla slid her back towards the door, turning and going down the steps to the main entrance. The door was bright red with a black doorknob, and a vertical window sat to the right, from ceiling to floor, at shoulder to shoulder-width. Darla noticed a brown wooden porch just outside.

Grabbing hold of the handle, Darla jiggled the doorknob, which posed restraint. As she attempted to open the door, she kept checking back over her shoulder. The unease of the two men lingered, tickling her spine. Back at it and pinching the slide lock that was above the doorknob, Darla twisted with every muscle to turn it north, but her attempts were fruitless.

“We told you!” Ken shouted from the living room.

Darla balled her fist as she leaned against the locked door. Tears of frustration were now begging to be released. Taking in a breath, Darla shut her eyes and rolled her head

over her shoulders. She ran her fingers along the seam of the door, then one of the windows. Shifting, Darla stood in front of the window. Leaning back, she gave it the best kick she could, but she only succeeded in falling to the floor. Eyes glaring at the ceiling, tears came trickling down her cheeks that Darla couldn't hold in. "This is a nightmare," she muttered.

To her right, Darla noticed stairs that she assumed led to a basement of sorts. Light from there caught her attention. Getting up, she wiped her tears and went over to investigate. Carefully, she descended the steps, not wanting Ken or Jesse to hear her. Once downstairs, Darla found that the basement had three sofas and a light hanging right in the middle—similar to the one in the kitchen. There were no windows on the blue walls. Suddenly, creaks in the floorboards above caught her attention. Darla listened, following the noise. The steps came from the hallway, and the voice that spoke was, again, one she did not recognize.

3

As she came up the stairs, Darla immediately noticed the new stranger. Standing tall, he was bald and broad-shouldered with a heavy beard. Wearing only a black sweater and jeans, he appeared to be in his fifties. The man stood with his guard up, distrust and stress evident in his eyes. His glare struck Darla. As she stood at the mid-section of the house, the man's shoulders turned to her, and he asked, "Do you have any clue what's goin' on here?" Darla only shook her head, stepping to the upper level and keeping her eyes on the stranger as she did so. Her first instinct was to shield herself, to not be seen.

"What's your name?" he asked.

She hesitated. Who were these men? What kind of a sick abduction was this?

"What is your name, miss, please."

"Darla," she said, softly.

He took a step forward—one of ease. His gaze started at her feet and crawled up slowly to meet her eyes. Once there,

he smiled. "Name's Robert. How'd a beautiful young lady like you get here?"

Darla shivered when he spoke. "I don't know. I can't remember how," she admitted.

"Looks like that's all of us then, huh," Robert replied loudly, still keeping his eyes on Darla. After checking her out once more—this time from top to bottom—he turned back to Ken and Jesse. "So, you've tried opening all the doors and windows? I assume all that fuckin' banging I heard was you two trying to break them?"

Ken gave Robert a nod. "That's correct." He then made his way to the first sofa and took a seat. Jesse then followed and joined him.

Robert frowned as he watched the two. "Is this really the time to get comfy?" he asked.

Ken shrugged. "I've been swingin' all morning, friend. I just need to sit down to process all this."

"You need time to process? How long have you been up? Have you tried the doors? Givin' it a real go I mean. Using strength. Or did you just twist the knob like an old pussy?"

Jesse chuckled.

"Don't fuckin' laugh!" Robert barked.

"You haven't tried the skylight in the bathroom, have you?" Darla chipped in.

"Skylight?" Ken said in surprise.

“Fuck you,” Darla said anxiously before Ken could respond, in no mood to put up with Robert’s shit.

He turned and smiled. “Nah, bitch, fuck you.”

“You want to be a prick, fine, go ahead, check the door, the windows, everything,” Darla said. She then leaned against the wall, arms crossed and staring at Robert. He nodded, smiled, then walked past her, storming towards the door. Darla watched as he got there, stopped, and looked through the window. Grabbing onto the doorknob, Robert twisted it hard. He then huffed and puffed as he tried to undo the lock.

“Come on,” he said under his breath. He stood for a few moments, deciding what to do next. He eventually settled on pulling the door. “COME ON!” he let out as he let go. Darla turned and saw Ken and Jesse, sitting, listening, and shaking their heads.

“The best option I think, right now, is to wait for the owners to stop by. This is clearly some mistake,” Jesse said.

Ken shook his head. “I don’t think so. Honestly, what rational person locks people up in a house? One that has no way out too,” he added.

“I’m just saying,” Jesse said, looking down at his feet as they heard Robert coming back up the stairs.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake!” he cried out in frustration. He headed over to the windows, checking for a handle, but he quickly realised there was nothing. Slamming his hand

against the window, Robert couldn't help but let out a chuckle. "Can't be real. This can't be fucking real." Turning to them all, he added, "How are you all not freaked out by this shit?"

Ken shot up, unable to contain his bottled-up wrath. Bolting forward, Ken clung onto Robert's shirt underneath his black jacket with a tight fist just below his neck. It happened within seconds, and none were prepared. Ken held him tight—flush red in the face and neck—and screamed, "This isn't a fucking dream! We didn't put you here, asshole! Can't you fucking listen?"

Jesse stayed put, watching with his legs crossed and fingers laced together as the drama erupted. Darla stepped back as the violence unfolded.

Robert struggled as he pushed Ken away, trying to get his hands off him as Ken shoved him up against the window. "What the fuck, man!" Robert said to him.

Ken, with fire in his eyes, continued his rage. "Why would we want to be stuck anywhere with *you*?"

Robert forced his hand toward Ken's face and shoved him away. Taking a few steps back, Ken stopped, brushed his white hair back, and stood in front of Robert, taking deep breaths of rage. Darla moved away as the sight of the man led her to think he might explode. Ken's eyes began to flutter, and his breathing started to slow its pace. Robert stepped back, fixing his jacket. Ken didn't say a word; he

closed his mouth and began to breathe with a meditative technique. His knuckles rapped on his leg again as he tried to calm himself. The room was tense as they all watched Ken do his thing.

“Psycho,” Robert muttered as he turned to walk away, but as he did so, he came to an abrupt stop. Darla noticed him staring down the hallway. As she turned, she saw what Robert was looking at—a young late-twenty-something-year-old man with a blond buzz-cut, in a black tux with the bow tie undone, stood leaning against the wall at the end of the hallway. He was hungover by the looks of it.

Rubbing his face and shaking his head at the scene he had just witnessed, the young stranger gave a laugh. “Damn, I thought the party was over last night.”

4

“Who are you?” Robert asked, but the guy just slugged off the wall, dragging his feet to the kitchen. “Hey, man, I’m talking to you,” Robert tried again, yet the guy just went straight to the sink.

Opening cupboards, he seemed to be looking for something. He opened them all but found each one empty. “Folks, where’re those glasses? Phillip’s got himself a hangover,” he said, loud and clear for the others to hear.

“Your name’s Phillip?” Darla asked.

The young man turned around, aiming his fingers like guns towards her. “Pow-pow, bingo-bingo.” He then spun back around to the sink.

“You think you’re a comedian?” Robert asked, losing his patience immediately with the little shit, and Jesse let out a laugh. Robert turned to him, and Jesse stopped and nodded apologetically.

Phillip turned the tap of the sink, but nothing came out. He frowned as he waited, twisting it again, but still, no water

“The food could be poisoned for all we know,” she explained.

Phillip paused, trying to understand. “All of this has gone bad?”

“No,” she said. “None of us know what’s going on right now. The food may not be good for us.”

“*Or* it’ll be the only food we’ll have for some time,” Ken added as he sat himself down again.

Phillip pivoted and let out a laugh. “Was this not—” He stopped, staring around the room, the fog slowly clearing in his mind. “This is not where I partied last night, is it?” he asked.

Darla shook her head. “I highly doubt it.”

“So, you’ve also never been here before or have any memory of how you got here?” Robert asked.

Phillip thought for a moment, shook his head, and said, “No.” Panic then seemed to set in, and he took a step back from them all. “Who are you people?” he asked.

Ken spoke up from the couch. “Buddy, listen—”

“Hey, I’m not your buddy. I’m not anyone’s fuckin’ buddy. You hear me?” Phillip replied.

Steps down the hallway echoed through the room, interrupting their fighting. The five of them snapped their eyes towards the sound in unison. A man in his thirties with retro-rimmed glasses, wearing a brown blazer and black

DOLLHOUSE

jeans, stood nervously beside door number 7—the bedroom they assumed he'd just woken in. He was nervous, they could tell. Raising his hand and giving an awkward wave, he said, "I-I'm Floyd. Can someone please tell me what's happening?"

5

“I just can’t believe it, sorry,” Floyd said. He pushed past Darla and headed to the door.

Phillip followed, “I’m with this guy.”

Both made it to the door, but to no one’s surprise, they struggled with it. “This isn’t funny. Open it,” Floyd said.

Darla shrugged. “We are not playin’ you guys.”

Ken got up from his seat, walked over to the kitchen, and had a look at the taps. He turned them on, yet nothing worked. Opening the kitchen cabinet doors underneath, Ken went to check the plumbing, but there were no pipes, no nothing. It was nothing more than a mock set up.

“Open the goddamn door!” Phillip demanded.

“We can’t,” Robert explained, and the others nodded in agreement.

Floyd stood in front of the window, staring at the woods. Stepping closer and gazing all around, the trees seemed to wrap around the house. Running upstairs, he looked out of the windows. Darla watched as Floyd began to

panic. Backtracking from the window, he headed back into the hallway. He stopped once he saw Darla, pressing his glasses up against the bridge of his nose.

“Please, this isn’t a game you’re playing, is it? Just be honest with me. People have played games with me my whole life. It’s not funny. Just tell me the truth,” he implored, begging for a proper answer.

Darla shook her head, almost feeling ashamed. “I-I just woke up, Floyd. Just like you.” Floyd nodded, then continued down the hallway to his room, attempting to open the window there instead.

Ken stepped into the bathroom, checking the sink. Again, no water flowed when the taps were turned on. These two squeaked and required grease. Ken tried the tub as well. Nothing. His last option was the toilet. Opening the lid, he found there was no water in the bowl. He even checked the toilet tank, lifting off the heavy porcelain lid, yet no water was inside, not even any mechanics. It was plain empty. Ken caught himself in the mirror on the way out and muttered, “This place fake?”

Phillip paced around the living room with the others, thrashing his arms back and forth as if he was trying to get his blood flowing. “I just. This isn’t fucking real, right? I’m in a nightmare.” The others stood and sat around him, watching.

Floyd walked up to try and interject.

“Forget about this asshole and have a seat, Ken,” Floyd said.

“I don’t listen to you. And, Phillip, you haven’t a clue what’s coming if you keep with this attitude. Keep spilling those—”

“You’re fucking pond scum!” Phillip shouted again as he leaned towards Ken, just pushing past Darla.

Ken snapped and lunged forward, hooking his hand around the back of Phillip’s head. He pulled Phillip towards himself, causing the younger man to lose his balance. Before he landed on his knees, Ken swung his right fist, which collided with Phillip’s left cheek. He took the hit, then fell to his knees. Darla went to grab Phillip as Robert and Floyd charged for Ken. He was able to get two more swings in before Robert and Floyd checked him against the fridge doors, pressing him tightly against his back. Darla tugged on Phillip’s shirt collar, bringing him back to a sitting position.

“Fuck you, rich boy!” Ken cried out.

“Fuck you, peasant!” Phillip cried back over Floyd’s shoulder.

Darla stuck herself between the two, getting in the way as Ken attempted to go at Phillip again. It was up to her to break up the fight. She stood in front, raising her hands, looking him in the eye. “Enough. Enough of this,” she said, yet Ken still tried to get her out of the way.

“This fucker isn’t going to get away with calling us that!” Ken shouted, pointing with furious rage towards Phillip. Robert and Floyd kept Ken pinned to the fridge as he struggled to get at Phillip.

“Come on, you fuck. Letting the lady get in your way?” Phillip said with an arrogant smile, flushed red in his face. Ken took a breath, his upper lip curling as he struggled to maintain himself.

“Don’t let him get to you,” Darla begged Ken.

“Little fucking late for that,” Ken admitted. He backed off into the living room, shaking off his fury. Ken sat beside Jesse, who was again sitting comfortably, fingers laced and watching the show.

Robert and Floyd pushed Phillip back, but he spat at their feet, fixing his tux and barking, “Fuckin’ assholes!”

Robert took a step forward, then Phillip, cowardly, took a step back. Robert raised his finger at him about to speak, but Phillip shot his words in before he could. “What the fuck you gonna do? Huh, What the fuck you gonna do, bro?” he challenged, smiling, arms out and eyes wide.

Robert shook his head. “Millennials,” he retorted and joined the others.

“Okay, I can’t deal with any more of this,” Darla said. She dug into her pockets and swished her hands around. The others stared at her while she did this, all in wonder. Finally, Darla pulled out what looked like a small, 4-by-6

photograph. Flipping it around, she held the photo before her, making sure they all got a good look. “This here is a photo of my late husband and my two babies, Luke and Olivia, 8 and 11. Right now, they’re terrified because their mother isn’t with them. If I’m not there, that means they’re alone. Every second that ticks by makes me feel just a little sicker knowing that they’re scared that I’m not around. I. Will. Get. Home. So... the quicker we all start acting like adults, the better.

“All of us are scared as hell and even more confused. But, by God, you think we’re going to get home acting like morons? Tell me one thing we’ve done so far—anything—that has gained us any progress? You know this house is defective. So much about it isn’t right. None of us have any memory of how we got here. It’s *Twilight Zone* shit, I know, but hell, can we all pull it together to figure out a solution to this problem instead of just adding to it?”

Everyone in the room paused their squabbling.

“You’re right,” Floyd said, smiling at Darla.

“I know.” Darla put the photo back into her pocket. “We’ve got food, but it’s really limited. We’ve—”

“I say we wait,” Jesse interrupted.

“Wait?” asked Ken.

“Yeah, like I said before, somebody owns this house. Why not just wait til they get back?” Jesse scanned the room, searching for an agreeable face.

“And then what? Shake their dicks and say hello?”
Robert said.

“No more waiting,” Darla said. “We figure out a way out of here.”

Floyd raised his hand. “May I just say something... There are six of us here, but there are seven rooms. Who’s the last guest?”