The perfect children

by vermicious_knid

Summary

What if the children of the story were never set free, never managed to escape? What if they were left to starve in the attic?

(Ghost story au meant for halloween, but never got around to finish it in time...)

"I wish I had yesterday,
I wish there were games to play...”
V.C . Andrews

In Virginia you seldom spoke of the Dollangangers, unless you absolutely had to.

Doing so not only meant bad luck, but you ran a risk of other things happening to you. You could say one of their names out loud, only to find the milk you just put out of the fridge gone sour. A healthy plant in the windowsill could wilt within the hour. Yes, such was the power of that name.

A mother never spoke of the dollangangers without keeping a watchful, worried eye on her children. Things go bad for you if you speak too long about those children, they say.

If you find a dead mouse outside your front door, you might have said all of their names in a quick whisper, unaware. If you suddenly find that your basement is crawling with rats, ask where your children have been playing after school. Perhaps they have gone up to that house on the hill where the vines grow long and the roses bloom all year long. It was a beautiful place, no doubt about that. At once looming and innocent, in the midday sun it was almost plain looking – an old Victorian
tomb in a neighborhood where most of the old had been torn down for the new American dream. A tired old hag doing not much harm on her own.

But heaven help you if you dared to look up. Up into the attic windows.

Or even worse - ring the doorbell and someone might invite you inside, and then anybody who is anyone knows that you will never come back.

Children couldn’t stop talking about them – even though they swore to their parents not to. It was a whispered tale, for sleepovers and spooky nights when the power was cut by the weather, and every household had to dig out candles and matches. Someone especially brave would start by lighting a candle and saying: Do you remember the Dollangangers?

*Of course they do.*

It was so long ago now, nobody quite remembers the whole story. But the driftwood, the important bits, those remain. Around 50 years ago, a grand woman named Corinne Dollanganger moved into the mansion at Garden glade ave where her parents lived, after her husbands sudden death.

Nobody knew anything about the children until the gruesome discovery 5 years later.

Some time after Corinne moved in, she met a new man. She was re-married to a wealthy duke and fully settled into the mansion – parents too old to protest. Everything seemed normal for a long time – except for the clocks that stopped ticking at 4pm in the afternoon. Later, it was discovered by chance that this was the exact time of death of the youngest, before he received a secret burial at the back of the garden.

Then, after the clocks stopped, a strange smell started affecting everyone. Unmistakable. It was the sweet, cloying stench of death. And it was coming from the attic, pulsating like a vengeful heart, persistent like smoke. Once the maids noticed, everyone noticed. It wouldn’t be ignored. But it did not make itself known during the day – the smell only became apparent at night. It haunted the inhabitants in their dreams, the stink seeped into their bed clothes and made them think about awful, awful things.

The servants began dropping platters when they were supposed to be carrying them to the table, whenever anybody in the house opened up a book, they always landed on a page that started with the word SISTER or TIME. It was hopeless to mark a place in a book too, because the mark would always shift to page number 13. The cellar kept flooding, and expensive wine bottles uncorked themselves as if the pressure inside was suddenly immense.

Everyone felt the sense of wrong the house, they just didn’t know yet what was causing it.

Then one day, all the toilets in the mansion promptly overflowed. A plumber was called in to fix the pipes. It was only by chance that he noticed the dripping. Water dripping through the ceiling, from the room right above – the corner bedroom at the fourth floor in the right wing. The one that had been kept locked for so many years.

Corrine was not around to protest, so the maids fetched for the brass key. A scorpion for the handle, large and heavy and sinister.

They finally unlocked the door, the key gone rusty and uncompliant. What they found when they opened it stilled everyones breath, and put ice into their veins that would mark them for life. It was unspeakable, the things a mother would do to her own children.

Corinnes gutteral scream sounded much more like four children in a terrible chorus of pain and
needs never fulfilled. But she didn’t scream out of pity of her poor, neglected children. She screamed knowing that her doom was near.

They say she died of a heart attack then and there. Other say that she was promptly arrested and sent straight to the electric chair, but nobody really believes that version. But the story doesn’t end there.

Somehow the duke Corinne married took over the ownership of the mansion. He tried to forget. But the flowers he planted in the garden grew grey and wilting. His hunting trophies started collecting flies. He took to crying in front of the fireplace - a man who only had cried when he was but five years old. His servants complained of his loud piano playing, when in truth nobody had been playing it. He didn’t manage to stay there very long.

The manor had been empty for a few years now.

Left perhaps finally on it’s own, without a living soul within to cause a stir. The once pale ivory mansion stood alone, moss and ivy growing up and around it. Tucked around it like a blanket, laid down to rest. Then almost miraculously, a new family moved in.

There had been the Parkensons. Oh, very lovely people they were. A married couple with two little children of six and eight. They liked the house immensely, oh yes they did. But after a week, the wife started to complain about a ticking noise. She only heard it at night, and it was not coming from the clocks. But as fast as it came, the ticking suddenly stopped. They never found the source.

Did they know about the attic? Perhaps they did, for they told their children not to go up there.

What was up there? The children asked their parents. But they wouldn’t answer.

If one of the children passed the door at the fourth floor in the right wing, she might catch the fragrant scent of wild roses. But the door was locked.

At night, the mother started hearing other noises. She thought it was her children playing, for that is what it sounded like. Echoing laughter, no louder than the cooing of doves. But she checked, and both of her children were fast asleep in bed. She thought no more of it, until her youngest asked if a ballerina lived upstairs.

The next family who moved in were bigger. Most of their children were already grown, except for a small baby. Mary, the golden haired little one. A sad thing, that was.

They stayed longer than the last family, although when they moved out they insisted that it had nothing to do with their baby gone missing.

The postman knows, and has seen them all. Forced to deliver his mail in the wee hours of the morning, when the moon is still up and about, he has spotted each dollanganger child more than once as he passes by that house.

The twins were rarely spotted inside, always in the garden around dusk or twilight. Their golden eyes made you mistake them for small woodland animals. Two porcelain dolls with broken faces, fixed at odd angles. They hated mothers, they said. Whenever one entered the house they Spit on her pillow, gave them headaches and yelled only so they could hear. Stole her pearls, made the water run cold when she took her baths.

Clung to Cathy whenever she appeared, the only mother they loved best.

Cathy appears whimsically with the twilight hour, always in green. Calling out to her children.
Whereas the others are more malevolent, Cathy is more like a sad country tune you hear on the radio.

“Why so sad Cathy-doll?” Her brother whispers in her ear, always luring her back to the house.

It is Chris who is the spider that feeds and feeds and feeds. Only a handful of teenagers out on a dare once has seen him. Because they did not heed their parents advice, and went up to the attic. They wish they never did. The smell alone of the ancient rooms makes their eyes water. The smell of flowers and decay mingling in a heady perfume. Dust motes falling from the ceiling like rain, old Victorian furniture and paintings and stuffed circus animals. A blackboard with unintelligible words written on it - someone trying to regain their wits, only to descend into a clutter of curse words and HELP, HELP, HELP written over and over.

Chris watching them with hunger, with interest. Tapping his fingers against the floorboards.

The truth is he pines. Pines for his dead mother, for growing old.

The teenagers return to town, taking shallow breaths and covering their faces with their hands. Wishes to unsee what they have seen. One of them missing his clothes, except for his boxers. As they grow older, their hair turns white, and no dye can ever turn it back to what was. But they still grow old, whereas some will never.

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