

The House in Stepney Green

It stood behind a fortress of trees, bushes and dense hedges, shrouding it in darkness; except for the one single street lamp shining a dim light on the pathway leading to the front door. Of course, the house and front door stood behind the bushes so could only really be seen if you were to peek through the shrubs covering the front gate; which I did on many occasions while passing by. Neither I, nor anyone else that I knew of, had ever seen a living soul leave or enter the house previously and yet, there always seemed to be a single light shining dimly in one of the third floor windows.

Having grown up in Tower Hamlets, I'd always been fascinated with all the old houses and their history. Always questioning what might be going on behind the closed doors of these illustrious buildings. For me, every home carries the happiness, hardships and achievements of the previous families. In my mind, this didn't necessarily mean that a place was haunted; just that the premises would still hold the auras in the air.

I was an only child. And over the years I developed a curious imagination – a sense of needing some slight adventure in my life – to make up for not having a sibling to converse with. Now that I was attending the Queen Mary University on the Mile End Road, which was just a stone's throw away from the mysterious house, I got to see her more and more, which simply sparked my curiosity and imagination further.

Sometime later, I found out his name; he being the owner of the house that is. His name was Henry Chiltern and he was a tall, broad shouldered man, rough around the face with chiselled features; around the age of forty five, I believe.

Now I know you're thinking: *How did we get to this part?* Well, I'll tell you. While studying at the university, a job opening came up in the local newspaper, the *East London Advertiser*, for a house keeper in Stepney Manor. I knew it was the same house as this was the only house of its prodigious nature in the area. My friends, at university, called me mad – said I'd be lucky if I ever got out of the house alive, considering all the old stories surrounding it.

They mocked, but their subsequent quietness reeked of genuine concern.

When first arriving at the house, I was even more awe-struck at the sheer beauty of the architecture. I delicately tread the black and white tiled path leading to the door. Being on the inside was different, almost eerie.

The front door opened with a large clunk and creak. He addressed me by my full name.

"Rose. Rose Emerson, I believe?"

"Yes, sir" I replied.

"Please, come in. My name is Henry Chiltern."

"Nice to meet you, Mr Chiltern." I said.

"No, please, call me Henry. Come, I'll show you to your quarters—"

"Quarters, Sir?—I mean, Mr Chiltern." I replied, taken aback.

A half smile from Henry indicated that he knew I would never call him by his first name.

"Yes Rose. This is a resident post. You'll stay here while you work here."

I didn't reply. Simply nodded timidly and smiled.

The first night I stayed there it was dark and quiet. Soft rain pattered on the windows. I was situated on the top floor, giving great views over the busy Mile End road. My room had one window and a writing desk in front of it, where I placed my diary and pen.

After settling in, I tried to sleep, but couldn't. Between the rain hitting the windows and the sound of a low scratching noise, I was too irritated to drift off. My imagination ran wild and

my mind began to wonder about all the other rooms in the vast house; and now that I'd seen mine, I felt implored to explore the rest.

First, I took a look in some of the rooms on my floor but they all looked the same as mine. Considering the size of the rooms and the types of windows they had, I do believe that at some point the house must have had plenty more servants to manage the upkeep. Now it was just me – a scary thought really.

I then descend the old wooden creaky stairs cautiously to the second floor. This is where Henry slept. I decided to go in the opposite direction of his bedroom to the other end of the hall.

One of the rooms I entered was untouched and stunningly beautiful. A four poster bed was draped in deep purple silks, fit for royalty. Portraits covered the walls depicting families, soldiers and wealthy merchants from what I believe to be the 18th century. A golden dressing table sat by the window, overlooking a pitch black garden. I was in awe—

"What are you doing Rose?" Henry said.

"I was – just – I'm sorry Mr. Chiltern I—"

"It would be best for you to stay away from this room, okay Rose?"

"Yes, of course, Mr. Chiltern." I replied as he shut the door abruptly behind me.

And so I stayed away from then on. Cleaning every room in the house, except that one.

One particular night I was writing a letter to my parents. I stopped to look out of the window, gathering my thoughts, when suddenly I spotted a group of people at the garden gate looking straight back up at me. It was my university friends. I jumped up and waved to them. They didn't respond; they stared, conversed, but didn't respond. *How could they not see me?* I thought. I was right there, waving profusely. Refusing to not be heard, I opened the window with great effort, to a gush of fresh air and the heavy noise of the main road. I shouted. No reply. I waved and shouted louder. Still, no reply. My last shout died like a dying piano note. And then it started to rain. The weather made my friends shriek and laugh before they left and disappeared into the distance. Distraught, I closed the window, blew out my candle and went to sleep.

The next time I was at University I spoke to my friends, Sarah, Mary and Agnes, asking them why they did not respond to my calls from the window.

"Oh we saw you Rose, and it was *you* who didn't respond to us." Agnes replied.

"But I was calling out to you. First I waved, and then I opened the window to call some—"

"Rose, seriously, we watched you the whole time. You sat by the window and didn't look up once to receive us." Mary said. "We thought it rather rude; considering we are supposed to be your friends." She added.

"It's ever since you started working in that old house. There's something different about you." Sarah said.

"But—" I said.

"Come on. Let's go." Mary interjected.

I sighed. It was too late. My friends were gone. Lecture books in hand, and down the corridor.

That evening, at sunset, I ran the length of Mile End road, crying. I cried, and ran until my eyes dried out.

I eventually made it back to the house. The house which time had forgotten; the old house with its shrubs and overgrowth protecting it from the modern, outside world.

Wiping the rest of the tears from my face, I slowly looked up, to the window where I sat

each night. And then I saw it. A woman sitting in my place. Her head down with a flickering light beside her. I was freaked out. I took a step back when suddenly she looked up, straight at me. I thought I was seeing things – so rubbed my eyes thoroughly – but the same figure sat there in the window, just staring.

Pulling myself together, I grabbed the key from my bag and entered the house hurriedly. I ran up the stairs as fast as I could to the third floor; but once I had reached it, I slowed, then realising I didn't quite know what I might encounter upon entering the room. Shivers went down my spine, the hairs stood up on my neck as I reached the bedroom door. I took a deep breath before twisting the door handle and opening. Bit by bit, more of the room became visible. A sudden urge of confidence arose and I threw open the door to reveal – nothing. No one was there. A dark empty room with no light. Just a bed, chair, suitcase and table by the window.

After a while I began to calm down. *I still have to sleep in this room*, I thought.

I tossed and turned for a while before falling into a half consciousness. That's when I heard it again – the same scratching noise I heard on my first night.

I sobered quickly, sat up and fixed my gaze around the room. My first thought was rats or mice; which would be fair to assume in a house as old as this one. Then, between hearing the noise and guessing what it might be, the noise suddenly stopped.

I threw the covers from me – slightly scared, more intrigued – and flung myself from the bed, searching the room for evidence. The floor was my first port of call, although I was well aware that if it was rats or mice they would have long scarpered by now. Then, the detective in me, led me to the window.

I shook the window frame, listening for the noise, convincing myself it must be that. It had to be. It wasn't. A feeling of frustration fell over me. I dropped my head and closed my eyes.

When they opened, they fell upon the pages. The blank pages of my diary. My diary was open, but I didn't open it; and the pages weren't, in fact, blank. There was something written on them. They read:

"I am confined..."

Confined? Who? And to what? I thought.

Without hesitation I grabbed the diary to inspect further. The adrenalin rushed around my body. Grabbing the diary, I rushed out of the room, across the hallway and descended the stairs.

I knew where he was. He was there every night: his study.

The door burst open to reveal Mr. Chiltern sitting in half darkness, at this desk, a glass of whisky in hand. He turned briefly.

"Have you been in my room?" I said.

Mr. Chiltern was in no rush to respond.

"Now why would I go in your room, Rose?"

Suddenly, with my diary in my hand, I felt hesitant, unconfident.

"So – you haven't seen this before?" Raising the diary.

Mr. Chiltern glanced over, then looked away. He was drunk.

"Come and join me, eh? Join me, dear Rose. Let us drown our sorrows together." He said, turning on his chair and trying to stand. I stepped back.

"No. No, it's okay – I – I need to get up early tomorrow—"

"Oh, come on! Just one..." He said, nearly falling to the floor in front of me.

"No, honestly... thanks anyway." I said, leaving the room and closing the door behind me. His wining voice, now muffled.

"Your loss," he shouted, "You ungrateful cow!"

His words hurt. As I walked back up the stairs I heard Mr Chiltern drop to the floor, sounds of crashing around him.

As I made my way up the second flight of stairs, a strange feeling came over me. The whole atmosphere in the house changed. The lights on the staircase flickered a few times. I stopped in my tracks, waiting to see if anything else would happen.

Nothing happened for a few moments. I carried on up the stairs. When I reached the second floor, the lights flickered again; but this time they flickered in the hallway leading to the forbidden room.

Curiosity, once again got the better of me. I made for the forbidden bedroom.

I opened the door and flicked the light on. The room was still untouched. I quietly closed the door. Finally, I could explore.

A grand dressing table sat over in the corner of the room. I couldn't resist going over and taking a seat. Maybe it was just me, but in the mirror, I'm sure my reflection looked prettier than usual. This was a real ladies room – a room I would love to have for myself.

There was a musical ballerina box sat on the grand dressing table. I picked it up and opened it. A beautiful tune played from it for a few seconds before fading. I closed it and put it back.

A grand old varnished chest of drawers stood between the two windows. The drawers were stiff. Once opened, all I could see were old clothes; but underneath these dusty garments, I found a book – a diary on closer inspection – not too dissimilar to my own. It was tied closed. I felt bad at first, but was too intrigued not to open it.

Inside, many of the pages had words that you would expect to be in most ladies private diaries; all manner of feelings and general gossip. I skipped through the pages to the back of the diary. The back page caught my attention. Separate from the rest of the diary it read differently. It read:

"In recent times I have become depressed. Affected by the person I once loved, in a way that I cannot express clearly enough, except to say this...

I am confined within..."

I recognised these words – similar to the words in my diary.

"...these walls, for what seems like an eternity. He was so kind in the beginning. That kindness slowly turned to control."

These were his deceased wife's words.

"I was so grateful to him for letting me stay when I had nowhere else to go – ever so grateful. I was surprised that he took such notice of me, when in reality I was just his cleaner."

I dropped the book in shock. Then realising the danger I was in.

I never did feel completely comfortable in that house, and so most of my belongings stayed in my suitcase, which I promptly grabbed before turning to the bedroom door.

"Rose, where are you going?" Henry said, stood in the doorway.

"I – I have to leave now. I'm sorry." I replied, as I made for the door.

"Please, Rose, you don't have to go?"

"I'm afraid I do. Now please, get out of my way." I pushed past Henry into the hallway.

He stumbled, still drunk.

"It's her, isn't it?" He slurred, as I turned at the top of the stairs. "She's still here... I doubt she'll ever leave. She loved this house. After she passed away—"

"Passed away? From what, Henry?" It was the first time I had called him by his first name.

Henry's attitude changed. He was sombre, there was guilt in his voice.

"Melancholy mostly. And consumption. The room I told you not to go into was hers – ours. As you've seen, it's untouched. When the depression hit, she withdrew up here; staying in this very room, in fact. All she did was write all day in her stupid journal – if only she would have just listened to me, this—"

That was when I realised that the woman I saw in the window, that day, was Henry's deceased wife! The lights in the house suddenly jolted on and off, as if sending a signal. A sombre feeling consumed me. What he did to her, he would do to me, given the chance. To slowly wrap his controlling, depression-soaked, tentacles around me—

I descended the stairs as quickly as my legs could manage. It wasn't easy in heels, carrying a suitcase. I could hear his drunken steps behind me. Shouting my name, when he wasn't trying to stop himself falling face first down the stairs. I wanted out, as quickly as possible.

On the last set of steps, I tripped, twisting my ankle. My right high-heel toppled to the bottom of the stairs. It hurt. But it wasn't bad enough for me to stop.

"Rose. Rose. Don't you leave me..." Henry shouted.

Reaching the bottom, I grabbed my shoe, slipping it on with one hand while hopping towards the front door with the other leg.

I grappled with the door handle. Stiff as always—

"Don't do it..." Henry said. I turned. He was at the bottom step. God knows how he reached me that quick.

My expression switched from sheer anguish, to pity, as I looked him straight in the eye. Then my determination kicked in all at once. I shrieked as I gave the door handle one almighty twist with both hands; it opened. A flood of cold fresh air, and noise from the main road hit me square in the face – freedom.

I pulled the door wide open, and turned.

"Goodbye, Henry."

My heels were clicking the floor tiles below me as I ran for the front gate and main road. I opened the gate and stepped out onto the pavement. Once there, I consciously slowed down, took a deep breath, and reverted back to sane human behaviour, to avoid attention. I looked both ways and turned right down the moonlit road.

A short distance away from the house, I turned and looked up at the window. She was there again, head down, writing. Then her head rose slowly. This time I didn't feel scared. She looked straight at me, for what felt like an eternity, before fading away, together with the light in the room.

I walked. And walked. And walked; crossing the busy main road, turning into the cobble-stoned Hayfield Passage. Away from the house.

I swore to never treat curiosity in the same way, ever again.'