**Dead Things Don’t Move**

Lawrence Watt-Evans

The house stood alone at the end of the road, a thousand feet or more from its nearest neighbor, and the big graceful oak trees that had shaded it from the summer sun all day also hid most of it from view. It was a perfect target.

At least, Sid said it was a perfect target. Jack had his doubts.

“So what’re you worried about?” Sid asked. “There’s just the one broad living there, I’m sure of it.” He stubbed out his cigarette in the van’s overflowing ashtray, ignoring the hot ashes that drifted to the floor.

“I dunno,” Jack said, “I just don’t like it. How c’n you be so damned sure she’s alone?”

Sid sighed, and leaned forward over the steering wheel. “Look, I told you,” he said, “There’s just one name on the mailbox, and it says ’Mudgett,’ and I looked up Mudgett in the phone book, and the only one on this road is Carol Mudgett, Carol with one R, so it’s a woman. If there was a man there, or anybody else, don’t you figure he’d have his name on the mailbox, too? Or if his name’s Mudgett, wouldn’t he be in the phone book?”

“I wouldn’t be too damn sure,” Jack muttered.

“Well, damn it, if you really gotta know, I’ve been watching the place for three days, and I haven’t seen anybody go near the place except the one broad and a couple of the neighborhood kids. I even fired off the twelve-gauge, just to see if anybody’d notice, and nobody did – not even Carol goddamn Mudgett. Now, quit worrying, will you?”

Jack slumped down in his seat and didn’t answer.

The van pulled off the road onto the shoulder and slowed to a stop; Sid turned off the engine and yanked the key from the ignition in one quick gesture, then reached forward and flicked off the headlights.

Darkness engulfed both men; there were no streetlights this far from town. The only light came from an upstairs front window of the house, filtered through the leaves of one of the oaks.

They sat in silence for a moment, contemplating that light; Sid stared out the van’s window at it, Jack peering around him.

“You got the gun?” Sid demanded, turning away from the light.

“Of course I got it,” Jack answered, annoyed. “I’ve had it on my goddamn lap for the last five miles.”

“’s it loaded?”

“’Course it’s loaded.”

“Check it.”

Jack started to protest, then thought better of it. “Put on the light,” he said.

Sid reached up and switched on the overhead light; the darkness vanished, then seemed to seep back around the edges as their eyes readjusted.

Jack broke open the gun and held it up. “See? Shells in both barrels, all set to go.”

“Good.” Jack slammed the breech shut, and Sid turned off the light. The darkness surged back around them.

“I need a cigarette,” Sid said into the night.

“No, you don’t. Come on, let’s get this over with,” Jack replied. He opened his door and climbed out onto the gravel, the gun nestled under his arm.

The driver’s door opened as Jack rounded the front of the van, and Sid stepped out.

“Gimme the gun,” he said.

“Take it,” Jack said, relieved; he thrust it out in both hands. Sid accepted it, weighed it carefully, and held it ready.

“Come on,” he said.

Jack followed him up the crumbling concrete walk, stumbling once on the broken surface in the dark. The steps creaked under first Sid’s weight, and then his.

“Be a shame if she didn’t have anything worth stealing after all this,” Jack whispered.

Sid smiled. “Oh, there’s always something. Worst comes to worst, we can always hock her refrigerator or something.”

The porch was narrow; Jack couldn’t stand comfortably behind his partner unless he stayed on the steps, so they stood side by side, Jack glancing nervously back at the van perched up by the roadside, while Sid pressed the doorbell button.

They didn’t hear it ring; all they heard was the sound of insects chirping in the tall grass. A few seconds passed, and Jack said, “Try it again.”

“No, I think I hear footsteps,” Sid said.

Jack had not heard any footsteps. He started to say so, but before he could get out the first word the porch light came on. The night was pressed back down the steps and over the railing, and Jack could see that the paint on the old narrow clapboards beside the door had faded and begun to peel.

There was no screen or storm door; when the door opened and the woman leaned out, there was nothing to block Sid’s actions. He thrust the shotgun under the woman’s chin and pulled the trigger.

That instant seemed to freeze as Jack watched. He saw very clearly every detail of the woman’s face. She had a long nose and faded red hair, and was younger than he had expected. Her expression was vaguely worried, and Jack thought she had been starting to speak. Her eyes were shaded by the doorframe and he couldn’t make out their color; the hallway behind her was unlit. Her lips were pale – no lipstick, Jack thought. Why should she be wearing any? She hadn’t expected company.

She looked like she might have been a nice person, Jack thought; a bit old for him, though, in her late thirties at least, but younger than he had expected. He had been thinking of her as a little old widow, living alone out here, and had been worried, he realized, that she might look like his mother.

She didn’t.

The roar of the gun drowned out the crickets and everything else, and the flash was blinding. Jack blinked, twice.

The woman’s face was gone, fallen out of his line of sight; he heard the thump of her body hitting first the wall, and then the floor, as she tumbled backward into the dark. He smelled gunsmoke.

“So much for Carol goddamn Mudgett,” Sid said. “I think the damn recoil just about broke my wrist.” He kicked the door wide open and stepped over the corpse’s legs into the hallway. “Come on,” he called.

Jack didn’t move; he stared at the legs. They stretched across the doorway, full in the light of the bare bulb hanging from the porch roof. They were bare to just above the knee; the woman had been wearing an old blue dress, shapeless and baggy, and the skirt had bunched up as she fell.

They were still a woman’s legs, just as they had been. They looked as if their owner might awaken at any moment and reach down to tug her skirt back into place. The blue dress was visible up to the waist; the woman’s upper body lay back in the shadow behind the doorframe.

Then Sid found a wall switch, and light poured into the hallway from an adjoining room.

“Oh, my God,” Jack said.

Blood had sprayed in a broad, wet stripe down the dirty wallpaper, from eye level down to the floor, and bits of hair, bone, and tissue clung to it. At the baseboard lay the woman’s body; her head had rolled forward onto her breast at an angle that would have been utterly impossible had it still been fully attached. Her neck consisted of two blood-drenched strands of ragged flesh; the shotgun had drilled a two-inch hole through the front of her throat and ripped the back of her neck and the base of her skull completely apart. Blood was pooled on the hardwood floor, dripping from where her neck should have been. One pale hand was flung out, the other folded across her breasts, where her almost-severed head stared blindly at the splayed fingers.

“Oh, my God,” Jack said again.

“What’s wrong with you?” Sid asked from the other room; he came to the door and peered back.

“Jeez, she does look bad, doesn’t she? I didn’t get a good look at her before,” he said.

Jack didn’t answer, and Sid cast him a worried look.

“Hey, c’mon, don’t stand there staring; you’ll be sick. Get in here and give me a hand.”

Jack looked up and tried to swallow.

“C’mon, you knew we were going to kill her,” Sid said.

“Yeah, but... I mean, my God, Sid! What’d you do?”

“I shot her, dummy. One barrel, like we said, in case we run into trouble.”

“I didn’t know it would do that!”

“Well, hell, neither did I, but dead is dead. What difference does it make? At least it musta been fast. Now, get in here and give me a hand, willya?”

Jack refused to look at the corpse again. He stepped over the spread legs and hurried across the hallway into the room where Sid waited.

“I think we’re gonna do all right,” Sid told him, smiling. “Take a look!”

Jack looked. The room was a relic – a relic worth a fortune in antiques. An octagonal clock hung on one wall, ticking loudly with each swing of its gleaming brass pendulum. Dresden china was packed on the mantle like the crowd on the rail at the track, and the mantle itself was an elaborate Victorian construction of carved oak and bevelled mirrors. An honest-to-God velveteen settee stood in one corner between matching cherry end-tables, one holding a bell-jar anniversary clock, the other a huge old music box and a stack of punched copper disks for the box to play.

“It might be hard to sell,” he said, not really believing it.

“The hell it will be! We drive up to New York, go to an antique dealer, tell him that our dear sainted mother passed away last month and we need to sell her things to settle her medical bills. We’ll get a thousand bucks, easy, for a vanload of this stuff!”

“Yeah, I guess,” Jack said. He couldn’t work up any real enthusiasm with the image of the dead woman in the front hall still fresh in his mind.

“We’ll need the blankets and stuff to wrap everything,” Sid said.

Jack remembered the corpse lying across the threshold and said, “You get ’em; I’ll look around some.” He headed toward a door at the back of the room, wanting to get further away from the body.

“Okay,” Sid agreed. He turned back toward the hall, and then froze.

Jack did not notice; he had no intention of looking in that direction.

“Jack,” Sid called in a loud whisper, “Something moved.”

“What?” Without thinking, Jack turned around, and saw the bloody smear on the hallway wall, framed in the rectangle of light from the parlor. He looked quickly away, before he could see anything worse. “Jesus, Sid, what’re you talking about? There’s nobody here but us and that woman, and she’s dead.”

“I know,” Sid said, still whispering, “but I swear, I saw something move out there in the hall. Honest to God, Jack.” He stared into the shadows.

“My God, Sid, you blew her head off! She’s dead; dead things don’t move!” Memories of stories he had heard or read as a child, of horribly-mutilated corpses pursuing bloody poetic vengeance, flooded his mind.

“I didn’t say she moved, I said something moved. I don’t know what it was.”

“Well, so what? Maybe she’s got rats.” Jack immediately regretted that suggestion as he imagined what rats might do to the body after he and Sid left. “You got the gun; go take a look if you think you saw something. I’m gonna look at the rest of the house.” He turned away again.

Sid was not visibly reassured, but he said, “Yeah, you’re right; I got the gun.” He broke it open, checked the remaining live shell, then snapped it shut. “I’ll go look.”

“You do that. You just yell if you need me,” Jack answered. He fumbled around the far side of the door to the next room, and finally found the light switch.

The switch worked an old hanging lamp with a stained- glass shade; more money, Jack knew. It hung above an oval table strewn with tatted doilies, and lit a glittering collection of china and glassware in matching cabinets along the far wall. Jack went to investigate what looked like Wedgewood.

Sid, too, was investigating. He inched toward the hallway, his gaze fixed on the red ruin of his victim’s head. He knew that she was dead. He knew that as Jack had said, dead things don’t move. Still, he was certain that he had seen something move, and what else could it have been? The hallway was almost unfurnished; a braided rug lay on the floor, a hat-rack stood at the foot of the stairs, and the corpse was sprawled by the open door, but otherwise, it was empty.

Still staring at the body, the gun clutched tightly in both hands, he stepped through the doorway.

Immediately, before he consciously felt anything, he knew he had made a mistake. He knew that he should have turned on the hall light, should have looked carefully around the corner. He hadn’t; he had been too busy watching the corpse. That was his mistake. Dead things don’t move; that meant he had seen something alive.

That something, whatever it was, had gotten him; he felt a sudden sharp coldness exploding into his side, beneath his left arm, and sensed something warm running down inside his shirt, and then the pain hit him. He sucked in air, but couldn’t find the strength to scream.

“You killed my mother,” a voice hissed. Sid looked down and saw a small hand pulling the butcher knife from his side, and then driving it in again. The pain turned to blackness, the gun fell from his hands, and he toppled forward.

In the dining room, Jack heard the crash. “Sid?” he called.

No one answered.

“Sid?” He called more loudly this time, a note of desperation creeping into his voice.

Still no one answered.

“God, Sid, if you’re pulling a joke, I swear I’m gonna kill you. You hear me, Sid?”

The house was silent, save for the ticking of the clock in the parlor.

Jack stood in the dining room for a long moment, waiting for some new sound, waiting for something to happen. He could hear the crickets, very faintly, chirping outside the window; he could see nothing but darkness and his own reflected image when he looked at the glass. China gleamed, white and cold, in the light from the lamp; he noticed that one of the little squares of yellow glass in the shade was cracked across.

“Sid?”

Nothing answered.

He had to do something, he knew that. His first thought was to get out, to run, to get away as fast as he possibly could. He would forget about Sid and about the antiques and just leave.

Sid had the keys to the van; without them, he would have to walk, five miles back to town, alone in the dark.

Worse, the corpse lay in the front door. He would have to get past it. Sid had vanished when he went into the front hall to see if the dead thing had moved. To get out of the house, Jack would need to do the same thing.

He couldn’t do it; he knew that immediately. He would have to find some other way out of the house.

There would have to be a back door, but to reach it he would have to explore new, still-dark rooms. That did not appeal to him.

He looked at the window. It was certainly large enough to climb through, but he could see immediately that it couldn’t be opened; he would have to break it. He could tell by the doubling of his reflection that there was a storm window on the outside, and those could, he knew, be almost unbreakable.

There were other windows, though. He would find a way out. He started back toward the parlor.

“Don’t move,” a voice said, a small, high-pitched voice, neither man nor woman; visions of freaks and monsters whirled through Jack’s mind. He froze.

The voice came from his left. Very slowly, keeping his hands well out from his sides and open flat, he started to turn, to see who had spoken.

Another doorway, one he had not paid attention to, connected the dining room to the hall, and standing in that doorway was a young girl, perhaps nine or ten years old. She was wearing an old flannel nightgown, white with pink flowers. Her face was flushed, and speckled with chicken pox. Her feet were bare. Her hands, and the front of her gown, were smeared with fresh blood.

She held Sid’s shotgun awkwardly in both hands.

“I told you not to move,” she said conversationally. “And you’re moving, but I know how to fix that.”

She raised the shotgun and pointed it at Jack’s face.

“Dead things don’t move,” she said as she pulled the trigger.

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