

## **The House on Banbury Road**

There was one Halloween that I remember from when I was a child. It was while I lived on a quiet road leading out of Oxford, a place that was inhabited mostly by dons and other people somehow connected to the university, which owned most of the surrounding land. All of the families on the street had young or youngish children with the sole exception of the inhabitant of the largest house, who was simply called Professor Mortenson – even the adults didn't seem to know his first name. The houses on the street had mostly been built shortly after the Second World War, when the university had first begun to spread in earnest to the outskirts of the city. The exception, once again, was Professor Mortenson's house, which was a Gothic mansion which had been in his family for three generations and was said to have been built far earlier, some said centuries earlier. The house held a peculiar fascination for me and the other children in the neighbourhood, which included children from the other side streets nearby, not just our road. It was large and forbidding but for some reason no one could ever really describe what it looked like. Perhaps this was because it was in a secluded spot, enshrouded by towering pine trees at the end of the close, but I had a theory that it never looked the same twice – it seemed to change and grow older. Like the house was alive.

I first became interested in Mortenson Mansion when I became aware that there was something about it that made even my parents uncomfortable. I was of course forbidden from playing in the house's grounds, it was private property after all, but my mother made it clear to me from an early age that she did not like me going anywhere near the place unless I was accompanied, preferably by an adult. It seemed to me to be a rather arbitrary and unfair injunction for I noticed over the years that both my parents and the others who lived in the close seemed to have no qualms about visiting Professor Mortenson's residence themselves on the rare occasions when they were invited there. In particular, every year on the sixth of January a Twelfth Night drinks party was held at Mortenson Mansion and this was an event that was always, without exception, well-attended. My parents went there with all the others, although never for more than a couple of hours for fear of leaving me on my own for too long, even though they were just over the road. While they were gone, even though I was meant to be tucked up in bed asleep, I would always watch Mortenson Mansion from my bedroom window, seeing the twinkling of lights beyond the trees and hearing the faint sounds of music and wondering wistfully what was going on beyond its walls. My parents never seemed to particularly enjoy Professor Mortenson's parties, however; I could tell this because when they came back they were invariably silent, whereas usually they would be laughing and talking when they returned from a night out. It was as if being at the Mansion left some dark cloud hanging over them, which was only dispelled by the rising of the sun the next day.

My curiosity concerning Mortenson Mansion only grew as the years passed and it remained largely unsatisfied. No adults that I approached were ever willing to speak about it: apart from my parents, the teachers at my school always gave short shrift whenever anyone tried to ask a question about the house or its owner, telling us children to mind our own business and pay more attention to our studies. Inevitably, therefore, we started to make up our own stories about the Mansion. Tommy Callaghan said that Professor Mortenson was a war criminal, a Nazi spy who had fled Germany just before the end of the Second World War with a fortune in stolen antiques that he had sold in order to buy the Mansion. The rest of us found this explanation rather far-fetched – the Professor was an old man but even he would have

been too young to have played any active role in the Second World War. Besides, Tommy was notoriously fond of war films and telling tall tales; he had in the past also claimed that our Maths teacher was a former Soviet scientist during the Cold War and his latest story therefore held more than a hint of *déjà vu*. A more plausible story, or at least one which a few of us subscribed to, was the one that the Professor was a madman, which was why he never appeared out of doors as he was, so the explanation went, confined to one wing of his vast mansion. Credence was given to this tale by the fact that apparently, even on those rare occasions when Mortenson Mansion was opened up to outsiders, no one had ever seen the Professor himself, although something that sounded like screams could be heard from the west wing – at least that’s what Poppy Cresswell’s parents had told her. Poppy was only slightly more reliable as a source than Tommy Callaghan, however, so I and several others reserved judgment on what secrets the mansion held.

As the children who lived on the road grew older – that was me, Tommy, Poppy, my best friend Max and his sister Rose, as well as a couple of others – more than once the suggestion came up that we should attempt to go inside the house at the end of it, or at least its gardens. Although we all felt an undeniable thrill at the thought of exploring Mortenson Mansion, we never seemed to go through with it for a variety of reasons. Partly it was fear of what our parents would do if we were ever caught and partly it was fear of the house itself, pure and simple, although no one ever admitted this. It had loomed in all our thoughts since we were very young – an apparition at the end of the road, dark and forbidden but always there, impossible to ignore. I had had nightmares about the place, being trapped inside it unable to escape while some nameless dread within its walls tracked me down for some unknowable purpose. I was sure, though I had never asked them, that more than one of my friends had had the same sort of bad dreams, and that this was as much a part of the reason why they did not want to go against our parents’ wishes as the fear of being caught in the act. And so the taboo against investigating the mysteries of Mortenson Mansion remained intact year after year, its secrets safe from the prying eyes of the children who lived near it – until one year, when everything changed.

I remember it well, for it was the last year before I started secondary school. We were all gathered in the usual place – the study at Max and Rose’s house. This was the biggest room in the largest house on the road – the largest apart from Mortenson Mansion that was – and it was a great place for all of us to meet. Max’s father was a lawyer and on the few occasions when he was at home he spent all of his time in the study. His mother meanwhile was a pale, wan thing who seemed to divide her time between her bedroom and the kitchen, perhaps because she was ill, although neither Max nor his sister spoke of this and the rest of us did not ask, sensing that some things were best left unspoken. This meant that the rest of their huge house was more or less free for Max and Rose to have the run of, together with any friends that they invited along. Visiting Max’s house was usually a happy occasion for me, but I remember that particular day there was a prevailing air of depression because we all knew that this was one of the last occasions on which we would all be together.

Tommy’s father was sending him to boarding school next year, while Max and Rose’s parents were selling up and leaving our road altogether in a couple of months. Whilst Poppy and I would continue living at our respective houses and would not be going away to boarding school, we would still be going to different schools and would therefore only see each other rarely. In any case, without the others there, things just would not be the same. Unsurprisingly this engendered a melancholy mood in the group and we were reduced to gloomy reminiscences of the times we had all

enjoyed together. Of course, this only made us all feel worse, knowing that after Christmas we would probably never have such times together again.

It was Tommy, probably in an attempt to cheer us all up, bless him, who said it first.

“Why don’t we explore the Mansion?”

Why not indeed? We had all been thinking the same thing and Tommy had simply been the first to put this idea into words. It was the last great taboo of our childhood and there would surely be no further chances to do this once we were all separated. A shiver of pleasure went through me at Tommy’s words and as I scanned the faces of Max, Rose and Poppy I could sense that they felt the same thing – excitement at the prospect of finally satisfying a curiosity that had been left to fester for years combined with the sudden thrill of the forbidden. Despite this there was something in each one of us, perhaps an in-built sanction ingrained by years of hearing warnings about the house and injunctions against visiting it from adults, that prevented Tommy’s idea from being seized upon immediately.

Poppy was the first to object.

“Tonight’s a school night.”

“I didn’t say we had to do it straight away,” said Tommy, “How about some time next week, when it’s half-term?”

Poppy subsided but it was clear from her face, scrunched up in thought and anxiety, that she was not really convinced and was just trying to think of another reason not to go.

“Won’t the olds get a bit suspicious when they notice us all disappearing at the same time? They’re bound to guess where we’ve gone and there will be a fearful row.”

It was Max that spoke this time and we all looked expectantly back at Tommy, wondering, perhaps hoping, that he would have another riposte. Max was the unofficial leader of our little group and we all tended to take his words a lot more seriously than Poppy’s. It would take something fairly convincing to gainsay Max and, from the suddenly blank expression on Tommy’s face, he was lost for words. Surprising all of us, not least me, I was the one who came up with a way around this latest obstacle.

“It’s Halloween at the end of next week and my parents have already said that they don’t mind me going out trick or treating – why don’t we all go out together? That way no one will suspect anything.”

My suggestion was met with almost universal approval immediately. Tommy was the only one who raised a slight objection – “Isn’t trick or treating a bit childish?” – but I suspect that was only because I had stolen his thunder slightly for coming up with a practical way of putting his original idea into motion. It was Max who pointed out that we would not *really* be trick or treating as this was just a cover for our true purpose of exploring Mortenson Mansion. Once Max had given the plan his stamp of approval that was that and the decision was made for us all to meet in the same place on Halloween night.

When Halloween night approached that year I prepared as normal. I asked my father to buy me a Frankenstein costume and was heartened by the fact that neither he nor my mother raised any objections – surely this meant that I would be allowed to go out trick-or-treating as usual. I’m slightly embarrassed to admit that before I left the house that evening I spent at least an hour in front of the mirror admiring myself in my nice new costume. The Frankenstein’s Monster mask that I wore was not the usual cheap plastic kind but was a proper latex model that fit over my entire head rather

than simply obscuring the front of my face. I felt curiously smug when I looked at the image staring back at me from the glass – bolts in the neck, scarred face, mouldy green skin and all – comfortable in the knowledge that the other boys with their old sheets, rattling chains and fake vampire fangs would not hold a candle to me. I felt even more proud of myself when I gave my mother a small scare just as I was leaving the house.

My feeling of self-satisfaction only lasted until I arrived at Tommy's house however. I knew all was not right as soon as Tommy opened the door. From the fake dog hair that was glued on to this face and hands I assumed that the likeness that he was aiming for was that of a werewolf but, with the crestfallen look on his face, he looked to me more like a beaten puppy.

“What's wrong?” I asked, fearing the answer that I would receive.