

The House on Forever Street

By

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Something was wrong, so terribly wrong: where were his golf trophies? For that matter, where was the chest of drawers they rested on? And his bookcase, and his Guinness beer glass? More troubling, this room looked nothing like the one he'd gone to sleep in: it smelled of damp and mothballs, and there was a closet where there had been a wall. Two small windows, quite unlike the ones in his apartment, were cranked open at the bottom, letting in a sliver of summer air. George Macready sat up in bed and glanced at the nightstand to his left; here were framed pictures of Pope John XXIII and John F. Kennedy, and suddenly he knew where he was: in the back upstairs bedroom of his maternal grandparents' home, on Furrier Street in Mammoth Falls.

But it couldn't be, George thought; he hadn't slept in that room for at least 40 years, and the house was gone, sold and demolished to make way for a Walgreens. Also, he felt so much younger, and smaller; he swung his legs off the side of the bed, and watched them dangle six inches above the floor. He hopped down and, glancing at a dusty wall mirror, saw himself as he must have looked at age nine or 10, with his crewcut and preposterous cowlick. In the far corner were his clothes, folded neatly on a chair, just as his grandmother had left them each morning.

He began putting them on, pausing thoughtfully as he did so. He and his older brother Marshall had spent a week at 1 Furrier Street – George had once inadvertently called it Forever Street; his brother and parents had laughed, but it did seem like forever, some days – every summer until they were 12 or 13. Nana and Papa – that was what they called Marie and Charles Coughlin – were nice people, and did their best to entertain them. Less appealing was Papa's older sister, Mary Coughlin, who also lived at 1 Furrier. She was a bit of a religious fanatic who,

when she felt the boys hadn't adequately learned their prayers, had taken a small rod from her purse and given each of them a sharp rap across the knuckles. This didn't hurt much, but was greatly resented by both, George especially. He'd complained to his mother about it often, but her lame response had been, "If she didn't like you, she wouldn't bother with you at all."

His father had been more philosophical, as well as calculating. "Maybe she'll leave you her money; she must have a pile of it. God knows she never spent any of it." But all the money his aunt had had, and it wasn't much, had gone to a religious order pledged to save heathens worse than himself.

George sat down, put on his socks and sneakers, and walked slowly down the hall. He stopped to look in the bathroom; there was the claw-footed tub he and his brother had found so laughable, and the medicine cabinet with no back to it, allowing one to see beyond the pill bottles into the closet next door.

He started down the slanting stairs, slowing as he reached the bottom step; dream or no dream, he would proceed with caution. He peeked into the living room and saw his great-aunt Mary, sitting on the lumpy brown sofa, doing her knitting. She looked up and smiled.

"You've come down at last," she said. "Did you have a good sleep?" George didn't – couldn't – answer, so Mary Coughlin continued, "Tobin and I have been waiting for you." She nodded toward the recliner in the corner, where a black cat curled. "You remember Tobin, don't you, George? You pulled his tail once. You were such a naughty boy, but Tobin has forgiven you, haven't you, Tobin?" Tobin showed no signs of having forgiven anyone; he opened his yellow eyes and bared his teeth, sharp daggers in a black mask. "Come and sit down, George." His great aunt patted the sofa cushion beside her. "We have so much to talk about."

George reluctantly sat down, and as he did so looked around him: it was all there, the curtains that looked like they hadn't been washed in years, the black-and-white television set with rabbit ears, the record player – the album made by 'The Singing Nun' was a favorite of his grandmother's – and the framed wall sign proclaiming, 'God Bless Our Happy Home.' George turned towards his great aunt.

"I must say this is the most realistic dream I've ever had," he said.

Mary Coughlin laughed, a kind of barking sound. "It's no dream, George. You've passed on."

George swallowed hard. "Passed on? You mean I'm –"

She looked pityingly at him. "Well, let's just say you now have a better body than the one you had – don't you remember how sick you were? Your lungs; you had trouble breathing. You had to leave your job as an auditor and enter assisted living. Think, now." George did think about it; it was all too true.

"I do remember, Aunt Mary; I wasn't well for a long time." He looked around. "Where are Nana and Papa?"

Mary Coughlin appeared hurt. She reached for a nearby box of tissue, selected one, and made a show of dabbing one eye. "This is such a shock, to learn that instead of your dear aunt you want to see someone else."

"It's not that, Aunt Mary; it's just -- I suppose I'll be here a little while before I go --" George was about to say, "to heaven," but reconsidered, thinking it might invite an unfavorable comparison with his present situation.

Mary put down her knitting. “Let’s talk about you, George. After college you went to New York City, where you led a wild and dissolute life.”

George was annoyed. “You’re right, Aunt Mary. Sometimes I even forgot myself and had a beer.”

“Now, don’t be fresh.” She looked at her purse, where the chastising rod was kept. “When I passed away a few years later you didn’t come to my funeral.”

“I couldn’t. I was in Puerto Rico on business.”

“You could have flown home; it wasn’t that far.” George saw something stir to his right; Tobin was sitting up now, and seemed to be staring accusingly at him. He looked back at Aunt Mary, and then over her shoulder, through the dirty drapes: there wasn’t a sign of life outside, not even a car driving down busy West Monroe, which intersected with Furrier at the corner. And, where were the Reeds, the children who lived in the brick duplex across the street, and were always playing or roller skating on the sidewalk outside their house? He needed to find out.

George gathered his courage and stood up. “Well, it’s been wonderful seeing you again, Aunt Mary. I have to go now.”

She looked incredulous. “Go? Don’t be silly.” She patted the cushion next to her, a little harder this time. George sat down.

He couldn’t tell how long he’d sat there, answering questions. Sometimes his great aunt seemed to already know the answers to her questions; other times she seemed genuinely curious. He noticed with relief that it was getting dark outside, and Mary noticed it too.

“It’s time for you to be going to bed,” she said. “It must be nearly 8:30.” George got up, contemplated making a dash for the front door, decided against it, and obediently started up the stairs.

The bathroom was at the top of the stairs, and as he passed it George recalled that the room’s one window was situated just above the tub. It wasn’t like the others that swung open just a few inches at the bottom; this window went vertically up and down, and there was enough room for someone his size to squeeze through. He knew there was, because he and his brother had escaped that way one hot summer night.

He went in, brushed aside the shower curtain and climbed on the rim of the tub. He heard a soft noise behind him, and, turning saw Tobin in the doorway watching him. George shrugged; cats can’t talk. He climbed higher, on the window ledge, turned round and smiled at the cat. “Take good care of Aunt Mary,” he whispered, chuckling to himself. Then he was gone.

Behind him, Tobin turned and swiftly padded downstairs.

George ran across the back yard and through the open gate, paused to catch his breath, and forced himself to think. Where did people go when they needed help? Why, to the police, of course. And Officer Daniel Cooney, a friend of his Uncle Nick’s, lived nearby, on Arthur Street. George started running and didn’t stop until he was at the front door of 21 Arthur. He rang the bell, praying someone would answer. Dora Cooney, the policeman’s wife, opened the door.

“Why, if it isn’t Master Macready,” she said, “What brings you here this time of night?”

“Mrs. Cooney, is Officer Dan home? I need to speak with him right away. It’s very important.”

“He went to the station just a few minutes ago; he goes on duty at nine. What can be so --“  
But George didn’t hear her; he was already racing down West Monroe towards North Ann, where the police station stood. The desk sergeant directed him to the garage out back, and there George saw the man he called Officer Dan, who was about to get into his squad car.

“Hello, George,” Cooney said, pleasantly. “What can I do for you?”

“Officer Dan, I need your help. I need your help real bad,” panted George.

“Well, get in the car and tell me all about it. I was just about to go on the road.” Normally young George would have been thrilled to get a ride in a real police car, but he had a story to relate, and he told it quickly, if not coherently.

“First, I’m a lot older than you think I am – I haven’t been back to Mammoth Falls in ever so long,” he began. Cooney nodded absently, and kept his eyes on the road; they passed Kelly’s Deli, the Feeney Funeral Home and the Pic ‘n Pay -- did these still exist, George wondered? He hurriedly continued, “I woke this morning to find myself in my old room on Furrier Street – I don’t know how I got there – and when I went downstairs I found my great aunt –do you know my great aunt?” Another nod. “Well, she told me I was dead, when she’s the one who’s been dead, for years and years. I don’t know where my grandparents are – I don’t know where anybody is – but now I’m stuck in the house with her and that crazy cat of hers.”

“Yes, I see.” Cooney turned right at the stoplight, and George saw with horror that they were back on West Monroe, headed in the direction of Furrier Street.

“Officer Dan, what are you doing? Don’t take me back there.”

Cooney looked sternly at him. "Of course I'm taking you back there; a boy your age can't be running loose at night, you'll get into trouble."

"I won't go!" The car had stopped in front of 1 Furrier. George opened the passenger side door to escape, but Cooney was too quick for him; he caught the boy by the arm and dragged him across the front seat. He then marched him up the front steps and down the long echoing porch. The screen door opened, and there was Mary Coughlin, smiling dangerously.

"Well, here he is, Miss Coughlin, your little runaway." Cooney pushed George inside, tipped his cap to the old lady, and returned to his car. Mary looked at George, and stopped smiling.

"You've been a naughty, naughty boy," she said, "and you must be punished." She opened her purse. "Now, hold out your hands."