

The Girl in the Window

Jimmy Hsu knew haunted houses existed. Jimmy had high functioning autism, and his rationale was simple, if there was one haunted house, then there had to be other haunted houses. And he knew where one was.

The Tinker House, off Elm Street, was haunted. Everyone in school said it was. A few people bragged that they had gone up onto the porch. Michelle Sneed told everyone she had opened the door.

Jimmy didn't believe them. They never produced evidence. Jimmy didn't have a cellphone anymore, not after his parents discovered he had used it to call himself in sick. He hadn't been able to inform them that he had skipped school to kill a vampire. They wouldn't have believed him. And while he no longer had a phone to use, almost everyone else at Anger Middle School did. Michelle had the new iPhone 11 with its cameras that looked like spider eyes.

No one took pictures. Not even their friends, who could stand at the street and do it without ever having to go onto the property.

No. Jimmy Hsu didn't believe his classmates when they said it was haunted. He knew they said it because the house was empty. There were no curtains on the windows, and several of them were broken. The dull red front door hung crookedly in its frame, and the roof of the long porch sagged in the middle. Long strips of gray paint had peeled from walls and hung like dead vines to the sun-burnt grass around the house's cracked foundation.

The Tinker House was surrounded by an open swath of yard, and despite the lack of shade, it was always cold when he stood on the sidewalk and looked at the building. And Jimmy could see someone in the house each time he stood and examined it from the safety of the sidewalk.

It was a girl. He thought she was his age, and she never appeared happy. Whenever he saw her, she was in the window to the left of the door, peering at him through a cracked pane of glass. Occasionally she would fade away. She didn't back into the shadows or sink down below the windowsill. The girl simply faded, as though someone shook an Etch A Sketch and erased her image from the world.

For two years, ever since he had started at Anger Middle School, he had seen her.

But as he stood and looked across the yard of dead grass to the house, he couldn't see her. There was no sign of the girl, and the house appeared darker.

Jimmy didn't like it.

For several more minutes, Jimmy stood on the sidewalk with the August sun beating down on him. Sweat gathered on the nape of his neck and slipped down to the collar of his plain gray T-shirt. A warm wind picked up, ruffled his hair, and the shirt. He could smell lilacs and the heavy scent of roses.

From the Tinker House, a chill seeped out, crawled over the ground, and nipped at his toes through his old, dirty white sneakers and climbed up the jeans he wore.

Jimmy ignored it as he worked out the problem in front of him.

The girl is gone.

She never looked happy. This place is bad.

Jimmy put his hands behind his back and clasped them loosely together. He closed his eyes and thought. I need to help the girl come back. I need to help the girl be happy. I need to know why the house is bad.

Jimmy opened his eyes and turned to his left. He walked as fast as he could to the library, knowing that if any of his classmates saw him running, they might give chase. For some reason he couldn't understand, they found it fun to run after him.

So, Jimmy made a point of not running.

In a few minutes, he entered the Anger Library and walked to the man who stood behind the desk.

The man smiled at Jimmy. "Good morning, what can I help you with?"

Jimmy returned the smile. "My name is Jimmy Hsu, and I would like to find out about the Tinker House."

"Well, Jimmy Hsu, my name is Dan Tate, and let's see what we can find out. Follow me."

Dan walked from around the desk, limping slightly as he went. He moved at a slow pace, which Jimmy found irritating until he saw the grimace of pain on the man's face.

This hurts him. With that realization, Jimmy was no longer irritated. Instead, he adjusted his steps accordingly, and soon they stood before a small room with a locked door. Dan produced a key from his pocket, unlocked the door, and then propped it open before he turned on the lights. The smell of old books and even older paper wafted out of the room and Jimmy smiled.

Knowledge and information clung to the odor, and Jimmy loved them both.

"This is part of Anger's history. There are stories and journals, letters, and ledgers. Everything you could want. I am certain we'll find something about the Tinker House in here." Dan smiled broadly and Jimmy saw some of his teeth were missing.

I wonder if he was in an accident. It is interesting to notice the injuries he sustained. It would be better to be able to attribute those to a specific incident.

Jimmy smiled and focused his attention on the gathered books and papers. "Where should we start?"

"Over on the left wall is everything that has to do with the town from after the eighteen-hundreds. I'm going to search on the right. There are some street plans as well as some family histories." Dan smiled at him. "Does that sound like a plan?"

Jimmy nodded. "Yes."

Without another word, he walked to his assigned side of the collection, took down the first book, and flipped through it. When he didn't see anything regarding the Tinker House, he replaced the book and moved on to the next. He kept up the process steadily, and he was nearly through the second shelf when Dan cleared his throat.

Jimmy understood it was a polite way to get someone's attention, so he turned and looked at Dan. The man held a slim journal in his hand and smiled. "I think this may have something."

Jimmy stepped forward and accepted the book from him. "May I check this book out, please?"

"No, I'm sorry. Books in this room have to be read in here. I could set this aside if you need to come back later."

"I have the time now," Jimmy replied, sitting down at a small desk. Dan chuckled. "Alright. Well, you come on up and find me if you need something, okay, Jimmy?"

"Yes, I will."

Jimmy turned his attention to the book as Dan left. On the cover, stamped with gold lettering, was the title, Bernard Tinker, Truth Seeker.

Jimmy opened the book and turned to the first printed page.

This journal is a small collection of information regarding the mysteries I have sought to uncover and examine throughout my life. I have sought to pierce the veil, to move beyond this reality and these physical sensibilities. I have found a door to another place, and I will show you how I have used my daughter to move into this separate world.

Jimmy read the last line several times. Used my daughter. His daughter must be the girl I see.

He turned the pages and sought more information, but there was little that made sense. Most of the writing revolved around the proper chemicals used to open a door into another world, and what type of wood should be used when building a special door. Jimmy's head ached as he read it, not quite certain Bernard Tinker had been sane when he had written his book.

Near the end of the book, Jimmy found several photographs were pasted in. The old photos were yellowed with age, and the first few were images of the exterior of the house, which was in far better shape. A tall man with stooped shoulders and with light-colored hair that hung to his collar dominated the photographs. In the last image, there was a woman and a girl beside the man. The woman's eyes were unnaturally bright, her hair pulled back in a severe ponytail, making it seem that her hair had been soaked and pressed against her head. She wore a long black dress with a white apron, and her hands were held behind her back.

To the woman's left stood a small girl, the same one he saw in the window. The legend beneath the photograph read, Myself, My Wife, Elizabeth, Our

Daughter, Rachel.

Jimmy closed the book and looked at it.

Her name is Rachel.

Standing up, Jimmy left the book on the table and exited the room. He walked to the front desk and waited patiently for several minutes before Dan appeared from a set of shelves.

"Is everything alright?" Dan asked.

Jimmy nodded. "Yes. How can I find out when someone died? The few places on the internet charge for such a service."

Dan smiled. "I have something better. Anger, for some reason, keeps a list of the death of every Anger resident, whether the death took place in town as well as those which occurred out of town. Follow me."

Jimmy did so, and instead of walking to the small room, they went to a low series of shelves, on the top of which was a large book opened to the center. It was tabulated, and when Jimmy stepped up, Dan asked, "Do you know who you want to look up?"

Jimmy nodded. "Rachel Tinker."

He watched as Dan flipped to the proper tab, opened it, and searched the pages until he came to the name.

Dan cleared his throat. "Tinker, Rachel J. Born August 1st, 1900. Missing, August 1st, 1912. Never found, presumed dead."

Dan shook his head. "That's absolutely terrible."

"Yes." Jimmy looked up at the man. "Thank you very much for your help. I appreciate it."

Dan offered a small smile and nodded. "You're quite welcome, Jimmy. Come back anytime. Good luck with whatever you're doing."

Jimmy nodded and left the library. He walked home and let himself in the back door. Both his parents were at work, and they considered twelve old enough to remain home without a babysitter.

Jimmy appreciated that, and he did nothing to jeopardize the trust. He enjoyed being alone. He preferred it. School was always difficult. Some of the teachers treated him differently because of his autism. He knew some of the other students did as well.

At home, no one bothered him. At home, Jimmy could think.

He went to the refrigerator and took out a jar of pickles. Jimmy put three on a plate, then he added a handful of barbecue potato chips. As he toasted two slices of bread, he ate one of the pickles. When he spread peanut butter over the toast, he ate the second pickle. Then, as he cut the sandwich in half, he ate the final pickle.

Jimmy poured a glass of milk and carried his drink and food to the table.

He ate in silence, enjoying the flavor of the barbecue chips and the texture of the toast against his tongue as he alternated a bite of sandwich for a potato chip. After three of each, he sipped at his milk. By the time he finished his food, his mind was clear.

I have read about ghosts.

It was a true statement, one he was satisfied with. He knew he had not read all there was to read about ghosts, but he knew that he had read a significant amount the summer before last. There had been a different librarian at the time. She had been a nice woman. Her name had been Diane.

What do I know about ghosts?

He reviewed the information quickly. There were various theories as to why ghosts stayed back. People who died badly. Others who didn't realize they were dead. Some who thought they needed to finish something. Jimmy remembered reading about some ghosts who weren't anything more than an echo of the past.

He believed it was a mixture of everything. No one was right, no one was wrong.

Why is Rachel a ghost?

Jimmy contemplated the question for a few minutes, and then he decided he didn't need to know the answer to that. He wasn't sure it had anything to do with the greater mystery, which was what had happened to her ghost.

Something bad happened to her. Someone didn't like her looking out the window. Who would that someone be?

Jimmy suspected it would be either her mother or her father.

Father. His thoughts weren't normal. Jimmy stared down at his empty plate, frowning as he concentrated. If he wasn't normal, and he did something bad to his daughter again, he will do something bad to me if I go in the house.

How do I stop him?

Jimmy closed his eyes and reviewed everything he read about ghosts. Soon he had a series of items in mind that might, if the writings had been true, help him protect himself from the ghost of Rachel's father.

Salt will stop a ghost. Lead will stop one, too. I think iron will hurt them. Or at least make them go away for a little bit. I do not know for how long. Jimmy opened his eyes and stood up. He brushed the crumbs off the plate and into the trash before putting all the dirty dishes into the dishwasher. Then, he went down into the basement and rummaged through the odds and ends his father kept in a small room off to the left of the furnace. His father kept almost every bit of metal he had ever come across. Once, when Jimmy was younger, he had asked his father why.

Metal, his father had informed him, can always be turned into money. I bought our car with copper and brass scraps I had been gathering since before you were born. People will always buy metal.

Jimmy ignored the bins with copper and those with brass. He passed by the aluminum container and the steel. Instead, he went to a large Rubbermaid barrel half-filled with an assortment of metal that was either too dirty to be cleaned, or some other metal his father hadn't gotten around to examining.

Adjusting the overhead light, Jimmy peered into the barrel, eyeing the contents for a piece of readily visible iron. At first, the only item he saw was an old tire iron. Then, he spotted a half-buried railroad spike. Both were too large to carry in the open. Bringing them in a bag might be dangerous. Ghosts could, he recalled, range up to a mile away from where they haunted.

The stronger ones go even farther. What if her father is strong? Or, if it is her mother, it could still be dangerous to be unprepared.

Jimmy disliked being unprepared.

He leaned over the barrel and removed some of the larger items, careful not to scratch himself on any sharp and rusted edges. Jimmy had heard of children and adults getting sick from rusted metal, and he had no desire to be sick. He hated throwing up.

Removing an aluminum baseball bat with tape around the handle, Jimmy heard a rattle. He peered in and saw several nails on an old Vermont license plate. The nails were strange, square cut, and short. He tilted his head as he sought the name for them.

Coffin nails. Used for floors. Iron. Driven in and then cleated.

Jimmy smiled. Iron.

He reached in and withdrew three nails. They were cold and heavy in his palm, and his smile broadened. He put one in each front pocket, and then the last in the back pocket of his pants.

Jimmy returned everything he had removed to the barrel before he went back upstairs. He poured a glass of water, drank it, and then searched the cabinets for salt. In the cabinet beside the refrigerator, Jimmy found an unopened box of iodized salt. He took a Ziploc sandwich bag from a box

of the same, filled the bag a quarter of the way, and then sealed it. This he added to his other back pocket, and then he put the salt away. He felt sufficiently prepared.

A glance at the clock showed it was one past one. His parents wouldn't be home until four.

I have plenty of time to go to the Tinker House and find out what happened to Rachel.

Jimmy left his home and walked back toward town. He focused on Rachel, but he did not let his concern for the dead girl consume him. Jimmy understood that fear and worry would cause him to make poor decisions, and so he didn't allow them any access to his thought process.

When he was a short distance from the Tinker House, he came to a stop.

Several of his classmates, their eyes wild with fear and their tanned faces pale, were racing towards him.

"Run, Jimmy!" Eddie Brewer yelled as he passed by. "Michelle went into the house, and she didn't come out."

Jimmy did run, but it wasn't away from Rachel's house. It was towards it.

His feet slapped the sidewalk noisily, his body awkward as he raced along the concrete. Jimmy wasn't athletic, and each step sent twinges of pain into his calves and thighs. His chest tightened, and a cramp formed beneath his right ribcage. In a matter of seconds, he was out of breath, but he didn't slow down. He could see the Tinker House and the path of crushed grass leading from the sidewalk to the front of the house.

The door was open, and the darkness beyond it looked unnatural, as though someone had taken a can of paint and sprayed it on a piece of wood.

Jimmy didn't slow down as he veered off the sidewalk and onto the property. Fear was growing in him, and he knew that if he stopped before he was in the house, he wouldn't be able to go in.

There are two people who need me. One living. One dead.

As the thought finished, he was through the doorway and in the bitterly cold interior of the Tinker House. He skidded to a stop and waited, counting his heartbeats as his eyes adjusted to the almost impenetrable darkness. As shapes and items came into focus, he moved his head from side to side, his nostrils flaring as he took in the plethora of scents.

There was the subtle odor of wood rot and the sharp tang of decomposing leaves. But there was no animal matter in the air.

Animals don't like ghosts.

He registered the thought and peered at the odds and ends of furniture littering the room, each tucked up against a wall. Some of the items were cast-offs. Broken chairs and a mattress. Only a pair of tables and a lamp appeared as though they might have been there when the Tinkers had occupied the home.

With his vision sharpening, Jimmy tried to see where Michelle might be. He caught a glimpse of a white Nike sneaker, and when he stepped closer,

he was pleased to see the rest of Michelle was there as well. Hurrying to her, Jimmy slipped a hand into his back pocket and extracted the iron nail. He held it tightly as he knelt down beside her.

Michelle's face was pale, her eyelids fluttering. When Jimmy touched her cheek, her eyes snapped open and she screamed.

He flinched but remained by her side.

Her eyes fixed on him, focused, and only then did she stop screaming.

When she spoke, her voice was hoarse. "Jimmy Hsu?"

He nodded, took her hand, and pressed the iron nail into her palm. "Hold this. You have to leave the house. If a ghost tries to stop you, push your hand with this nail against it. Yes?"

She looked at him, confused.

"Do you understand?" He raised his voice, hating the sound of it, but knowing it was a necessity.

"Yes."

"Good." He helped her to her feet. "Go outside and get warm. Don't let anyone stop you."

"What about you?"

"I have to find Rachel." He shooed Michelle toward the door and watched her leave. Once she was out safely, Jimmy turned his attention back to the house. His eyes were better. He could see details on the walls. A few photographs and a painting hung here and there. His eyes were drawn toward the only door in the room.

The door was closed over, but not shut.

The basement. He took her down there. It is where he would have done his experiments.

Jimmy patted the pocket with the salt, reassuring himself that it was there, and then he took out one of the remaining nails. Holding the iron in his hand, he was surprised to find his palm was clammy.

I am more afraid than I thought I would be. He registered the information, then set it aside to be examined later when the work in the basement was done.

I will focus on Rachel and only Rachel.

Jimmy walked to the basement door, opened it, and stepped back, surprised at the cold air that seeped out of the doorway. When he had adjusted himself to the cold, he peered down into the darkness and realized he should have brought a candle. As he stood at the top of the steps, debating on the best way to approach the situation, he was pleased to see a bit of light. It wasn't much, and he suspected it came from one of the basement windows.

If there are clouds, or if the sun shifts too much while I am down there, it will be dark. I won't be able to see.

The thought of being trapped in the blackness bit at his stomach and clawed its way up his spine. It took Jimmy almost a minute to regain control over himself, and when he did, his heart was beating hard and fast against his chest.

He reached out, took hold of a rough wooden banister, and descended into the basement. He could smell dust and mildew, but on the first floor, there was no hint of animal life. Jimmy examined the room around him, carefully registering where everything was in relation to his position. He saw a furnace and across the room from it was a coal bin. The door to the coal chute was broken, and it was from there that the light source emanated.

Along the entirety of the right wall was a table. Strange pieces of radios and vacuum tubes were attached to it, and there was a layer of dust over every item.

That was his work area, Jimmy concluded, and then he turned away.

Where did he do the experiment, though? Where did he send her away?

At the far edge of the basement, only hinted at by the light from the coal chute, there stood a long closet. Three doors were awkwardly hung, but evenly spaced, and as Jimmy neared them, he could make out words carved upon each.

In, read the first.

Out was on the second.

Nowhere, read the third.

Jimmy scratched his head and tried to understand the rationale. Which door did he send her through?

He yelped as the Nowhere door rattled in its frame, and a man's furious voice punched through the wood.

"Let me out, damn you! This isn't right!" The rage in the man was impossible to miss, and Jimmy took a cautious step back.

"Woman!" the unseen man screamed. "Let me out!"

Jimmy reached into his pocket and took out his other nail. Clutching one in each hand, he straightened and opened his mouth to speak.

"Step back, child."

The voice came from behind Jimmy and caused him to whirl around.

He saw the ghost of Rachel, and, if the photograph in the book had been correct, he was also looking at her mother.

The dead woman smiled tightly and motioned Jimmy to step away from the doors.

Jimmy did so, his eyes darting from Rachel to the dead woman.

Rachel smiled at him, and Jimmy, still tense, forced a smile in return. "What is your name?" Rachel asked, and Jimmy told her. She looked at her mother. "He would always wave to me."

The dead woman's smile was bright and pleased.

"It has taken me decades to find my way back to my daughter," she explained. Her expression became dour and angry. "My husband refused to send me in after her, and so I went without his knowledge. Yesterday, I returned, only to discover he had managed to remain behind after death. Not to comfort our child, but to send her through the doors time and time again."

Rachel's smile faltered, and she pressed closer to her mother, who wrapped a protective arm around her.

"This morning, as he prepared to send her into the other door again," the dead woman continued, "I pushed him in."

The dead man screamed and pounded on the door.

Rachel winced and then frowned. Looking up to her mother, she said, "He shouldn't be so loud. There are creatures between the walls, and they don't like noise."

Her mother smiled bitterly. "He is an inquisitive man, Rachel. Let him learn this lesson on his own."

Rachel nodded, and both ghosts returned their attention to Jimmy. "Why are you here, Jimmy?" her mother asked.

"I was concerned for Rachel when she was no longer in the window."

The dead woman tilted her head slightly, a small smile playing on her face. "Did I hear you correctly, young man?"

Jimmy nodded.

Rachel beamed at him.

"I thought you had entered the house on a dare," the dead woman continued. "If Anger is the same as it was when I was alive, children often went into houses where spirits were said to linger. I suspect that was the reason for the other child's entry into our home."

Jimmy frowned, slightly confused, then he nodded. "Michelle. Yes, probably. Your home is known to be haunted."

"I'm sure it is." The dead woman chuckled. "I am impressed and thankful that you cared enough for a stranger, and a dead one at that, to come and investigate her veering from the norm."

Jimmy put his hands into his pockets and released the iron nails. "I am glad she is safe."

"More than safe, Jimmy," the mother replied, putting her hand on Rachel's head.

As his adrenaline emptied into the pit of his stomach, causing nausea, Jimmy smiled awkwardly at the two ghosts. "Will I see you in the window?"

The girl nodded and glanced at her mother, who smiled. To Jimmy, Rachel asked, "Will you come and visit again?"

The question surprised him. No one ever wanted him around. "Yes. I would like to." He scratched his head. "When?" "Whenever you want," her mother replied.

A proud, happy feeling swept over Jimmy, and smiling, he waved goodbye before ascending the stairs and leaving the cool comfort of Tinker House.