

The Man on the Stairs

I have never told a soul what really happened to Frank Dent the night he disappeared. If I had, they would have considered me a candidate for a lobotomy, or at the very least, thought my imagination was in overdrive. Everyone in town believed Frank ran away. He was planning to do just that. I know. I was with him on that night many years ago.

We were walking along the old gravel road at the south end of town headed for the Beauchamp house where Frank intended to hide out until he could slip away. The creepy Beauchamp house! While growing up and filled with the round-eyed gullibility of youth, I had been convinced that the Beauchamp place was haunted. It certainly looked haunted, even in daylight—a deserted, decaying, former plantation-house that had seen its glory years before the Civil War. Now, as we approached the old ruin in the darkness, the childhood stories I had heard about it kept bubbling up, chipping away at my teenage bravado.

“Man, cops or no cops, you couldn’t get me to stay there tonight,” I said.

“Al, you know I have to. I can’t go home, and I can’t walk the streets. It’s the only place I can think of to hide. I’ll get away tomorrow before daylight and leave town,” Frank said.

“What a bummer. Just because they found a little pot in your locker,” I offered as a form of comfort. After all, Frank was my friend, and I had been the one to warn him that the sheriff was after him. “Listen, Frank, maybe they won’t bust you, just give you a warning or something.”

“Not this time. You know what the sheriff told old man Stutz at the home last time. One more mistake and I’ve had it. I got to get away. I just ain’t going to no jail,” Frank replied. The “home” was the Protestant Children’s Home where Frank, an orphan, had lived most of his life.

We rounded a bend in the road and there it was, the Beauchamp house, looming stark and black against the night sky. A rotting, split-rail fence, silvered by moonlight, defined the weed-choked lot upon which the house stood --all that was left of the old estate. The fields long ago had been sold off.

“Must’ve been pretty impressive way back then,” I said.

“Just an old, falling down dump, now,” Frank said. “Come on.”

I followed reluctantly. We edged through waist-high weeds to the rear of the house and stepped cautiously across the creaking boards of the verandah to the back door. Inside, it was pitch black except where moonlight squeezed between cracks in the boarded up windows. I flipped on my small pocket flashlight and played it slowly around the room. It must have been the kitchen where Beauchamp slaves once prepared family meals, but only some broken pantry shelves, wood crates, and an old flue pipe remained.

“I’ll sleep in here,” Frank said, removing his jean jacket and rolling it up to serve as a makeshift pillow.

“Kind of spooky,” I said. “Remember all those stories about it being haunted?”

“Douse the light,” Frank interrupted. “There’s a car coming.” We crouched and peered through the window boards. Headlights momentarily lit up the rickety old fence then disappeared down the road.

"Must be old man Griswold. His is the only other place on this stretch of road," I said. "Here, you take the flashlight and look around. I'll keep my eye on the road just to be sure that car's not coming back."

Frank took the flashlight and moved toward the inside door. I heard the boards creak as he stepped out of the room. The glow from the flashlight faded, and the darkness seemed to wrap itself around me. I shivered even though the September night air was quite warm. I called to Frank, more to break the mood than anything else, "You see anything?"

"Just some old boxes and junk. There's a door here must lead out to the front hall."

I heard him pull the door open. Suddenly, he cried out. "Hey, who are you?"

"Frank, Frank," I shouted. "Who is it? What's going on?"

I started toward the door but tripped over something and crashed to the floor. I felt a wrenching pain in my ankle.

"Al, it's some guy going up the stairs carrying a candle. Hey, you, what---." Abruptly, Frank's voice was cut off.

I pulled myself up, lurched from the kitchen, somehow found my way across the room to the door that Frank had just opened, and hobbled into the front hall. The flashlight lay on the floor, its feeble light barely outlining the first steps of the staircase.

"Frank? Where are you?" I called. "Frank? What happened? Damn it, Frank, where the hell are you?"

No answer. Defying the grip of fear urging me to get out of there fast, I picked up the flashlight and started up the stairs. He must have gone after whomever it was he saw. But why did he drop the flash? And why didn't he answer my yells? I reached the second floor and limped down the hallway to the first door.

"Frank, you in there?" Again, no answer. I pushed open the door and circled the room with the flashlight beam. Empty. In a rising panic, I moved as quickly as my throbbing ankle would allow, and opened every door, every closet. All were empty. There was no sign of Frank or the man on the stairs. A flight of steps led up to a third floor, but my courage had reached its limit. I peered up into the deep darkness and shouted as loudly as I could, "Frank, you answer me. If you don't, I'm leaving. Now." Again, no answer. I turned and limped down the steps, my thoughts a mad mixture of fear, fantasy and even anger at Frank, who, for whatever reason, had left me alone in this dark, haunted house.

I reached the first floor, waited until the fast-rising fear overcame my concern for Frank; then, shouldering open the front door, I hobbled down the porch steps. I looked back one last time at the house, now a menacing, black silhouette against the starry sky. With the moonlight and my flashlight to guide me, I turned and made my way back toward town along the gravel road.

The next morning, a little ashamed of my panic the night before, I decided to go back and make a thorough search of the third floor. When I reached the old house, I saw the sheriff's car parked in front. I walked up as casually as I could and asked the deputy, Joe Bender, what was up.

"Man down the road called this morning and said he saw a light in here last night. Say, you're Don Cook's kid, ain't you? You're buddies with that Dent fella. You seen him?"

"No, why?" I asked, playing dumb.

“Looking for him,” Bender said. I could see an unspoken question in Bender’s eyes, but before he could ask me anything else, the sheriff came out of the front door and walked down the steps.

“Should’ve torn this place down years ago,” he said, eyeing every step warily.

“See anything?” Bender asked.

“Went through it from top to bottom. Just trash and this.” He flipped Frank’s blue denim jacket to Bender. “Belongs to the Dent kid. This was in it.” The sheriff held up Frank’s wallet.

“Looks like he cut out real fast to leave that behind,” Bender said. Turning to me he added, “Somebody must’ve told him we were looking for him.”

“Well, he’s certainly gone now,” the sheriff said. “He’s probably halfway to Beckertown. I’ll call over there and have them keep an eye out.”

They climbed into the car, pulled down to the gravel road, and roared off around the bend. Now there was no reason to search the third floor. The sheriff said he’d been all through the house and still no Frank. Maybe Frank had just cut out, like the sheriff thought. But what about the man Frank had seen on the stairs? Had he been a hallucination? A ghost? A real person? And if Frank had run off, why would he have left so suddenly without saying anything to me and without his wallet? The questions buzzed through my head as I slowly walked home.

In the two years that followed, Frank and his whereabouts were forced to the back of my mind. No one had heard from him. The common theory was that Frank had run off like the sheriff said, and I had all but convinced myself of it---until the day I came home from Roanoke College to do some library research for a history paper.

My subject was pre-Civil War society. Since we had an honest-to-goodness ante-bellum house right in our town, I decided I would write about the Beauchamp family. After all, the venerable plantation-house kept intruding on my thoughts anyway.

Mrs. Holden, our librarian, turned up a collection of papers, letters, and other materials about the Beauchamps. The surviving descendants of the original Beauchamp family apparently had donated them to the library when they deserted our little town for other parts. No one, it seemed, had been into the musty, dust-covered portfolio for many years.

That evening, as I sorted through the material, I came upon a worn, ledger-like book, a journal belonging to Roger Beauchamp, the man who had built the Beauchamp house. I flipped through it, reading a paragraph here and a passage there. Then I came upon this entry, and with the help of Roger Beauchamp, the mystery of Frank’s disappearance was solved--at least for me:

September 16, 1864

This night a very perplexing occurrence baffles my comprehension, but I shall set it down as it happened. Perhaps tomorrow an explanation will be found. As bands of scavenging deserters have been reported in our vicinity, this evening I was especially careful to fasten every door and secure each window in the main house. I stationed Ben at the front door with a fowling piece and Hercules at the rear entrance with the dinner gong. At the first sign of trespass, they were to rouse the household to prepare for a defense of sorts. I had placed several rifles with ball and powder at various upstairs windows in preparation for such an emergency. Earlier, I had

sent Marie and the children to town for safety.

I had completed making a final check of the main floor, had snuffed the lamps, and was mounting the stairs by candlelight. About half way up I had this uncanny feeling that someone was watching me. I turned and much to my amazement I saw a man, or rather a lad, standing at the foot of the stairs, staring up at me in the candle glow. Although I could see him mouthing words, I could hear no sound. Then suddenly he fell in a heap upon the floor in a swoon.

I raced down the stairs and looked at him closely. He seemed to be about sixteen or seventeen years of age. His hair was trimmed in an unusual manner, and his clothing was, somehow, foreign. No one I have seen dresses in such a fashion. I thought at first that he might be a deserter and somehow had gotten past Ben and Hercules. Ben assured me that no one had gone past him. Hercules' reply was the same. I checked every window, but each was still firmly fastened. Somehow he had gotten in but I cannot perceive how.

As I write, three hours have passed since this occurrence, and the poor young devil has not uttered one sound. He sits upright, swaying gently, staring...at nothing. He neither hears nor sees me. I am afraid he is quite deranged. Tomorrow I will fetch Doctor Alben to see him.

Yet now, I sit here wondering who is he? Where did he come from and even more puzzling, how could he have appeared so suddenly and mysteriously in my own house when no one could have entered without our knowledge? It is as if he appeared out of nowhere like a ghostly apparition. Yet he is flesh and blood and as real as I. Seeing his present state of mind, however, I doubt that we shall ever know the true answer.

I set Beauchamp's journal down ever so slowly. It was a wild, impossible idea. Yet, there it was. Unmistakably, it had been Frank that Beauchamp had written about, appearing suddenly in his front hall. I looked at the date of the entry, September 16, 1864. Frank and I had entered the house on September 16, the day before my eighteenth birthday, two years ago.

Incredibly, the man Frank had seen going up the stairs had been Roger Beauchamp. In some crazy, inexplicable, instant shift in time, Frank had been transported back, out of the twentieth century forever.

I had been part of an astounding, inconceivable event, but in the years since, I never told anyone. Who would believe it? Would you?