

CUL-DE-SAC SÉANCE

by

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Madame Dvořák felt she was losing the room.

Bill and Hal checked their watches, not wanting to miss their tee time. Mary whispered to Vera about cheese as her fingers hovered above a coffee table filled with epicurean delights. Other homeowners, whom Madame Dvořák didn't know by name, fidgeted and cast dubious glances at each other beneath the high-ceilinged family room decorated in Crate & Barrel chic.

Only Helen, the homeowners association's president and host, paid full attention. The mother of three nodded approval at pretty much everything the medium said. Thank goodness for rubes. Rubes paid Madame Dvořák's rent.

Madame Dvořák's proclamation that evil spirits were responsible for the mass of dead flies in the McMansions of the cul-de-sac drew eye rolls and a few muttered curses. It used to be easier for her to convince folk about the existence of devilry before iPhones. She guessed that most of the group stayed to be polite neighbors for Helen.

Bob Morgan, the builder of the *nouveau riche* development, breathed a sigh of relief from his vantage point next to a potted ficus plant that could have been made of plastic. Nobody as yet was blaming his company for the weird stuff that was happening. Occasionally he got into legal tussles with homeowners a few years after completion by some things, such as leaking roofs and windows, shoddy plumbing, or an occasional small electrical fire. Cutting corners was where profit was made. After listening to the kooky medium, Bob did not think he had to worry about

paying any damages.

“Helen,” Madame Dvořák said, “when you first called me, didn’t you say many of your friends also reported an abundance of dead mice? They were desiccated, unusually preserved.”

Helen rose to her feet and nodded emphatically, hoping to convince those who did not believe in the supernatural to give Madame Dvořák more time to make her case.

Claire, Helen’s closest neighbor and a fellow believer of the cul-de-sac haunting, said, “I found three dead mice in the back of our master closet that were not there weeks ago. Can you explain how mummified mice mean there are ghosts in all our houses?”

Claire’s husband, Bill, interjected, “As I said earlier, this is a new housing development—nobody has died on this land yet; it isn’t old enough to be haunted. Ghosts are mostly in Europe.”

“How about the Native Americans who died here, you know, the ones our ancestors stole the land from?” Taylor asked. “Maybe they are haunting us as retribution for our cruel and inhumane treatment of them.” He was the “enlightened” neighbor most people didn’t talk with for very long.

Bob Morgan cringed at the thought of potentially being in a lawsuit with a Native American tribe who would claim his development was on sacred land. He hoped this event would not make the news and stir up a manufactured local brouhaha. It appeared lucky that nobody seemed to be writing or recording.

Hal said, “Let’s not turn a neighborly discussion about ghosts into some far-left agenda item. The Indian dead can’t be haunting our homes because they lived in tepees; they were nomads. Real ghosts are connected to the places they inhabited in life, in substantial dwellings—like castles, mansions, old inns, and the like. I’ve never heard a story of an Indian ghost haunting

an old cow field.”

Helen projected a plastered smile even though most of what Bill and Hal often said were echoes of beliefs whose currency was on the wane. She hoped to avoid another political shouting match like the one that occurred the prior July Fourth holiday over letting the kids play with fireworks unsupervised.

Madame Dvořák cleared her throat with a theatrical flair. “I’ve been feeling a powerful stirring of spectral energy from this cul-de-sac ever since I arrived. Something evil happened here a long time ago—perhaps an unrecorded massacre early in Virginia’s history. With such energy, the evil spirits seek to inhabit living flesh again. It’s clear they tried to enter the mice but failed. The bodies of mice are not strong enough to host them.”

“Do you think these evil spirits will try to possess us like they do in places like Louisiana and Alabama?” Vera said as she surreptitiously put down her Roquefort cheese wedge on the coffee table to avoid judgment over her eating habits.

“Perhaps,” Madame Dvořák said mysteriously. “It would not be the first time I’ve seen rampant possessions in multiple homes at once. It can happen fast.”

Helen gasped audibly. “Are we in immediate danger?”

Taylor and his wife took that moment to leave the gathering in a silent protest. Taylor would not tolerate the denigration of non-European ghosts. A few others joined them.

Inwardly Madame Dvořák glowed from the panic that Vera and Helen displayed. Perhaps she could stir the pot of hysteria some more and turn this situation into multiple paid interventions that led to the cul-de-sac paying for a costly séance to cast the spirits out. All it took was a dedicated core of people to turn things around to make the nonbelievers go with the flow. Most people found it easier just to pay her fees and move on.

Hal chuckled. “I believe ghosts are real but not here. Something else is causing the flies and mice. But, to play along, assuming Indian ghosts can enter our homes despite having not lived in them, what would be the signs of their so-called possession of us?”

Madame Dvořák always found at least one person in a group had to be the “pisser in the punch bowl.” She would win if she could outdo his cynicism in front of the group.

“It always starts with simple body changes before it gets worse,” Madame Dvořák said. “Has anybody had unusual hair loss in the past couple of months?”

Sheepishly, a few hands went up. Hair loss was a high-probability item with a crowd in their mid-to-late fifties. Madame Dvořák used that symptom often—a fish-in-the-barrel guess.

Hal frowned at Bill and mouthed the words “big deal.”

“Please forgive the crudeness of this next one,” Madame Dvořák smiled. “Have people been more frequently incontinent with bouts of diarrhea?”

A few people looked at each other and groaned.

“You sure it wasn’t related to our Cinco de Mayo block party? That Mexican food ran through me like Sherman through Atlanta,” Hal snarked as he rubbed his belly.

The room erupted in laughter.

Helen looked to Madame Dvořák, hoping the medium would make a stronger case. She sensed that most of the cul-de-sac wasn’t buying into her idea that they were all being haunted. Helen worried that her family wouldn’t get invited to barbecues or that her kids would be shunned from playdates. She didn’t want to be known as the crazy lady of the neighborhood; after all, she was the one who contacted Madame Dvořák and called for the public meeting.

Madame Dvořák went for the big guns—Hal, the alpha male golfer, was a Mr. Funny; humor was a deadly tonic to a medium. It was time for her Hail Mary pass. She called out a

litany of physical ailments to the group.

“Fever?”

“Nausea?”

“Vomiting?”

“Rotting teeth?”

The volley of ailment questions raised a surprising number of positive responses. Even Madame Dvořák was shocked that three people raised their hands for rotting teeth.

Nobody was laughing anymore.

In a faint voice Mary said, “Mr. Littles at 432 suffered a seizure day before last; his wife said he’s in the ICU in a coma. Last week he jogged through the neighborhood and all seemed well.” A hush fell over the room.

“What do you suggest we should do now?” Helen asked Madame Dvořák.

Madame Dvořák spoke triumphantly, “I will conduct a thorough review of all your homes over multiple visits for the presence and identification of the types of spirits you have in this haunting. At the end of the week, when the moon will be in half-phase, we will conduct a séance. It will not be a cheap process, but in the end we will exorcise these evil spirits from your homes.”

There was an awkward silence as everyone calculated their public position on whether to be honest about their belief in a neighborhood haunting.

A skinny, dark-haired man from the back of the room set down his plate of vegetable crudité and said, “I think we need to look to more scientific reasons as to why we have experienced all these things.”

His wife replied, louder than she intended, “Honey, we are just guests—we haven’t even

closed on the house yet; let's not be unneighborly.”

Ignoring her, the man continued, “All the physical symptoms experienced, including those of the flies and mice, lead me to conclude that this cul-de-sac has, for whatever reason, a very high level of radiation present.”

Another sampling of muttered curses filled the room. Helen put her head in her hands. Bill tightened his fists and clenched his jaw. Hal placed his hands over his balls as he did during dental x-rays.

Madame Dvořák was defiant; she would slay the interloper. “I am a world-class spiritualist and clairvoyant—I’ve been on *The Wendy Williams Show*. By what authority or experience do you dare contradict my professional opinion?”

“I’m a board-certified radiation oncologist, and all these symptoms are textbook signs of acute radiation syndrome.”

Bob Morgan retreated from the house via the garage entrance. It would take several years and a civil trial to determine that the marble he had used in all the cul-de-sac homes was purchased at a meager price from an Eastern European dealer who surreptitiously traded in radioactive marble mined from the Ural Mountains of Russia. The mine was located at Lake Karachay, a site known to be the depository of nuclear waste since at least 1951. Bob thought he had found a good deal. It was not his intent to harm people.

As Bob climbed into his four-door pickup truck, and after saying a hurried goodbye to Helen, Madame Dvořák took a moment to catch her breath in her car. She hastily tried to clear her mind as she had learned in her mediation class. Still, she could not erase the visual of the Wicked Witch of the West melting from the bucket of water thrown over her. Any doctor in a group was bad for business.

The business of being a medium seemed too difficult lately; perhaps she would utilize her persuasive skills as a life coach.

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