

Behind the House He Lived In

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By

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Every night we'd been there, hiding behind the old junior school wall to watch as Marie, the local lunatic, shuffled to the nearby phone box and dialed a number.

We never saw her put money in the slot, but whenever she dialed a faint ringing would sound from the empty house opposite. Sometimes it just rang and rang until she gave up and shuffled away again, more slowly and more stooped than before.

Other times, after about six rings, the sound would stop. Then Marie would leave the kiosk and make her way round to the back of the house.

Several years before, Marie had spent months in the psychiatric unit in town after she had been spotted making her pilgrimage to the phone booth and calling a number that no longer existed.

Maybe it hadn't been long enough because now it looked as if she was up to her old tricks again and she was going to make this the best summer ever. We had all finished our A-levels and were enjoying our last summer holiday together before we parted to go onto university or to jobs in faraway places. Each of us had a summer job, but we didn't take them too seriously and while Mad Marie was back in action, we knew this was going to be a summer we'd never forget.

They say that Marie, a local girl, had been a singer and songwriter when she was young. The whole village knows her story and those who knew her back then, remember her as having been beautiful. That was hard to believe, seeing the state of her now. Everything had looked good for Marie twenty years ago. People had begun to hear of her and her music and she started to make a lot of money.

Then Michael arrived in the village. Apparently it was one of those love-at-first-sight occasions and they were going to be married the following spring. But Michael died

that September and that's where the story really ended for Marie as well. She became a recluse. She stopped singing and writing and the next time anyone bothered to look at her again she had gone mad.

Michael's house was still deserted. No-one seemed to know who currently owned it. Now, more than twenty years after his death, we huddled behind the old school wall and watched as this woman, whom we had only ever known as old and stooped, made her nightly journey to the phone booth outside Michael's house.

For most of July we observed Marie trundling back and forth between the phone and the house, but in time it was no longer enough just to watch. One night, hidden in our usual spot, we saw Marie dial the number, listen and then shuffle round to the back of the house. We gave her two minutes then we followed.

One of the planks of wood boarding up the kitchen window had come loose. Through the gap we could see the dusty kitchen, the hall and doorways leading to the downstairs rooms. The whole area was lit by a gentle glow, although we could see no obvious source of light. As we peered in we saw Marie, tall and beautiful as she must once have been, dancing in and out of the rooms with a slim, ghostly figure. I assume it was Michael.

Although we would never admit it, we were scared and for a few days we kept away from the house. Then, as our fear ebbed away, curiosity reared its ugly head again.

We wanted to know: would Michael answer the phone for us as well?

A week after we'd seen Marie with the ghost we went back. As soon as she left the phone box that night, we ran down to it and pressed the redial button. The number showed on the display: "78253". We all wrote it down.

We were back again the next night a good half hour before Marie's usual time. Giggling, slightly nervous, we made our way to the phone box and pressed the buttons. We expected - and half hoped - to find we were calling a stranger's house. A quick apology for the wrong number and the adventure would be over.

The phone rang. It rang and rang: ten, eleven, twelve rings. We were going to ring off. Then it was picked up. We waited for the "hello" but no-one spoke. Our giggling stopped, the receiver was replaced in its cradle. Slowly we made our way round to the back of the house.

Michael was waiting for us, in the open doorway of the kitchen that had always before been padlocked. As he heard us approach he turned to meet us, smiling, happy. His expression changed to bewilderment, horror and maybe, a moment of anger. Finally despair settled as he looked at us. Then he vanished.

We ran back to the safety of the school wall. Marie arrived soon after. She dialed Michael's number but nothing happened. Again the next night she tried, but the phone was never answered. For another six weeks we watched her arriving, dialing and waiting with no reply. Then she stopped coming.

Marie died that September. "Seems like she just pined away" I heard some one say.

I didn't take the university place I was offered that autumn. I claimed illness until the following spring and then returned to the summer job I had the year before. Five years on I still do that job.

Now I go to the phone box every night and dial Michael's number. I'm hoping that Marie will answer and show me that they are reunited, that they are happy and I am

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forgiven. Some of the local kids have noticed and started hanging around me, calling me names and sniggering. What do they know?

So far Marie has not replied.