

# *The Sweet Yurt of Booth*

**By Fiberglass**

It was an exquisite, three-story Victorian house. It had been built in the 1840s, according to the sign in the yard designating its status as a historic residence.

I stood on the sidewalk, suitcase in hand, staring up at it. I had dreamt of living in a place like this since I was a kid, though I certainly would have preferred to have owned the whole thing myself rather than just renting a room in it. Perhaps that day would come, but at the present time I just wasn't pulling in the necessary bread.

I climbed up to the porch and rang the bell.

A woman in her sixties answered the door. She wore a pair of jeans and a sweater and had her dull-gray hair tied back in a ponytail.

"I called about the room," I said.

"Ah, yes, Mr. Johnson. Come right in. I'm Ms. Bierce."

I followed her through the foyer and into the living room, which was large, clean, and well lit. There were three comfortable-looking couches, several wingback chairs, and a long coffee table.

"Everyone shares this room," she said. "There's a television in the corner, and some books and magazines on the shelf there. I only ask that if you're going to eat or drink that you don't spill anything."

"No problem."

"Your room is on the second floor," she said, moving into the hallway on the other side of the door. "I think you'll get along with the other tenants. They're a good group."

"How many other people are there?"

"Three women and two men. You've evened things out."

"Good deal."

"Do you cook?"

“Sort of.”

“This way.”

She led me through the door at the end of the hall and into the kitchen. An attractive young woman with flowing brown hair was standing in front of the stove, worrying over a pot of kidney beans and rice. Noticing us, she smiled.

“This is Kimberly,” Ms. Bierce said. “She lives on the first floor.”

“Andrew,” I said, offering her a slight wave.

“Moving in?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Cool. I think you'll like it here.”

“I think I will.”

“The kitchen is also communal,” Ms. Bierce said. “I suggest writing your name on whatever you put in the fridge and pantry. I can't guarantee that that will prevent someone else from eating it, but at least that way you reduce the odds.”

We made our way back down the hall and climbed the stairs to the second floor. She unlocked the door to my room and handed me the key. It was nice, larger than I had expected, with hardwood floors and a high ceiling. In terms of furnishings, it had a single bed, a chest of drawers, and a roll-top desk with a swivel chair. While I set my suitcase on the bed, she opened a window to let in some fresh air.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“It's great.”

“Fell free to decorate however you like, but you must leave this painting where it is,” she said, pointing. “It cannot be moved for any reason.”

I followed her finger to the painting in question, which hung on the wall opposite the chest of drawers. It didn't seem to be anything special, just a dusty parcel of land with a yurt made from animal skins on it. If anything, it was kind of strange. You'd usually expect such a painting to have people and animals on it, but it just had that yurt.

“Can I ask why?”

“Do you want the room?”

“Yes.”

“Then please just comply with my request. It’s been in this house since it was built, and it must remain in that exact spot.”

I thrust a stack of money at her. “Fair enough.”

She counted the bills and smiled. “Okay. You can move in as soon as you like.”

“All I own is in that suitcase, so I guess I already have.”

“Really? That’s it?”

“I sold everything else before I moved. Just seemed easier that way.”

She turned to go but stopped when she reached the door. “Oh, there is just one other thing: The basement is strictly off limits.”

“Why would I go down to the basement?”

“I don’t know, but just keep out. I pride myself on not being a difficult landlady, but I expect the few rules I’ve put in place to be followed. All right?”

“Okay.”

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As I was settling in, there was a knock at the door. When I opened it, an older gentlemen smiled and stuck out his hand.

“Larry Brown,” he said. “I live in the room down the hall.”

“Andrew Johnson.”

He laughed. “What happened? Did you get impeached?”

“Something like that.”

I stepped out of the way and waved him into the room. He sat down in the swivel chair and looked around.

“What do you do, Andrew?”

“Nothing at the moment. I’m new in town. I’m living on savings until I find a job.”

“No worries. It’s happened to the best of us. You’ll do fine.”

“Thanks for saying so.”

He ran a finger down the wall. “Remember Wild Cherry?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Wild Cherry.”

“The Kool-Aid flavor?”

“The band.”

“Oh, sure. ‘Play that Funky Music.’”

“I was the bass player. And we had other songs, you know.”

“I’m sure you must have. I mean, how many bands only have one song?”

“Let me think. Gin Blossoms?”

“No. All their songs just *sound* alike.”

“Same thing.” He smiled, and then his expression shifted into a conspiratorial set.

“Listen. You seem like a decent guy, so I’m going to let you in on something.”

I glanced toward the door. “Is it about the basement?”

“What do you know about that?”

“Nothing. The landlady just told me not to go down there. Honestly, if she hadn’t mentioned it, it never would have crossed my mind. I’m not exactly a basement kind of guy, you know. Not really my scene. But since she did I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Gotcha. I’ve never been down there myself, but I have stood in front of the door a couple of times, just out of curiosity. I heard weird noises.”

“What kinds of noises?”

“Hard to describe. Kind of like rusty machinery. Anyway, I wasn’t going to talk about the basement.”

“What is it, then?”

“There are some strange people living here. Just wanted to make you aware. There’s a dude on the third floor named Nathan. He eats toucans.”

“Huh?”

“Yeah. He doesn’t think anyone knows about it, but we all do. We found a bunch of beaks in the trash, and then one day I just randomly asked what he was up to, and he said he had just scarfed a couple of toucans. He quickly realized his mistake and glibly tried to cover it up—something about eating two cans of SpaghettiOs—but the cat was out of the bag.”

“Toucan play at that game.”

“What?”

“Never mind. Why on earth would he eat toucans?”

“I think he might have misunderstood a Froot Loops commercial.”

“So that’s it? He just has a predilection for consuming tropical birds?”

“I think it’s a symptom of a much larger problem.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, man, but every time the police catch some serial killer, his friends and acquaintances are always able to remember weird things that he did that they should have recognized as indicators of psychopathy.”

“You think he’s a serial killer?”

“Nah. I was just using it as an example. And even if he were one, where would he bury the bodies? A boarding house isn’t a suitable place for that kind of thing.”

Through the window, I saw a large murder of crows disperse in front of a billboard advertising an upcoming film called *The Adventure of the Fourteen-Minute Head*. It starred Gabe Kaplan, Matt Salinger, and the guy from *Bosom Buddies* that wasn’t Tom Hanks.

“All right, so there’s the toucan guy. Anyone else?”

“Yeah. One of the women on the first floor, Kimberly, is a witch. And not just in the ‘I bought a copy of the *Book of Shadows* at B. Dalton Bookseller’ kind of way, either. A genuine wielder of magic. Don’t let her cute veneer fool you.”

I thought back to the friendly young woman I had met in the kitchen. Could such a thing really be true?

“Is she dangerous?” I asked.

“I don’t know. She invited me into her room for tea one afternoon shortly after I moved in, and while it looked fairly normal in there, outside of some vaguely witchy décor, I noticed some strange properties about the place. For example, I saw her go out a door on one side of the sitting room and immediately enter through one on the other side.”

“Like in *Kid Icarus*?”

“Sure, kid.”

“Other than the door thing, what evidence do you have that she’s a witch? Have you seen her cast any spells?”

“No, but like many musicians of the funk era, I have the ability to pick up on that kind of stuff. We experimented with a lot mind-altering substances in those days, as I’m sure you’re aware.”

“That hasn’t changed. It’s still going on.”

“Don’t take that away from us.”

I smiled and raised my hands in submission.

He rose and stretched. “I’ve got to get going. I’m meeting some of the guys from Argent

at Mrs. Winner's."

"Thanks for the info."

He gave me a fist bump as he exited the room. I closed the door behind him and considered the implications of what I had just learned. Was eating toucans against the law? Seemed like it might be. Of course, that paled in comparison to the possibility of there being a sorceress on the first floor. I had no way of knowing whether Larry was a credible source, so I'd have to feel things out on my own. Witchcraft, as I understood it, was a subtle art, so unless I saw her riding a broom, stirring a giant cauldron, or dancing nude in front of a bonfire in the moonlight (one can hope), it would be difficult to know for certain.

I opened my suitcase and began to transfer my meager personal effects to the chest of drawers. As I placed a roll of socks in the bottom drawer, I heard something move. When I turned to look, I could have sworn I saw the frame of the painting shift slightly.

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As the weeks went by, I found that I rarely encountered the other tenants. Even Larry wasn't around much. *How does a guy who was in a one-hit wonder band from the 1970s spend his days?* I mused. He was probably off laying down the boogie somewhere.

All of the women, as it turned out, lived on the first floor. The other two, like Kimberly, appeared to be in their twenties. I found the three of them in the living room one afternoon, watching a soap opera. Kimberly perfunctorily introduced the others, but they barely acknowledged me, as they were quite engrossed in the program, and I soon forgot their names.

I ran into Nathan a couple of times, but he wasn't much of a talker. The first time, he only glanced at me and nodded his head before hurrying up the stairs. He must have been in a rush to ingest some toucans. The second time, I saw him coming up the basement stairs, which gave me pause. I could not, of course, be sure that he had been *in* the basement, but I couldn't come up with any other reason why he'd be ascending the stairs. When he saw me, he cleared his throat and mumbled something about having dropped a pen and going down the staircase to retrieve it. I just smiled and continued on my way.

Ms. Bierce herself came up to my room once a week to collect the rent, but other than that I only saw her when she was executing minor repairs. I was sure she lived in the house, but I didn't know where. I ultimately decided that it didn't matter.

My curiosity about Kimberly grew, but I couldn't think of any way to investigate without seeming like a creep. I kept hoping she'd invite me to her room, but she never did. I wondered why she had invited Larry over. Perhaps she had been starstruck. He had told me about his claim to fame inside of a minute of meeting me, so I had no doubt that he'd done with same with her.

No one was going to be starstruck by me; that was for sure.

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One day I returned from job hunting and found a footprint on my comforter. I made it a point to make my bed every morning, a habit that had been ingrained in me from a young age, so it was immediately obvious. I got down on my knees and looked at the print from all angles, trying to figure out how it could have gotten there. I was somehow less struck by the fact that someone had been in my room when I wasn't home than by the strangeness of the print's existence.

The window was locked, so no one could have gotten in from the outside even if they could have reached the second-floor roof. The only other person who had a key to the room was the landlady, and this was certainly not her footprint. It was much too large, and it appeared to be from a man's shoe. Of course, she could have *let* someone in, but that seemed unlikely. I didn't know her that well, but she didn't strike me as the type who would do such a thing. And what business could anyone possibly have had in my room? Moreover, I couldn't figure out *why* anyone would have stepped on the bed.

A few days later, I entered the house after another day of unsuccessful job hunting and found a man in the living room whom I had not seen before. He had short, curly hair and a handlebar moustache and was wearing the kind of outfit that was popular during the late nineteenth century. He was clearly very interested in the play he was watching on PBS.

"Hello," I said. "Are you a new tenant?"

He started and looked uneasy when he turned to address me. "Um, no. I've lived here for some time. Name's John Booth."

"I'm Andrew Johnson."

He moved away slightly. "Really?"

"Yeah. I live on the second floor." I removed my windbreaker and slung it over my shoulder. "It's pretty weird that we'd both have names associated with the Civil War era."



“Uh-huh.” It was clear that he was nervous. I wasn’t sure whether he was just socially awkward or was concerned about something else.

“What are you watching?”

He looked back toward the television. “Oh, it’s, um, a performance of one of Tennessee Williams’ lesser-known works. Are you a fan of the theater?”

“I am, as a matter of fact.”

“Wonderful. I’m an actor myself, actually, though I haven’t been in a show for some time. The world of the stage has changed, and I have, unfortunately, found myself unable to adapt.” He indicated the chair next to him. “Would you care to join me? It’s only just begun.”

“Just give me a second to get us some snacks and drinks from the kitchen.”

“Looks like we’ve got ourselves an evening.”

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Over the next few months, John and I became good friends. While he was somewhat out of touch with modernity, he more than made up for it with his zany sense of humor and knowledge of many fascinating subjects.

He told me he lived on the same floor as I did but said that he was a private person and wasn’t comfortable having anyone else in his room. I decided not to press the issue, although I did find it peculiar. We enjoyed going out to dinner, shared a love of candlepin bowling, and even managed to see a few plays at the community theater.

Strangely, any time we left the house, he’d insist on donning a disguise. He said it was because as an actor he enjoyed wearing costumes and assuming other identities and had so few opportunities to do so otherwise. To be honest, this sounded awfully fishy, but ultimately I just chalked it up to his being eccentric and played along.

One night in late September, after having been absent for a few days, he came to my room with an uncharacteristically serious expression on his face. There was clearly something bothering him.

“What’s up, man?” I asked.

He sat down on the bed and looked at the floor. “I want you to know that I really appreciate your friendship, which is why I have to get this off my chest.”

I lowered myself into the desk chair and scooted it toward the bed. “Go on, buddy. You know you can tell me anything.”

“Where to begin?” he said. “I guess I’ll start by saying that I don’t just share a *name* with the man who shot Abraham Lincoln.” He turned his face to the ceiling and rubbed the back of his neck. “I *am* the man who shot Abraham Lincoln.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m the blackguard who assassinated our fourteenth president. After I did it, shot him that is, I fled and went into hiding. The former mistress of this house, a Confederate sympathizer, took me in, and I’ve been here ever since. The history books say that I was shot dead by one ‘Thomas Corbett,’ but that’s just a story. There *was* no such man. He was made up by the press. They couldn’t find me, so they cooked up a tale to satisfy the public. People were pretty pissed.”

“Inebriated?”

“Angry.”

“Ah. Can you blame them? You killed the greatest president in American history.”

“Was he really the greatest?”

“That’s the general consensus.”

“Well, it’s not like I’m *proud* of it or anything.”

“How on earth have you managed to live this long?”

“My lifespan has been magically extended.”

“So you’re immortal?”

“No. I’m still susceptible to exterior factors. I’m just immune to aging. At least I have been so far. I don’t know how long the effects will last.”

“That’s quite a story.”

“Please hear me out,” he said. “There’s more.”

“I’d might as well.”

He sighed. “The real reason I haven’t invited you to my room is that...I don’t have one.”

“You don’t live in the house?”

“Oh, I do. I just don’t have a room.”

“Then where do you live?”

He stood up and stepped onto the bed. I watched in astonishment as he grasped the frame of the painting and passed one leg into it. He swung his other leg in and walked toward the yurt, growing smaller as he did so. He lifted the skin hanging over the entryway and disappeared inside. A few seconds later he came back out, spreading his hands.

“Good lord! You live in the painting?”

“Basically,” he said, walking back toward me.

“You’ve been living in *my* room, then.”

“Not really. It’s another dimension.”

“Contained within a painting.”

“No, the frame is just a gateway. It appears two-dimensional due to a trick of the eye, but it’s actually part of a vast, though really uninteresting, world.”

“Is it comfortable?”

“Yeah, very much so. The weather’s always mild. There are never any storms. And the inside of the yurt is really cozy. The pantry’s perpetually stocked with all manner of goodies.” He sighed contentedly. “You wouldn’t believe the night’s sleep you get on animal skins. I remember reading Arabian folk tales as a youth and thinking that it would be great to sleep in one of those tents. Crazy how things just work in your favor sometimes.”

“Well, I have to admit that I had a hard time accepting your story before, but it seems completely believable now.”

“I’d imagine so.”

I rose, ran two fingers along the edge of the frame, and considered the tableau from several angles, which was disorienting. “Can I, uh, come in?”

“Sure.” He offered a hand. I took it, mounted the bed, and joined him. I expected to experience some sort of weird sensation as I passed through the frame, but it was literally no different from climbing through an open window. I followed him into the yurt. A nice fire was going in the stone pit in the center, and it was surrounded by gorgeous, thick rugs and cushions. John brought a tray with cups of tea and E.L. Fudge cookies. I took one of each, as did he, and we both sat down next to the fire.

I took a sip of tea and studied the pleasant flames as I tried to let things sink in. “Let me ask you this: If you’re in hiding, why did you tell me your real name?”

“I’m a good actor, but I’m a terrible liar. Any time I tried to use an assumed name it was really obvious and awkward. Most people in this country are so ignorant of history that I just decided they probably wouldn’t know who I was anyway, especially if I left out my middle name.”

“Then why bother with the disguises?”

“I don’t want to draw attention to myself in case any of my contemporaries are still hanging around. If I’m still here, there’s a reasonable chance that some of them are, too.”

“How on earth is any of this possible?”

“As I said, sorcery. Really powerful sorcery.”

I thought of our alleged witch. “I suppose Kimberly’s responsible.”

“How do you know about her?”

“I don’t. I was just throwing it out there, based on what one of the other tenants told me when I first moved in.”

“It’s true. Like me, she’s not as young as she looks. She managed to avoid being burned at the stake centuries ago. She and I crossed paths in the woods one evening, and I sensed that I could trust her. She moved into the house shortly thereafter and installed the painting. Prior to that, I had been living in the basement.” He took a long swallow of his tea.

*The basement.*

I cleared my throat. “Why a yurt, of all things?”

“It’s not just *a* yurt. It’s *the* yurt. The original, the first one ever constructed. That’s why it is has magical properties. It wasn’t easy to obtain, believe you me.”

“Does Ms. Bierce know about any of this? She *did* tell me not to move the painting.”

“She’s blissfully unaware, but Kimberly put a hex on her mind. She doesn’t know *why* the painting has to stay where it is, but she’s programmed to tell people not to mess with it. We leave the details to her. She believes the painting has always been here, even though it wasn’t hung until some twenty years after the house was built. Also, she just knows me as a friend of Kimberly’s, so if she happens to see me she doesn’t ask why I’m in the house.”

“What would happen if it were moved? The painting.”

“The gateway would be ruptured, and I’d be stuck in here forever.”

“You wouldn’t be okay with that?”

“No. As I say, there isn’t anything here other than the yurt. Just mile upon mile of dusty flatland.” He paused. “I guess I should have said this at the beginning, but can I trust you to keep this under your hat?”

“It’s not as though anyone would believe me. But I’m not sure how I feel about it. You’re one of history’s most notorious criminals.”

“I realize,” he said, setting his empty cup down, “that I was on the wrong side of history, as they say, but it’s far too late to do anything about it now, not to mention the fact that everyone thinks I got my comeuppance long ago.”

“You don’t think you should be punished?”

“What good would it do? The guy’s been dead for a hundred-and-fifty years. All his friends and relatives are long gone. No one’s shedding any tears over him these days.” He stood up, and I set my cup down and followed as he exited the tent. He stepped out onto the bed and lowered himself to the floor. I did likewise, though not as gracefully.

“I’ve often wondered,” he said, “about the nature of punishment. What’s its purpose? Does the person being punished gain anything?”

“It seems to me that the ones *doing* the punishing are getting a lot more satisfaction out of it than they should. I see it primarily as a form of revenge.” He straightened the frame, which had gone askew as we climbed through it. “It’s not like I’m planning on shooting anyone else, much less another president.”

I looked him square in the face and then looked at the painting.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll keep your secret.”

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The following week I finally landed a job. I was away from the house a lot, and, as such, I only saw John every now and then. Honestly, even though I had agreed not to tell anyone about him, I found that I no longer looked at him the same way. I tried to focus on the man I had known as a friend, but it became more and more difficult not to see him for what he really was.

One night I entered my room and found him sitting on the bed, his head in his hands. On the floor beside his feet was a pile of splintered wood. The space on the wall that the painting had occupied was blank. Oddly, nothing else was damaged or out of place.

“The yurt!” I exclaimed. “Who did this?”

“I don’t know. I went out this afternoon, and I found it like this when I got back.”

“The only other person who has a key to this room is Ms. Bierce, and there’s no way it could have been her.”

“That’s for certain.”

“Whoever it was knows your secret.” I picked up a shard of the wood and rolled it over in my hand. “Have you told Kimberly?”

“She went to a coven meeting upstate. She won’t be back for a couple of weeks.”

“Can she conjure up another painting?”

“Unlikely. It’s a very complicated, time-consuming incantation. I’m not even sure that the materials she used are available anymore.”

He sighed. “I guess I’m going to have to move back into the basement.”

“I don’t know whether you’re aware of this,” I said, “but the landlady warned me to stay out of there when I moved in, and Larry, the guy down the hall, said he’d heard strange noises coming from it. Do you know what any of that is about?”

“Beats me. When I lived down there, it wasn’t even finished. I just found a dry spot in the corner to put some blankets. I wasn’t exactly in any position to be picky. I’m prepared to stay down there again if need be.”

“There’s no telling how it might have changed in a century and a half.”

“I’m going to find out. Will you come with me?”

I felt something akin to nausea, but rather than making me want to heave, it filled my viscera with a dizzying warmth that radiated out and played among my ribs like a baseball card in bicycle spokes.

“Yes,” I said.

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We descended the stairs slowly, stopping every few steps to listen. We didn’t hear anything at all, and the silence was somehow both comforting and disconcerting. When we reached the bottom, I was surprised to find no padlock on the door, contrary to what I had expected. Apparently, Ms. Bierce was under the impression that her mandate alone would keep people away. Faint light escaped from underneath. I reached for the knob, and it turned easily.

The room was much larger than I anticipated, a good fifty-foot square. It was lit by a single fixture situated among the cobweb-wrapped joists a few feet above, and visibility became poor after about twenty feet. The floor consisted of white linoleum tiles five feet below the door frame. There were no stairs, so we had to lower ourselves down.

“Wow,” John remarked. “When I lived down here, it had a dirt floor. Someone really whipped this place into shape.”

He seemed very enthusiastic, almost hypnotized, by what we had discovered and left me behind as he rushed toward the edge of the light. I, on the other hand, was apprehensive. I sensed that something sinister was at play.

I tried to call out to him, to warn him that we should stick together, but my voice was drowned out by awakening machinery. Similar to what Larry had described, it sounded like rusty metal grinding against itself. Dust began to rise through the spaces between

the tiles.

Suddenly, the light became almost blinding. After a moment the brightness eased off, and it was now apparent that the portion of the floor that had been previously in darkness was slick with blood. There were gallons of it spread around, pooled in some spots and smeared in others. It looked as though a bull had gotten loose in a blood bank.

Five feet ahead of me, the tiles abruptly tilted down at a sharp angle, sending John sprawling, picking up speed as the blood and velocity carried him inexorably toward an iron door at the bottom of the slope.

The door opened, and a man emerged. He was wearing a black butcher's apron. Long, bloody spikes protruded from it.

It was Nathan.

On the wall behind him, written in blood, were the words FOR ABE.

As he watched John's descent, he reached up, grabbed the corner of his neck, and ripped his face off. Rather than flesh, it had been a very convincing mask. That which lurked beneath was straight out of a madman's wildest nightmare. A pulpy, misshapen thing with gory furrows traversing its width and no discernible features other than a pair of chapped lips, it could not have reasonably been called a face. He produced a machete-like weapon with jagged teeth running down its length and drew it back seconds before John's terrified form reached him.

The light faded, but I could hear the sickening sounds of flesh being torn and bones breaking. I raced back to the basement entrance and found Ms. Bierce standing there. She castigated me with her eyes but didn't say anything.

The floor returned to its original position with the crackle of machine parts and the faint sloshing of blood as history, with something akin to a satisfied grunt, recalculated itself like a barnacle-crusting astrolabe that had languished on the sea floor for eons.



