

Willow Court-Lily McGuinness

Based on the short film created by Team Fenton at the Willow Court Girl's Home, New Norfolk, Tasmania



He came at dusk, at the time when the sun was beginning its laboured descent below the horizon. The willow trees sent shadows spreading over the grounds in long tendrils, and the departing sun sent a chill through the very bones of the house, if it wasn't cold enough already.

Water had begun to cling to the blades of grass that craned their necks towards the looming door. His feet crunched over damp twigs, eyes wide and curious. He carries a camera, gripped with white knuckles, and his fingers are shaking as he raising the object to his face. The *snap snap snap* of the shutter echoes through the damp silence, so quiet for a place so close to a busy road. His apprehension seems to radiate off him, but it is outweighed by determination, and his feet crunch forward. His camera swings around his neck, and his hands reach for the door as he crosses the verandah.

His fingers twists the icy handle, and a small gasp of shock escapes his lips as the frigid air of the house hits him. His pale face surveys the entrance hall, the looming staircase and the ramshackle spread of rooms. As the light dips below the western hills, and moonlight begins to shine through the broken windows of the house, he presses forwards, the white of his eyes shining through the growing darkness.

Camera in hand, the *snap snap snap* breaks the cold silence. He's heading for the staircase, the creaking of floorboards the only evidence of his journey through the hall. He's trying his hardest to avert his gaze from the dolls that litter the ground floor, from the moonlight shining off their smooth mannequin bodies as they survey him from their vantage points around the room. He is under the impression that he is alone, so lets his obvious fear escape him in gasped breaths and shaking fingertips as he takes photos of everything, bar the mannequins that make his heart beat a little too fast.

The staircase looms ever closer, and the upper floors beckon. His apprehension is once again stowed away, as he brings his foot to the first, then second, then third steps. With this higher vantage point, he turns and raising his camera, the *snap snap snap* once again breaking the silence.

The feeling of having his back turned to the new and unknown level of the house seems to unnerve him, for he whips around again, and carries himself a little faster up the stairs.

The upper floor reveals itself to him as he reaches the top of the stairs, its symmetry the stark opposite to the random spread of rooms below his feet. Instead, he sees before him a wide hall, lined with door after door leading to small rooms. Hands grip his camera as he turns to take in the abundance of corners, of dark crevices and secret spaces. His brain is overrun with thoughts of what could loom in the dark, what could watch him from behind a doorway as he carries himself with shaky feet through the home. He steels himself for what feels like the hundredth time, calming the shaking of his hands with a vice-like grip on his camera and pushing away all thoughts of spirits, and things that abandon the realms of science. He plunges forward, leaving the staircase behind and heading towards the small rooms. His pupils take time to adjust to the darkness, the moonlight the only illumination as he ducks his head into room after room. He sees couches with stuffing blooming from ripped fabric, beds with springs ricocheting out in all directions, creaking rocking chairs adorned with dust caked blankets, candlesticks encrusted in long melted wax. He takes in the dolls, their ivory faces cracked and layered with dust, their coral lips still shining through the years of grime. Their glassy eyes glint through the darkness as they watch his passage through the house, porcelain hands resting on baby blue dresses. Their blond hair lies stiff around their shoulders. He *snaps* a photo, and takes no time to hurry away from the silent playthings.

Venturing further, he begins to feel ice seep slowly into his veins. The house is growing ever colder, and he can see the moon hanging bright out a window. Night has well and truly fallen, and the wish to depart is growing ever stronger. Fear has left his limbs stiff, yet they feel like jelly. His heart is thumping out of his chest, its jarring rhythm echoing in his ears.

His camera is full of captured moments, of spiderwebbing cracks along the ceiling, rippled floorboards damp with age, of a pale china doll with dull blonde hair. He has what he came for, so his feet carry him back down stairs. He heading for the door when the rhythm of footsteps reach his ears. He freezes, and stares down at his feet as though trying to convince himself they aren't moving. The melody of footsteps carries on, echoing above his head.

Tap, tap tap.

Panic.

He heads for the door at breakneck speed, his camera swinging violently as his fingertips reach for the handle.

His shoulder slams against the wood with resounding *thump* as he is unable to slow his speed in time to scabble at the knob, desperately slipping and twisting until he realises the door-handle isn't moving.

He freezes, terror running through his veins, his ears straining to hear the footsteps again. When he is greeted by silence, his breathing calms, only to speed up tenfold as the *tap tap tap* once again resounds through the house. Only this time, its not coming from above his head. It's coming from behind him.

Overtaken by pure dread, he doesn't turn to find the source of the noise, in fear of what he might see. Instead, he slams a shoulder against the door, trying desperately to break through the damp, ageing wood and breath in the cool night air, but to no avail. The door is seemingly sealed shut and no amount of wrenching of the handle, or throwing of one's body will force it to budge.

The walls seem to be closing in as he forces himself to turn towards the staircase, his back pressed against the door.

She stands before him, bare footed at the bottom of the stairs. Her eyes are wide open, great green orbs framed with thick lashes. Long raven hair cascades down her shoulder, matted and lank, strands as black as pitch carrying his gaze down to her dress. The garment perhaps was white a long time ago, but is now browned with age, hanging limply over her thin, sallow form.

A scream bubbles up in his throat but never makes it past his lips. His brain is telling him to run, to slam himself against the door with every bit of force he can muster, to run right past her and find another exit, to throw himself from one of the windows if that's what it takes to get out of this god forsaken house. Instead he stands rooted to the spot, unable to peel his gaze from the young woman as she moves closer to him, a long fingered hand reaching forward as though to caress his face. She glides across the floor towards him, wide green eyes taking in every inch of his quivering form as she raises another hand.

His entire body is shaking, spasming with fear, his legs still seemingly unable to carry him forward. He wants to squeeze his eyes shut, anything to block out his view of her hollow cheeks, her yellowed teeth that peer out at him from a mouth that hangs wide open. He doesn't want to see the threads of lank hair hanging over her forehead, or hear the strangled whisper that is rising up from her throat. He wants to shut his eyes and shield himself from the dark circles under her eyes, from her long fingernails that are coming closer and closer to his throat as she bridges the final gap between them.

Instead his eyes are wide open as her hands gently caress him, one long fingernail scratching his Adam's apple as another finger traces his cheek. An inhuman gurgling growls from his throat, a sound he never thought he could produce. Her face is so very close to his, her lips brushing against his cheek. His brain has become fuzzy, shock and fear taking over to the point of being unable to form coherent thoughts. He feels hot and cold at the same time, but is snapped back to reality at the feeling of her cool hand slipping around his throat. Her fingers are around his neck, the pressure mounting. Suddenly he has regained his movement, and began to struggle against her grip. Despite her arms being thin as twigs, he is unable to wriggle free, and his kicking and muffled gasps for air do nothing to stop her crushing grip on his oesophagus.

Stars dance across his vision, and as his thoughts begin to slow he thinks about the twinkling of Christmas lights, that looked like stars when his mother strung them up around the tree many Decembers ago. His eyesight fades to black, and his legs give one twitch, involuntary this time, and he slides to the floor at the base of the door.

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The heat of the day is in full swing, and the verandah of the great house looks more and more welcoming the closer the teenagers get, their feet crunching over the grass. Still slightly on edge after an encounter with the wizened old caretaker five minutes beforehand, they were only just beginning to remove their cans of spray pain from under their shirts. The towering old house seemed the perfect place for some good old fashioned teenaged vandalism, as long as they visited it during the day, when the sun hung like a reassuring beacon above their heads.

They weren't expecting the freezing cold air that hit them like a truck as soon as they pushed open the huge wooden doors. Their initial surprise was dimmed, however, as soon as their eyes adjusted to the dark.

Three sets of pupils widened in terror as they took in the male form suspended above them, devoid of ropes yet still hanging above the staircase, his body limp and very dead.

His neck was splattered with a water colour of bruises, his eyes wide open and as big as coins, spinning gently despite there being no wind, nothing to make his naked body turn slowly in the icy air.

Suddenly the room was filled with high pitched, petrified screams of three teenagers, and the clatter as they dropped their spray cans and ran for the door. They sprinted down the stairs and onto the grass as fast as their trembling legs could carry them, breath heaving and eyes wide as they pelted full speed towards the road.

Minutes later, they would be flagging down every vehicle speeding down the road adjacent to the house. They would take a long time to calm down as they screamed about a man, dead and hanging above the staircase at the creepy old house at Willow Court. One of them, once calmed down by an elderly passerby, would whisper that she "...didn't see any ropes....there were no ropes."

The police would be called, and nearly fifty people would be seen by the caretaker, walking up the lawn and entering the house. And there would be many sighs of annoyance as the police and gaggle of spectators discovered a hall full of mannequins and old furniture. There was no sign of the man, or his ghostly suspension above the stairs.

The only thing they found was a camera, lying shattered at the foot of the stairs.