HOUSE OF HORRORS

 In 1953, Maxwell was an all-American kind of small town in Nebraska. It was built on the Union Pacific rail line in 1908 about a mile north of the Platte River, and had 2514 residents. Located in central Lincoln County, Maxwell was eleven miles east from the county seat of North Platte (population 15,523), and nine miles west from the next closest town, Brady.

 Maxwell had a small K-8 school, a post office, a filling station/car repair, a cozy diner, a library, a one-man police station, a volunteer fire brigade, an evangelical Christian church, a simple food market, and a modest weekly newspaper – The Chronicle. There were a half-dozen empty stores on Main Street, yearning for businesses to set up shop. Most folks drove the eleven miles to North Platte to purchase clothing or furniture or hardware or to see a movie.

 Perry Duncan was nine years old, the youngest of three brothers. His older siblings were named Terry and Jerry, so the unofficial town jest was to mix up the boy’s names, especially at school. Perry’s mom, Mary, was a housewife, and his dad, Fred, sold ranching equipment in North Platte. The Duncan family also had a collie named Larry.

 It was early October, that golden month when the weather was still favorable before the brutal harshness of a Nebraska winter settled in like an iron claw. Wary local cattle ranchers were always prepared even at this time of year, however, because winds in this state could swing temperatures wildly up or down, even day-to-day, depending on their direction of origin. Ranching was a fickle business, but not as risky as farming, due to the irregular annual rains on the Great Plains.

 Because his brothers were several years older than him, Perry often found himself either exploring his surroundings alone or with his best school friend, Matthew. Lately – although his mom discouraged him repeatedly – Perry liked to visit the scariest place in town, an old, two-story, abandoned house on Plumer Street. Rumors around town said the house was haunted, so naturally it was a magnet for curious youngsters.

 The Plumer House was at the end of a long gravel driveway, the road lined with living and dead gnarled trees. One afternoon after school, Perry rode his bike there from his house. The house had peeling, faded grey paint. Several windows were broken, and the porch was collapsing. Its red brick chimney was likewise crumbling onto its dilapidated roof. The doors were padlocked, with a large DANGER – DO NOT ENTER sign out front. But Perry already knew how to sneak in the back kitchen window.

 Once inside, the pungent smell of the house was disgusting -- a mixture of dirt, dust, and pellet turds from various small mammals. Busted glass shards littered the floor, along with torn, ancient newspapers and magazines. Ripped curtains covered some of the windows. Broken chairs and distressed tables were strewn here and there. Upstairs, a teen ‘make-out’ den was artlessly arranged for amorous couples -- consisting of a dirty bare mattress on the plain wooden floor, some old pillows tossed on a torn green couch with some dark springs sticking up through its upholstery, and a solitary soiled blanket. Empty beer and soda bottles lay scattered about, along with discarded snack food wrappers, cigarette butts, a candle with a pack of matches, and a well-thumbed nudie magazine. But Perry didn’t trust the rickety stairs, so he usually confined his explorations to the ground floor.

 He found some Life and Saturday Evening Post magazines and casually flipped through them in the dim light, focusing on pictures advertising the new 1954 cars. Perry heard the wind moaning through the broken window panes, and knew he would never visit here at night, even on a dare! And Halloween (coming up soon) was absolutely out of the question, though his brothers Terry and Jerry bragged that they had once spent a midnight hour here. Were there really ghosts in this place? Perry wondered. It was certainly creepy enough to house more than a few.

 On Saturday, Perry invited his best friend Matthew to accompany him on a visit to old man Vickers’s house. Clem Vickers was a widower and the town’s oldest man at age 89. He had been in the merchant marine, and had traveled to many exotic foreign ports. How he wound up in Nebraska, thousands of miles from any ocean, was a bafflement. His favorite hobby was whittling and carving, using various-sized knives. His specialty was making a linked chain out of a single block of wood. If asked, he would recount his memories of such famous events as learning about the Wright Brothers first flight, or about the sinking of the Titanic, or of the Great Flu Epidemic of 1919, which took the lives of millions worldwide, including his brother, Alfred. But today, Perry wanted to know all about the Plumer House. Clem was on his porch in his rocking chair, whittling as usual.

 “Were you here when people still lived in the old Plumer House?” Perry began. Matthew likewise perked up his ears.

 Mr. Vickers put his knife aside, pondered the sky a moment, then responded. “Well, Perry, six different families lived there long ago in the years before you were born. I think the house was built sometime in the late 1880s. Legend has it that some kind of witch came to town and moved in and started luring children inside and wound up murdering three of them. She also killed two infants in the same house after kidnapping them. That was about fifteen years ago, just before World War Two, I think. The witch woman disappeared or died or moved away, nobody can say for sure. She was never caught, and the bodies of those poor innocent children were never found. As the years went by, folks once again moved back in the house, unaware that such killings had occurred. That’s when the stories about haunted night time events began to run wild. Night wails and cries of tortured infants. Thudding sounds. Flickering light bulbs. Stomping on stairs. Rumors of secret passageways. The ghost of a silent woman in a rocking chair holding a dead baby. Naturally, the families moved out, and the house fell into disrepair. Nobody has lived there since The War ended.”

 Clem paused to clear his throat and spit a gob off his porch railing onto his lawn. “If you want to know more, boys, go see Miss Fischer at the library. She probably has old copies of the Chronicle for you to look at. I recall that no photo was ever taken of the witch woman, so we don’t know exactly what she looked like. But it is said that she always wore a black shawl whenever she ventured out of the house. Well, boys, I hope this stuff won’t keep you up tonight and give you any nightmares! I’ll catch the dickens from your folks if it does.” Mr. Vickers picked up his whittling knife again. He was currently carving the antlers on a small buck deer, his hands still remarkably steady for his age. “Next time, I’ll show you boys the secret trick to putting a model ship in a bottle. Oh, one more thing…they say that every criminal feels compelled to return to the scene of the crime one last time, so keep a sharp eye peeled,” he nodded sagely. “Y’all run along now.”

 Perry and Matthew popped on their bikes and quickly pedaled to Maxwell’s modest public library. Miss Fisher smiled as the boy’s walked in. “Well, if it isn’t my two explorers, Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett,” she quipped. She stopped her book processing and let her silver eyeglasses drop down so that they hung on the thin metal chain around her neck. Her white hair was pulled back into a tight bun. Nobody seemed remember a time when she had not been town librarian. When once asked casually why she had never married, Miss Fischer smiled and had cleverly answered, waving her hand expansively towards the tall stacks of library bookshelves, “Look around…I DID get married…and these are ALL my children!” Now, she looked at the boys and asked, “What’s it to be today, gentlemen? More Jules Verne? The Adventures of Tarzan? Or perhaps you’d like to read about rocket ships to Mars?”

 “None of those…thanks, Miss Fischer,” Matthew replied. “Perry wants to know more about the haunted Plumer House. Mr. Vickers said you might have some old newspapers about the murders. I want to know too.”

 “Hmm...crime is really the department of Officer Merrill, you know,” Miss Fischer offered. Mike Merrill was the town’s only policeman. He was on duty in Maxwell six days a week. One day a week on rotation he went to Brady, because that neighboring town of 203 people was too small to have its own full-time lawman. (Perry had a running gag going with Officer Merrill: every time he encountered the policeman, he always asked the same question – “Did you catch any bank robbers today, Officer Merrill?” The answer from the lawman was always, “Nope, not today.” Then they would both laugh, because there was no bank in Maxwell! The closest bank was in North Platte.)

 “But let’s go in the basement and see what we can dig up,” Miss Fischer directed.

 Down the stairs the trio went. The library basement was rich with the musty smell of old books in storage. It was also where the town archives was kept. Miss Fischer opened a flat, black file cabinet tray. “Here…let’s look back about fifteen years in the Chronicle.” She leafed through several back issues, circa 1938. “O.K. Here we go…I hope you are both mature enough to handle this material.”

 Together they read under a single high- intensity lamp. They learned that indeed three children and two infants had been killed there, as well as one adult. Motive unknown, disappearances/murders never solved, bodies never found. A strange woman wearing a black shawl was reported living in the Plumer House. Next, the trio examined newspapers up through the years: 1942 – A nine-year old boy, supposedly fleeing the house in fright, fell down the stairs and broke his neck, dying instantly; 1944 – A woman cradling a dead infant is found sitting in a rocking chair alone in the house, and is committed to the state mental institution in Lincoln; 1948 – A 12-year old boy is found dead, hung from a ceiling light fixture in the front parlor of the now abandoned house. And more: strange sightings reported of floating lit lightbulbs in the house at night, terrifying midnight screams, eerie supposed ghost encounters, even dogs afraid to approach the building -- night or day. When they were finished, the trio looked at each other, their faces partly obscured in shadows where the lamplight missed them. “Awful…just awful,” Miss Fischer sighed, getting up and placing the newspaper stack slowly back into its flat black file cabinet tray. “We’re done here, boys. Let’s go back up. That’s all we have. Enough dark thoughts for today.” They ascended the library basement stairs and returned to the front circulation desk by the main entrance. After thanking Miss Fischer, the boys rode home, splitting off when they came to their own houses.

 The next day was Sunday, so Perry dressed up and went with his family to worship. About 300 of Maxwell’s residents were there at the local evangelical church, including Perry’s fourth-grade teacher Mrs. Jeffers, whereas other Maxwellians attended different churches in North Platte.

 The minister at The House of the Risen Lord was the Reverend Malcolm Beck. He was in his late 40s, tall and imposing, with piercing black eyes and a swept-back mane of salt and pepper hair. He had been a widower since arriving in Maxwell five years ago from Montana. Today’s special announcement at the beginning of the worship service was the surprise introduction of his new bride to the congregation. Her name was Lilith. She was plain-looking and somewhat shy, also in her late 40s, and she hailed from Massachusetts. The minister asked that the community help make her feel welcomed. The reverend then grabbed his Bible and began his service with relish after the rousing opening hymns were completed. Mary and Fred Duncan both liked the preacher because they felt that he helped put the fear of God in their three growing boys with his imaginative, fiery sermons.

 Monday after school, Perry ran into Officer Merrill as he was getting into his patrol car. “Did you catch any bank robbers today, Officer Merrill?” Perry asked innocently. “Nope, not today,” the policeman responded, likewise straight-faced. Then they both started smiling. “Hey, Perry, did you hear about the new store opening on Main Street? It’s an antique shop. Lots of interesting old stuff in there. You should have a look. The owner is a lady named Mrs. Magillacutty. She just moved into town over the weekend. I think she came from Kansas. Well, I’m off to make my rounds. Stay out of trouble. And good luck with your homework. I hear Mrs. Jeffers can really pile it on, but it’s for your own good. See you later!”

 Because he was close to Main Street and wasn’t overly anxious to tackle his latest math assignment just yet, Perry decided to stop in the new antique shop and browse a bit. The new store name stenciled on its front window in fancy lettering said: Past Times.

 Mrs. Magillacutty came out from somewhere in the back of the store once Perry entered. She was holding an old-fashioned candlestick telephone. From afar, she was ordinary-looking and modestly dressed, the kind of woman that could blend into a crowd such as you would never notice or remember her.

 Her voice was cool and appraising as she approached. “Can I help you, young man?” she inquired. Perry found himself staring at her eyes and her face. Although he couldn’t put his finger on it, she made him distinctly uncomfortable. She seemed to look into his deepest soul and was maybe even taking notes. Perry was the only other person in the shop. “No, thank you. I’m just looking,” he replied. His eyes saw, over her shoulder, shelves full of bric a brac. He also spied an Edison phonograph with its large listening horn, displays of antique toys and glass bottles, some heirloom furniture, several stacks of old books and magazines, and more.

 “Halloween is just around the corner, so maybe a book about ghosts and goblins?” Mrs. Magillacutty suggested. “Or how about a book on witchcraft and magic spells?” She arched her left eyebrow, ever so slightly.

 “Sorry, but my folks would get very upset if I ever brought home anything like that,” Perry replied, somewhat nervously. “They are very religious and read the Bible a lot… Well, I got to be going. Thanks anyway.”

 That night, over dinner with his family -- macaroni and cheese, baked ham, salad, and cherry Jell-o with fruit cocktail in it -- Perry kept mum about his encounter at Past Times with its owner. But the next day at school, he told Matthew all about it during recess. “She gave me the creeps,” he confessed. “I’m never going back in that store. And you should stay away too.”

 Five days later, a Maxwell child went missing. Eight-year old Jessica Perkins was last seen playing alone in her backyard. When her mother called her in to dinner, she was gone. Officer Merrill was immediately alerted. The town was thoroughly searched, and frantic phone calls were made, but little Jessica was nowhere to be found. Merrill then searched neighboring Brady without any luck, so he next notified the police in North Platte. They, in turn, also notified the Nebraska Highway Patrol. The local Maxwellians were in a panic, and naturally the Perkins family was devastated as the days dragged on with nothing new to report.

 A week after Jessica disappeared, none of the frightened townsfolk allowed their children to play outdoors after dark. On that particular day, Perry and Matthew had a half-hour left before the sun set and dinner would be ready at their homes. They decided on a lark to visit the Plumer House again, having grown restless after playing catch for an hour. That old place was never boring for them.

 The boys crawled in the back kitchen window, as always. But this time, they noticed a strange smell. Probably a dead raccoon or opossum, they figured. They looked around both downstairs and up, but found nothing new. Matthew then suggested they look in the crawlspace under the house. As they approached, the smell grew more intense. They both noticed that some of the dirt there seemed recently disturbed, so they found some broken pieces of wood to dig with and began excavating, to satisfy their boyish curiosities.

 Perry was the first to find a small, somewhat discolored human hand. Its tiny fingernails had traces of chipped pink nail polish. The hand was connected to an arm, and then, assuredly, to an entire dead body, the boys realized. Now terrified and nauseated, they boys dropped their digging implements and fled the crawlspace. They rapidly biked to Officer Merrill’s office. It was closed, and it was getting dark fast as cold autumn winds whipped up, swirling the season's last fallen leaves. Rather than go home, however, the boys went directly to the policeman’s house. The lawman was relaxing out of uniform, and getting ready to sit down and eat dinner with his family.

 After getting all the details from a frightened Perry and Matthew, Merrill told the boys to go right home as he strapped on his revolver belt and grabbed his jacket and Stetson, along with a large flashlight. As the boys jumped on their bikes, the policeman stepped into his patrol car and sped away.

 A sizeable crowd of sympathetic townspeople attended little Jessica’s funeral two days later at The House of the Risen Lord. The girl's casket was closed. Her parents sat in stunned disbelief as the Reverend Mr. Beck intoned the eulogy, his wife Lilith sitting beside him, dressed somberly in black. Jessica Perkins was in a better place, the minister assured his congregation, for she was now in the eternal bosom of Jesus. The whole Duncan family was there, and Perry also noticed that old man Vickers and Miss Fischer were there too, but he saw no trace of Mrs. Magillacutty. And oddly, a mysterious woman had also attended the memorial service, yet no one knew who she was. When the Perkins' were later asked if the woman was a distant relative, they admitted they had never even seen her before. The Reverend Mr. Beck was similarly baffled.

 According to the Lincoln County coroner, the Perkins girl had been murdered by having her throat slit. Forensics at the crime scene were still ongoing but were inconclusive at this point. The Chronicle ran extra editions for several successive days, because the public couldn’t wait week to week for news updates on the vicious, shocking crime that rocked the community. Some residents even demanded that the old Plumer House be torn down.

 At school, the boys were rather famous for having discovered the corpse, and they were repeatedly asked by their classmates for the step-by-step details of what it was like to find a genuine dead body of someone everyone knew. Yet like most sensations, life gradually resumed its routine as the initial rush of publicity tapered off. Meanwhile, Halloween came and went. It was a bust, because traditional trick or treating was cancelled due to safety concerns. The school, however, provided cake and ice cream, and the kids could wear their costumes in class for the afternoon party. But nobody wanted to be cheerful. Nobody was in the mood to be scared, even for pretend.

 Another month went by without the authorities finding Jessica Perkins’ killer. A week after Thanksgiving, the weather in Maxwell got really frigid, with snow and brutal winds coming from the north, and plunging temperatures. Winter was coming in early.

 That was when Matthew disappeared.

 He had been shoveling snow on a gloomy, grey day for an elderly neighbor down his street. Just before 11:00 a.m., when that same neighbor yelled out the front door with an offer of a break for some hot chocolate, Matthew didn't answer and seemed to have vanished. His snow shovel had been left stuck upright in a snow pile. Soon, Officer Merrill was at the scene, a sickening, familiar feeling of dread in his stomach. As it had some six weeks earlier, word rapidly spread through the town after Matthew’s family was notified. When Perry found out the horrible news that evening, he locked himself in his room and repeatedly punched his bed pillow in frustration, his face red and his eyes watery. His brothers, Terry and Jerry, eventually calmed him down. Then his parents tried to reassure him that his best friend would probably be found safe -- somewhere and soon.

 But nothing positive happened, even after 72 hours. Matthew was still missing. The entire town of Maxwell was on edge. His family was understandably in shock, and feeling helpless. Naturally, Officer Merrill checked the Plumer House thoroughly as part of his investigation in searching the town, but the derelict structure offered no clues. Meanwhile, Matthew and Perry’s teacher, Mrs. Jeffers, even called in sick one day because she was so upset.

 It was then that Perry had the awful feeling that Matthew was dead and buried under the Plumer House, just like Jessica Perkins, and that somehow Officer Merrill had missed something. Perry even had a vivid and disturbing nightmare about finding his friend's corpse, with Matthew's eyes still open in death. He decided that he would sneak out of his house the following night and try and find out the truth. He knew he would surely get a punishment beating from his father later -- because his parents had expressly forbidden him to ever enter the Plumer House again -- but he had to do everything he could for his best friend, no matter what.

 The next night, Perry put on his boots, then bundled up with his thick winter coat, his red wool hat with earflaps, and his scarf and mittens. He had also remembered to bring his trusty Boy Scout flashlight with him. It was about 1:20 a.m., according to the clock on the living room fireplace mantle. Larry, the family collie, woke up and thought that Perry was going to take him outside for a non-routine walk, but the boy pushed the dog back away from the door. “No, Larry, not now. Go back to bed…be a good boy,” he whispered. Perry then carefully tiptoed out the back door without getting caught.

 The skies were clear and the moon was full in the bitter, crisp night air. Perry decided to walk because getting his bike out might make too much noise. It took about fifteen minutes to get to the gravel road at the end of Plumer Street, then another five to get to the abandoned house, down its lane of dead and dormant trees. Perry’s breath made huge huffs of steam as he trudged through unshoveled snow and piercing west winds. His exposed nose and cheeks were stinging and red, and his nose was runny.

 Using his flashlight, he awkwardly climbed in the usual back window by the kitchen. Because of the Plumer House’s many broken windows, the inside of the house was still cold, but blessedly not very windy. Perry scanned the downstairs area first with his flashlight, then chanced the rickety stairs leading precariously up to the second floor. He got halfway up when he heard a sound like someone running in the snow outside the house! He slowly descended and retraced his steps and went to the nearest main floor dirty window – a rare one because all of its glass was still intact.

 The wind moaned like a banshee as Perry swept his flashlight beam back and forth and approached the window. He could see shadows of tree branches, cast by the full moon. Suddenly, for just a split second, he saw a woman’s face staring at him mere inches away from the other side of the window outside! Her eyes glared at him in hatred and evil. She was wearing a black shawl, which covered most of her head. Perry was startled and dropped his flashlight. Then the mystery woman disappeared. Perry picked up his flashlight again and pointed it out the window. Peering through the grime on the glass, he saw that no one was there. But there was a clear trail of strange footprints in the snow. He knew that the face had not been his imagination. Yet it all happened so fast that he couldn't tell if he had ever seen the woman before or not. Her eyes, though, he could never forget...

 The boy thought about running home then and there, but something compelled him to finish his search upstairs first. When he got to the second floor, he saw some recently used food dishes near the soiled mattress on the floor. No mice or rats had disturbed the remains yet. Perry then tripped on a loose floorboard and made a loud crash as he fell, knocking over some empty beer bottles casually stacked on an old cardboard box. After he got back on his feet, he heard a muffled noise coming from behind a closed closet door. Next, he heard a kicking sound. He cautiously went over to the door and shined his flashlight upon it. Then he opened it. Matthew was inside! His hands and feet were tied with hemp rope and his mouth was gagged with a ragged cloth. He was wearing blindfold too. He was alive but weak, his body loosely covered by an old blanket. Propping his flashlight against the door on an angle for light, Perry carefully removed his friend's blindfold. Matthew's eyes appeared bloodshot, as he looked at Perry first in surprise, then quickly in recognition, and finally in sheer relief. Perry next removed Matthew's gag. "Get me out of here," Matthew begged with hoarse voice. Then he started to cry.

 Perry quickly untied the ropes binding his friend, then helped him to his feet, which were unsteady. "Let's get to the first house we see and have them call Officer Merrill," he offered. "I'll help you walk."

 The boys climbed slowly out the old kitchen window. Perry saw no trace of the horrifying woman in the black shawl, so they moved as quickly as Matthew could walk through the snow and cold, the tattered blanket his only protection from the biting winds.

 When the gravel driveway ended, they were at the far end of Plumer Street where the regular row of homes were. They banged on the first front door they saw, while repeatedly ringing the doorbell and yelling,"HELP! HELP!" Mr. and Mrs. Ramsey soon answered the door in their bathrobes and got the boys safely inside. They immediately called the police and both boys' parents. All five additional adults arrived within minutes.

 Over mugs of hot milk with Ovaltine and some pound cake, an exhausted Matthew told Officer Merrill and the others everything he could remember about his terrifying abduction and captivity.

 "I was shoveling snow when something hit me over the head. The next thing I knew, I was tied up and blindfolded and gagged and stuck in the back seat of a car. I heard a woman's voice. She was humming some kind of chant. Then I heard crazy words like: Lucifer, I give you my soul...Only the Devil will triumph...The Prince of Darkness must have fresh blood... Weird stuff like that. We would drive for a long time, then stop at what sounded like abandoned houses out in the country. She un-gagged me only when she fed me bread and some pieces of baloney and gave me water to drink. She unbuckled my pants and dropped them when I needed to pee. Then I would sleep. We did this for a few days, until Perry rescued me. I was sure she was going to kill me soon. But I never saw her face." Matthew stopped and began to cry as his mother rushed forward to comfort him. Perry then relayed his part in the rescue, including his seeing the woman's face in the window and her footprints in the snow. Officer Merrill soon realized that the day when he had searched the Plumer House immediately after Matthew's disappearance and had found nothing, it was because the boy was actually being held by his abductor at a different abandoned location.

 Matthew was taken to the hospital in North Platte for examination and observation. Other than exhaustion and shock and a touch of malnutrition, he would be O.K. again with plenty of food and bed rest. He was released and went home after two days, much to the relief of his family and the rest of the town of Maxwell, not to mention the Duncans. Matthew later thanked Perry profusely for saving his life, and gave him his favorite pocket knife as a sign of everlasting friendship.

 Eight days later, Perry was asked by Officer Merrill to come by the police station afterschool. "I already told your parents. I need you to identify a suspect for me. I think I have the woman who kidnapped Matthew."

 Perry was very nervous as he entered Merrill's office. Sure enough, there was a woman there in handcuffs, but her back was to Perry so he couldn't see her face.

 Officer Merrill angrily turned the shackled culprit around. "Alright, Perry, take a good look. Was this the face you saw in the window at the Plumer House that night?"

 Perry was shocked to see Lilith Beck, the minister's new wife, looking blandly back at him.

 "Ah...ummm...I'm not positive, Officer Merrill...it all happened so fast..."Perry was hesitant.

 "That's O.K., take your time. Take another look, Perry. I have to know," the lawman said calmly.

 Lilith Beck was stock still, staring at the boy.

 "How about now, Perry?" the policeman asked. He quickly produced a black shawl and wrapped it over Lilith's hair. "I found this in her car trunk."

 The shawl had the instant effect of changing the woman's facial features into those of a deranged monster. Her contorted eyes became filled with pure hatred and evil. Just like that freezing night at the window at the Plumer House...those eyes!

 Perry was stunned at the transformation. "It's the woman!" he gasped. The boy instantly recoiled and instinctively tried to run away, but Officer Merrill quickly grabbed his arm. "You're safe here with me, son, don't worry...I didn't catch a bank robber today, but you helped me catch a killer." Perry began to relax a bit when Merrill pressed his shoulder in a fatherly manner.

 Lilith Beck suddenly screamed, "Satan...save me!" But Merrill dragged the handcuffed suspect and locked her in the only jail cell in the station. She moaned and chanted a few unintelligible phrases, then fell silent. Perry was thanked and sent home. Mike Merrill quickly got on the phone to the District Attorney's Office at the state capitol in Lincoln...

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 In the weeks to come, Lilith Beck -- under rigorous cross-examination and psychiatric examination by experts from the state of Nebraska -- confessed to the five murders going back to the Plumer House in 1938, and to the killing of Jessica Perkins, and to one recent kidnapping with the intent of murder. But she denied ever killing an adult, so that case remained unsolved. She had fled Nebraska in 1940 for Salem, Massachusetts. She met and later married the Reverend Malcolm Beck while he was attending a national church conference last year in Salem on the modern dangers of witchcraft.

 As for further evidence of her more recent crimes, Matthew definitively identified a tape recording of Lilith's voice as his abductor, and her shoes matched the footprints in the snow that Perry had noted. She had lied to her minister-husband about her absence when she had killed and buried Jessica Perkins, saying that she was visiting some sickly out-of-town relatives overnight. The same excuse was made to explain her days missing during the Matthew kidnapping incident. After his wife was convicted, her husband divorced her. The Reverend Mr. Beck later left town and his ministry after suffering a nervous breakdown.

 Lilith Beck was judged criminally insane and sentenced to life without parole in early 1954. She was spared from the electric chair, but the state's worst mass-murderer, Charles Starkweather, who killed eleven people over a two-month spree, was given the chair in 1959 at age 20. Beck died in the Nebraska Women's Correctional Facility near York in 1972. She was 66 years old.

 So what became of the House of Horrors at the end of Plumer Street?

 Neither the town of Maxwell nor Lincoln County could ever appropriate enough funds for its demolition and removal. A person or persons unknown tried to burn it down with kerosene one night in 1961, but the volunteer fire department quickly put the blaze out before it did much damage. For years, it was infamously considered one of the most haunted houses in all of Nebraska. The Plumer House still stands, though continually rotting and collapsing, surrounded by a chain link fence that a sympathetic contractor in North Platte donated. Thus, anyone can see it even today, but no one can ever enter it again...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

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