

“And here’s the cosy breakfast room,” says the realtor. She makes an expansive sweep with her arm. The fraudulent smile on her face doesn’t falter — even when the back of her hand smacks into the wall of the cramped kitchen area and a lump of plaster falls off.

I roll my eyes and look at my parents.

“It’s lovely,” coos Mom. “Absolutely lovely.”

“Perfect,” Dad agrees.

Still smiling, the realtor bends over me. Her overly-white teeth are in stark contrast to her wrinkly, fake-tanned face. She gently pinches my cheeks in an effort to show how much she adores children, and to ingratiate herself with her prospective customers, my parents.

Pouting, I pull away, and with an effort suppress my annoyance. Mom and Dad are grinning back at the woman in that sickly-sweet way of theirs.

Sensing a done deal, the realtor says: “What a cute little girl you’ve got.”

At this pronouncement of my cuteness, the expression on Mom and Dad’s faces suddenly changes. A cross between bemusement and hilarity, it implies my disposition is otherwise.

“Full disclosure,” I remind the realtor, fluttering my eyelashes. “You have to provide us with full disclosure about the house.”

The woman becomes disconcerted. She chews on her bottom lip for a few seconds, but eventually decides she has no choice but to fess up. “Um, well, yes, there is just one thing. Locally there’s talk about the property being haunted. Every Midwest town has such a property — the so-called ‘haunted house’. It’s nonsense, of course. You know how some people can be in a small community like this, thriving on idle gossip and others’ misfortunes. What you will hear, or apparently have already heard, is unsubstantiated rumours, ramped up and exaggerated over the years. That said,” she finally admitted, “the last two occupants vacated the house in the middle of the night, after less than a week’s residence.”

Mom and Dad perk up at this last snippet of news.

“Really? Which room has the reputation for being the most haunted?” asks Mom.

“That would be the back bedroom. The one at the top of the stairs and to the left. You can always leave it unoccupied if you have any reservations. No incidences of haunting have been reported elsewhere in the house.”

“No, no, no,” says Dad. “It sounds perfect.” He grins down at me and pats me on the head. “We’ll make that your bedroom, Karen.”

The realtor looks horrified at the suggestion.

I snigger and give the woman that funny look of mine that unnerves adults so much.

“Behave yourself, Karen,” says Mom, as the realtor hastily hands over her business card, makes her excuses and heads at a wobbly, high-heeled sprint for her car.

The following night, in the back bedroom at the top of the stairs and to the left, I snuggle up under the blankets. The nightlight’s on, but I’m unable to sleep in anticipation of what might be about to unfold. This is the third ‘haunted house’ we’ve stayed in this year. None of the others proved authentic, though. Then I recall the realtor’s reaction to Dad’s intention of allocating me ‘the most haunted’ room in the house. Was she genuinely concerned for my wellbeing? Or does she think we’re freaks, adrenalin junkies? Maybe she’s pegged us for publicity seekers looking for fifteen minutes of fame or a shot at our own reality show.

A creaking noise disturbs my reverie and I catch my breath. Is that a door opening somewhere beyond the foot of my bed? Is there really something supernatural inhabiting the bedroom closet?

The nightlight dims and goes out. A huge black shape emerges from the closet, illuminated by the drape-filtered rays of a full moon. It lopes towards me, slavering and slurping.

In an instant I’m out of bed, growing, transforming, until I’m all fur, bulging muscles and chomping jaws. The monster-in-the-closet falters and attempts a tactical retreat. I’m too quick, though. My claws rip out its throat, my teeth tear off strips of flesh. I delve into its pulsing organs and slake my thirst on the creature’s blood.

Then the bedroom door flies open. Mom and Dad are standing in the doorway – and they’re not happy with me.

“You selfish little cow,” says Mom.

“We’re supposed to be sharing,” says Dad, looking down at the eviscerated remains of the monster-in-the-closet. “You do know what ‘sharing’ means, don’t you?”

I transform back into a harmless-looking girl. “I’m sorry,” I say, staring down contritely at my feet. “I was hungry.”

A shuffling sound catches my ear.

I crouch down and stare into the dark recess beneath my bed. Something whimpers and pulls its legs up. Cringing, it takes up the foetal position and tries to look as small and insignificant as possible.

I turn to my parents and wink. They’re already transforming in anticipation.

“Why don’t you two take care of the monster-under-the-bed?” I suggest.

Paul A. Freeman has the hide of a rhinoceros — bring it on! (845 words)