

House of MYSTERY

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Matthew
STURGES
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When I was a little girl I used to tell my father bedtime stories.

The stories were about a little girl named Fig who went on adventures in all sorts of different worlds.

Fig was plucky and brave, and with the assistance of her faithful stuffed rabbit Walden, she encountered every peril you can imagine.

She faced down monsters and wicked stepmothers alike, saving the denizens of these worlds from danger.

All she asked in return was a bowl of vanilla ice cream with sprinkles on top.

My father was a writer, and he wrote up my stories and sold them as the Fig's Adventure books.

Fig's Adventure in Stuffytown

Peter and
Bathory
Keele



Fig's Adventure in the Clown Kingdom

Fig's Adventure in the Cloud Castle of Puffery

Fig's Adventure in Stuffytown

The books were a little too weird to be bestsellers, but we managed to put away enough for college.

Then my parents got divorced, and Dad moved to Texas.

We had summers and Christmas together, but Fig's adventures were through.

For a time.

COME ON! LET'S GET OUT OF HERE!

HURRY!

CRASH

FBI! WHAT THE HELL DID YOU DO?

I THINK THE HOUSE IS, UH, ANGRY WITH ME.

YOU OKAY HARRY?

I'M FINE—LET'S KEEP MOVING.

THIS WAY THIS WAY!



HEY, POET,
LOOK! THIS IS
WHERE WE PUT ALL
THOSE FISH!

THE
DOOR UP *THERE*
SHOULD TAKE US
TO THE BART!



WITH ANY
LUCK WE CAN GET
OUTSIDE BEFORE
THE WHOLE PLACE
COMES CRASHING
DOWN ON OUR
HEADS!



CLIMB THAT
STURGEON!

WE'RE
SCALING A
FISH!

GET
IT?



CRESS, WE
COULD *DIE*
HERE!

LISTEN,
WHEN YOU'VE
DIED AS MANY
TIMES AS I HAVE,
YOU LEARN NOT
TO TAKE IT TOO
SERIOUSLY.

She Brought Down The House

Part Five of
MATTHEW STURGES writer

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ROOM and BOREDOM
LEE LOUGHRIDGE colors

TODD KLEIN letters

ESAO ANDREWS cover

SHELLY BOND &
ANGELA RUFINO
co-editors

THAT'S ALL
WELL AND GOOD FOR YOU,
CREGGIDA, DEAR, BUT THE REST
OF US ONLY GET TO DIE ONCE. AND I,
FOR ONE, HAVE CERTAIN STANDARDS
REGARDING THE TIMING AND MANNER
OF MY DEATH, NEITHER OF WHICH
CORRESPONDS WITH PRESENT
CIRCUMSTANCES.

BY ALL RIGHTS
I SHOULD DIE BY A FOUNTAIN
IN ROWE--YEARS HENCE, MIND YOU--
COUGHING UP MY LAST CONSUMPTIVE
BREATH ONTO THE LILY-WHITE
BREAST OF A VENETIAN
PROSTITUTE.

POET,
WILL YOU COME
THE FUCK ON,
PLEASE?

SIGH:

AH, WELL.
I SUPPOSE IT'S
FITTING THAT I DIE
WITH THE SAME AMOUNT
OF DIGNITY WITH
WHICH I LIVED.





"Choose not with your body, or your heart, or your mind, but with all three, with the whole of yourself, every atom.

"For it is the whole of you that ultimately must live in your choice."

THIS ISN'T RIGHT!
WHERE THE HELL ARE WE?

THIS WAY!

That's not even them being fancy-- that's how they really talk.

If anything, I've dumbed it down a little.

Miserable, pompous bastards, the Conception.

But brutally insightful.

COME ON! GO!

THROUGH HERE!

SKREEEEAAH

CRACK

OH.

I saw it.

I saw it very plainly.

The pain of it, twisted into knots it had no idea how to untie.

I understood why it wanted me so badly.

Why it needed me in particular.

That was the moment I made my choice. I only thought I was making it later.

ANN,
DO YOU SEE
IT?

NO. NOT
NOW, NOR EVER
AGAIN.

OH,
MY.





I remember it so clearly.

THIS IS MY HOUSE.



The sudden awareness, the *awakening*. I saw it, like a sign coming sharply into focus, only printed in a language I didn't yet understand.



I understand it now.

CRASH



IT'S NONE, I'M... RESPONSIBLE.

WHAT ARE YOU SAYING, CHILD? WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

This is my house.





"WELL, MY MAIN THING IS THAT I'M IN FILM SCHOOL, BUT I DIDN'T GET A FULL RIDE, SO I HAVE TO WORK NIGHTS AND WEEKENDS TO HELP PAY THE BILLS."

"SO I WAKE UP LATE FOR WORK THIS PAST SATURDAY, *SEERIOUSLY* LIKE HALF AN HOUR LATE. I'D BEEN UP MOST OF THE NIGHT, AND I GUESS I HIT THE SNOOZE BAR ONE TOO MANY TIMES."

BREET
BREET
BREET
BREET



"AND SINCE I WAS RUNNING SO LATE, I GOT DRESSED IN A HURRY."



"REMEMBER THAT, BECAUSE IT'S REALLY IMPORTANT TO THE STORY, OKAY?"



"SO ANYWAY, I GO OUT IN THE LIVING ROOM AND THERE'S TIM. TIM'S BROUGHT HIS BIO LAB STUFF HOME WITH HIM, AND NOW HE'S MAKING A HUGE MESS WITH IT."

"AND I'M LIKE, 'COME ON!'"

GET THEM OFF ME!
AIEEE!

JORDAN'S TALE

MATTHEW
STURGES
writer

SEAN
MURPHY
artist

LEE
LOUGHRIDGE
colors

TODD
KWEIN
letters

SHELLY BOND & ANGELA RUFINO co-editors















After my father left, Fig's Adventures simply stopped.

Walden the rabbit stopped talking to me. My closet door no longer opened onto magical worlds.

It just opened onto a closet.

I never brought up Fig's Adventures again, and my father instinctively understood.

His next book was a science fiction novel.



My mother and I learned to blame each other for everything that was wrong in our lives.

I had no friends.
I was alone.

And that's when houses started talking to me.

After that I had a brief career as a Teen Detective. I solved all of my cases with a combination of insight and maxie...and the help of talking houses, of course.

AND THAT MEANS...THE
PIANOS WERE
NEVER THERE IN
THE FIRST PLACE!

It was about that time that I started dreaming about my house. My House of Mystery. And drawing it obsessively.

And that's when I decided to grow up and become an architect--

I never understood why or how it happened. And I never told anyone about it. I'm not stupid.







THIS IS FUCKED UP.

WELL?



IT WANTS ME TO LEAVE.

IT SAYS IT DOESN'T WANT ME THIS WAY. IT SAYS IT'S... SORRY.



FIG--



HEY!

STOP! IT'S OKAY, HARRY. IT'S PROBABLY BEST FOR EVERYONE IF I GO.

SKREEEE

By the time I was twenty-one, I was neither a Girl Adventurer nor a Teen Detective. I was just *Fig Keele*, college student, living in the same town as my now-college-professor dad.

I was serious.

I was mature.

But growing up--for me, anyway--turned out to be pretty god-damned disappointing.

Some examples of things that weren't anything like what I'd hoped:

Spending more time with my father.

Romance.

FWWW.

Living on my own.

The worst part was that architecture--the discipline I'd believed would carry me through into adult life--was the most disappointing of all.

All the romance of the profession had evaporated--replaced with mundane necessities like Calculus, Structural Analysis, and something called Geo-technical Engineering.

I never actually showed up for that last one, so I don't know exactly what it is, to be honest.

COURSE	GRADE
ARC 560Y Advanced Design	F
CE 367 Geotechnical Eng.	F
PHYS 302 Disc. Golf	D
ARC 361 Technical Comm.	F
GPA	0.25
Cumulative GPA	1.00
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____



As I said, I'd already made my choice. I didn't realize it until much, much later, though.

I could have saved myself a lot of trouble if I had. And I probably could have saved Harry as well.



Life in all its guises-- regardless of its many traps, its longings, its baffling circumstances and unsatisfying conclusions--is still preferable to the alternative.

And death comes in a lot of flavors.



I thought I knew what I was doing.



I was wrong.

OH, NO. NOT YOU. PLEASE. NOT YOU.



"THE CONCEPTION LOVES YOU, FIS. THEY LOVE YOU VERY MUCH.

"AND THEY WANT TO BE WITH YOU."

End of
Story One

Next
Love Stories
for Dead
People



I tread carefully down the hallway on unfamiliar legs and into the bar where a thousand scents assault me. She is there, waiting, and I feel my skin flush. Her permanent scowl: what tender smiles lie beneath it, waiting to be teased out by a lover's grace?

Ann Preston, Pirate Queen. My secret love.

Does she even know my name? Not my true name, certainly, but the one I use here. Does she know it?

I took a human shape out of mere curiosity. A knight came to slay me, as they sometimes do. After I took his sword-arm out of its socket, I said that I might free him if he relieved my boredom with a good story. He had a smashing one, he said; he'd heard it at a secret place, a tavern where stories act as currency.

And it was a good story, at that. But I ate the flesh from his bones anyway.

I was not looking for love when I stole his form. Had I been, I would certainly have been more selective. So when I first came to the House of Mystery, it was in a rather plain visage. I listened to a few stories and drank a sampling of bubbling brews. Charming, yes, but nothing I hadn't seen before. I shrugged and stood to leave.

And then I saw her.

As my eyes swelled at the sight of Ann Preston, I became suddenly aware of my newfound humanness. I felt my soft skin prickle. Heat (of a kind with which I was wholly unfamiliar) raced up my neck, my ears and cheeks. With horror, I realized that human flesh is inseparable from human desire. All my life until that moment, the only things I'd piquantly desired were pure blood and a glittering hoard. But these things were now ash compared to the tender grace of Ann Preston, as she bludgeoned a misbehaving patron into submission with her elegant fists.

Now, years later, I sit at the bar with a studied nonchalance, trying not to look too hard or too long at her.

"Evening," says Harry, the bartender. He has kind eyes and a strong face. He is inescapably handsome. Had it been his visage I'd stolen, perhaps I would have found the nerve to speak to Ann long before now.

He follows my gaze. "Can I offer you some advice, friend?" he says kindly. I nod uncomfortably, feeling that I will not appreciate his advice.

"I don't think she's the one for you," he says, a look of - my God, is it pity? - peeking from his eyes. "Ann is beautiful, and she's a good person, but..." He pauses, looking for the word that will not offend. "She's... hard. Do you get what I mean?"

I can feel my human blood boiling. I could tell Harry the truth. I could tell him that my scales are harder than any diamond, that my teeth can saw through steel, that with a single breath I could reduce his entire bar to a smoking channel house. But I do not say these things for fear of being banned. If I were never to see her again, how long before I went mad?

"I understand," I mumble, looking down into my beer. I look up at him and I say with no artifice, "But a man can dream, can't he?"

For the briefest instant, Harry recoils, seeing something in my eyes that he does not like. Let us be honest - he sees something that terrifies him. He sees through these soft, moist human eyes into the soul behind and he shudders.

I don't think he understands what he's seen. The moment ends, and he regains his composure admirably.

"Seriously," says Harry. "You're a nice guy. A girl like Ann would eat you alive."

He reaches over the bar and pats me on the shoulder, sliding another beer in front of me. "On the house," he says.

Perhaps someday this charade will become too much for me. Perhaps I will summon every shred of magic in my fiery being and take Ann by force, tearing her by sheer will from the confines of this place. I will bring her back to my den, and I will make her love me. I will pull her skin against my glowing scales, and she will fear me, at least. I could do it. If I had to, I could.

Perhaps someday, but not today. I finish my drink, wave to Harry, and head for the exit. When I reach the door, she is standing there, so close! My heart leaps in my chest - if I reached out my hand I could touch her, trace my fingers in her hair.

"Good night, Ann," I say, tipping my hat. She glares at me, glares past me, and grunts. The sound, surely, of angels in their heavenly bowers.

Then she looks away abruptly, and I can sense that I am gone from her thoughts in an instant.

Perhaps someday. But not today, my love.

Discuss **HOUSE OF MYSTERY** online at the official site of Matthew Sturgis and Bill Willingham: clockworkstorybook.net



