



A Stir of Echoes

By Richard Matheson

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This eerie ghost story, by award-winning author of *Hell House* and *I Am Legend*, inspired the acclaimed 1999 film starring Kevin Bacon.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Matheson is the master of paranoia---pitting a single man against unknown horrors and examining his every slow twist in the wind."---*San Jose Mercury News*

About the Author

Richard Matheson is *The New York Times* bestselling author of *I Am Legend*, *Hell House*, *Somewhere in Time*, *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, *A Stir of Echoes*, *The Beardless Warriors*, *The Path*, *Seven Steps to Midnight*, *Now You See It . . .*, and *What Dreams May Come*. A Grand Master of Horror and past winner of the Bram Stoker Award for Lifetime Achievement, he has also won the Edgar, the Hugo, the Spur, and the Writer's Guild awards.

He lives in Calabasas, California.

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ONE

The day it all started--a hot, August Saturday--I'd gotten off work a little after twelve. My name is Tom Wallace; I work in Publications at the North American Aircraft plant in Inglewood, California. We were living in Hawthorne, renting a two-bedroom tract house owned by one of our next-door neighbors, Mildred Sentas. Another neighbor, Frank Wanamaker, and I usually drove to and from the plant together, alternating cars. But Frank didn't like Saturday work and had managed to beg off that particular day. So I drove home alone.

As I turned onto Tulley Street, I saw the '51 Mercury coupe parked in front of our house and knew that Anne's brother, Philip, was visiting. He was a psychology major at the University of California in Berkeley and he sometimes drove down to L.A. for weekends. This was the first time he'd been to our new place; we'd only moved in two months before.

I nosed the Ford into the driveway and braked it in front of the garage. Across the street Frank Wanamaker's wife, Elizabeth, was sitting on their lawn pulling up weeds. She smiled faintly at me and raised one white-gloved hand. I waved to her as I got out of the car and started for the porch. As I went up its two steps I saw Elizabeth struggle to her feet and adjust her maternity smock. The baby was due in about three months. It was the Wanamaker's first in seven years of marriage.

When I opened the front door and went into the living room, I saw Phil sitting at the kitchen table, a bottle of Coca-Cola in front of him. He was about twenty, tall and lean, his darkish-brown hair crew-cut. He glanced in at me and grinned.

"Hi, brother man," he said.

"Hi." I took off my suit coat and hung it in the front closet. Anne met me in the kitchen doorway with a smile and a kiss.

"How's the little mother?" I asked, patting her stomach.

"Gross," she said.

I chuckled and kissed her again.

"As they say," I said, "hot enough for you?"

"Don't even talk about it," she answered.

"Okay."

"Hungry?" she asked.

"Ravenous."

"Good. Phil and I were just about to start."

"Be right with you." I washed my hands and sat down across from Phil, eyeing his blindingly green polo shirt.

"What's that for," I asked, "warning off aircraft?"

"Glow in the dark," he said.

"Helps the co-eds keep track of you at night," I said. Phil grinned.

"Now don't you two get started again," Anne said, putting a dish of cold cuts on the table.

"Whatever does you mean?" Phil said to her.

"Never mind now," she said. "I don't want any needling session this weekend. It's too hot."

"Agreed," said Phil, "needling excluded. Agreed, brother man?"

"And spoil my weekend?" I said.

"Never mind," said Anne. "I can't face that and the heat both."

"Where's Richard?" I asked.

"Playing in the backyard with Candy." Anne sat down beside me with a groan. "There's a load off my feet," she said.

I patted her hand and we started eating.

"Speaking of Candy," Anne said, "I trust you haven't forgotten the party tonight at Elsie's."

"Oh my God," I said, "I did forget. Do we have to go?"

Anne shrugged. "She invited us a week ago. That was excuse time. It's too late now."

"Confusion." I bit into my ham on rye.

"Brother man seems less than joyous," Phil said. "Elsie's shindigs no goo'?"

"No goo'," I said.

"Who is she?"

"Our next-door neighbor," Anne told him. "Candy's her little girl."

"And parties are her profession," I said. "She's the poor man's Elsa Maxwell."

Anne smiled and shook her head. "Poor Elsie," she said. "If she only knew what awful things we say behind her back."

"Dull, huh?" said Phil.

"Why talk?" I said. "Go to the party with us and see for yourself."

"I'll liven 'er up," said Phil.

* * *

A little after eight-fifteen Richard fell asleep in his crib and we went next door to Elsie's house. In most marriages you think of a couple's home as *theirs*. Not so with that house. Ron may have made the payments on it but the ownership was strictly Elsie's. You felt it.

It was Ron who answered our knock. He was twenty-four, a couple of years older than Elsie, a couple of inches taller. He was slightly built, sandy-haired with a round, boyish face that seldom lost its impassive set; even when he smiled as he did then, the ends of his mouth curling up slightly.

"Come in," he said in his quiet, polite voice.

Frank and Elizabeth were already there, Elizabeth settled on the red sofa like a diffident patient in a dentist's waiting room, Frank's thin body slouched in one of the red arm chairs. He brightened only a little when we came in, raising his bored gaze from the green rug, straightening up in the chair, then standing. I introduced Phil around.

"Hi!"

I glanced over and saw Elsie peering around the corner of the kitchen doorway. She'd cut her dark hair still shorter and bobbed it still tighter, I noticed. When we'd moved into the neighborhood, she'd had long, drabby blond hair.

We all said hello to her and she disappeared a moment, then came into the room with a tray of drinks in her

hands. She was wearing a red, netlike dress which clung tightly to the curves of her plump body. When she bent over to put the tray down on the blondwood coffee table, the bosom of the dress slipped away from her tight, black brassiere. I noticed Frank's pointed stare, then Elsie straightened up with a brassy, hostesslike smile and looked at Phil. Anne introduced them.

"*Hel-lo,*" Elsie said. "I'm so glad you could come." She looked at us. "Well," she said, "name your poison." What happened that evening up to the point when it all began is not important. There were the usual peregrinations to the kitchen and the bathroom; the usual breaking up and re-gathering of small groups--the women, the men, Frank, Phil and myself, Elizabeth and Anne, Elsie and Phil, Ron and me--and so on; the drifting knots of conversation that take place at any get-together.

There was record music and a little sporadic attempt at dancing. There was Candy stumbling into the living room, blinking and numb with only half-broken sleep; being tucked back into her bed. There were the expected personality displays--Frank, cynical and bored; Elizabeth, quietly radiant in her pregnancy; Phil, amusing and quick; Ron, mute and affable; Anne, soft-spoken and casual; Elsie, bouncing and strainedly vivacious.

One bit of conversation I remember: I was just about to go next door to check on Richard when Elsie said something about our getting a baby-sitter.

"It doesn't matter when you just go next door like this," she said, "but you do have to get out once in a while." Once in a while, to Elsie, meant an average of four nights a week.

"We'd like to," Anne said, "but we just haven't been able to find one."

"Try ours," said Elsie. "She's a nice kid and real reliable."

That was when I left and checked on Richard--and had one of my many nighttime adorations; that standing in semi-darkness over your child's crib and staring down at him. Nothing else. Just standing there and staring down at his little sleep-flushed face and feeling that almost overwhelming rush of absolute love in yourself. Sensing something close to holy in the same little being that nearly drove you out of your mind that very afternoon.

I turned up the heat a little then and went back to Elsie's house.

They were talking about hypnotism. I say *they* but, outside of Phil, Anne and maybe Frank, no one there knew the least thing about it. Primarily, it was a dissertation by Phil on one of his favorite topics.

"Oh, I don't believe that," Elsie said as I sat down beside Anne and whispered that Richard was fine. "People who say they were hypnotized weren't, really."

"Of course they were," Phil said. "If they weren't, how could they have hatpins jabbed into their throats without bleeding? Without even crying out?"

Elsie turned her head halfway to the side and looked at Phil in that overdone, accusingly dubious way that people affect when they have to bolster their own uncertain doubts.

"Did you ever *really* see anyone get a hatpin jabbed in their throat?" she said.

"I've had a five-inch hatpin in my throat," Phil answered. "And, once, I put one halfway through a friend of mine's arm at school--after I'd hypnotized him."

Elsie shuddered histrionically. "Uhh," she said, "how *awful*."

"Not at all," Phil said with that casual tone undergraduates love to affect when they are flicking off intellectual bombshells. "I didn't feel a thing and neither did my friend."

"Oh, you're just making that up," Elsie said, studiedly disbelieving.

"Not at all," said Phil.

It was Frank who gave it the final, toppling push.

"All right," he said, "let's see you hypnotize somebody then." He squeezed out one of his faintly cruel smiles. "Hypnotize Elsie," he said.

"Oh, no you don't!" Elsie squealed. "I'm not going to do terrible things in front of everybody."

"I thought you didn't believe in it," Phil said, amusedly.

"I don't, I don't," she insisted. "But...well, not *me*."

Frank's dark eyes moved. "All right," he said, "who's going to be hypnotized?"

"I wouldn't suggest me unless we want to spend the whole night here," Anne said. "Phil used to waste hours trying to hypnotize me."

"You're a lousy subject, that's all," Phil said, grinning at her.

"Okay, who's it gonna be then?" Frank persisted. "How about you, Lizzie?"

"Oh..." Elizabeth lowered her eyes and smiled embarrassedly.

"We promise not to make you take your clothes off," Frank said.

"*Frank*." Elizabeth was thirty-one but she still blushed like a little girl. She wouldn't look at anybody. Elsie giggled. Frank looked only vaguely pleased. Elizabeth was too easy a mark for him.

"Come on, Elsie," he said, "be a sport. Let him put you under. We won't make you do a strip tease on the kitchen table."

"You--" Ron started to say.

"Oh, you're awful!" Elsie said, delighted.

"What were you going to say, Ron?" I asked.

Ron swallowed. "I--I was going to ask Phil," he said, "you--can't make someone--do what they don't want to do, can you? I mean--what they *wouldn't* do? If they were awake, I mean."

"Oh, what do *you* know about hypnotism, Ronny?" Elsie asked, trying to sound pleasantly amused. The acidity still came through.

"Well, it's true and it isn't true," Phil said. "You can't make a subject break his own moral code. *But*--you can make almost any act fit into his moral code."

"How do you mean?" Frank asked. "This sounds promising."

"Well, for instance," Phil said, "if I hypnotized your wife--"

"You could make her do something *wicked*!" Frank asked, looking at Elizabeth pointedly.

"Frank, please," she almost whispered.

"Say I put a loaded gun in her hand," Phil said, "and told her to shoot you. She wouldn't do it."

"That's what you think," Frank said, snickering. I looked at Elizabeth again and saw her swallowing dryly.

She was one of those pale and pitiable creatures who seem constantly vulnerable to hurt. You want to protect them and yet you can't. Of course Frank wasn't the easiest man in the world to live with either.

"Well, for argument's sake," Phil said, smiling a little, "we'll assume she wouldn't shoot you."

"Okay, for argument's sake," Frank said. He glanced at Elizabeth, a hint of that cruel smile on his lips again.

"*But*," Phil said, "if I were to tell Elizabeth that you were going to strangle her and told her that the only defense in the world she had was to shoot you right away--well, she might very well shoot you."

"How true," said Frank.

"Oh, I don't believe that," said Elsie.

"That's right," I joined in. "We have a friend named Alan Porter--he's a psychiatrist--and he gave a demonstration of that very thing. He had a young mother under hypnosis and he told her he was going to kill her baby and the only way she could stop him was by stabbing him with the knife she was holding--it was a piece of cardboard. She stabbed him all right."

"Well, that's different," said Elsie. "Anyway, she was probably just playing along with a gag."

"Look," said Phil, gesturing dramatically with his hands, "I'll prove it to you right now if you want. Just let me hypnotize you."

"No, *sir*," said Elsie, "not me."

"How about you?" Phil asked Ron.

Ron mumbled something and shook his head with a faint smile. "He's already half hypnotized," said Elsie, kindly.

"Can't I get me a customer?" asked Phil. He sounded disappointed.

"How about you, Frank?" I asked.

"Uh-uh," he said, smiling as he blew out cigarette smoke. "Don't want ol' Lizzie knowing what's in my dirty old subconscious."

Elsie giggled and Elizabeth pressed her lips together, having failed in the attempt to smile.

"Well, that leaves you, brother man," said Phil, looking at me.
"You don't really think you could hypnotize *me*, do you?" I needed.
"Don't be so darn sure," he said, wagging a finger at me. "You arrogant ones are the first to topple."
I grinned, shrugging. "So what have I got to lose?" I said.

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From reader reviews:

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