

The Twisting House

From the front it looked like any other, ordinary house. A front door with a brass knocker in the middle, with windows either side and above. A red tiled roof with chimney stacks topped the house like festive icing, whilst on the ground an unexceptional green lawn and path made of pale yellow sandstone led to the front door. It looked to all intents and purposes like every other house on the same street. There were net curtains in the windows so it was hard to see inside, but it looked just the same as every other house.

Until you got inside.

Luke had been wandering in this house for a long time now. When he first came in, equipped with the map and everything he had been taught, he was prepared - at least he thought he was.

When you first entered the house it seemed like any other house; carpet on the hallway floor, pale vaguely patterned wallpaper on the walls. No furniture, which was odd. In fact, no decorations or knickknacks of any kind. Nothing to show that anyone was living or had ever lived in the house.

As you entered the front door it closed behind you with a soft click - hardly anyone remembered to turn a look behind them, otherwise they would have noticed there was no handle on the inside. To the left and right of the central hallway were two wide, open rooms, fairly brightly lit and on the opposite walls in each of those rooms, there were some doors. And beyond those doors were more rooms, with more doors. The stairs were further down the central hallway and appeared to go to a landing on the first floor. In fact they reached a landing on several floors, and no one that Luke had ever met in the house had ever known exactly how many floors there were above.

It was impossible. There was no way that the house could physically contain this many rooms or this many floors when you considered how it looked from the outside. And yet...

You could go anywhere you wanted to in the house but finding the exit was almost impossible.

Luke had come to find The Lost. He and other members of his team had been equipped with the map and instructions to help guide them through the house. But mostly they were there to find The Lost Ones - the people who had found their way into the house and were now trapped there and couldn't get out. His mission was to find them and use the map and the instructions he'd been given, to guide them and help them find their way out. But it wasn't as easy as all that.

For starters the house seemed to change. It wasn't immediately obvious - subtle changes like the carpets becoming more threadbare. The lighting becoming more dim. The rooms becoming more drab; less colour, less warmth... It wasn't freezing cold. But

you never quite felt warm. Hovering just on the wrong side of comfortable. There were no beds to sleep in, no bathrooms, no kitchen or food or toilets but also somehow, those things weren't needed? You just spent all of your time wandering, roaming, seeking, searching...but never finding the exit. It didn't matter how many times you went up the stairs, how many floors you tried to conquer there was no loft-and no convenient skylight to try and climb out of to call for help. There was no basement, no garage port, no windows in any of the rooms apart from the two at the very front of the house which somehow never seemed to reappear once you'd set foot beyond them. Just the same rooms, the same doors, the same hallways, gradually becoming consistently dull and lifeless and monotonous.

It wasn't as if people didn't try to leave the house. There was evidence of this all over the place - people perhaps had a pencil or a pen in their pocket when they came in and there were marks on the walls and doors to show when people had been there, which direction they had gone in and when they had come back again and realised that somehow they had gone in a circle.

Luke met people on his wanderings through the house and when they met, he'd spend time with them: talking through where they were now, showing them on the map, which always seemed to change to show exactly where they were right at this moment.

He'd showed them on the map which way to go: "Straight ahead, then a right, go through two more rooms, pick the door on the left down the hallway and you'll be nearly there. Then two more rights and the door in front of you should get you out." Each person was found in a different part of the house, so each person needed a different set of instructions. Some people had been in the house for a long time, whereas others had only been there for a little while. Luke didn't question that the map changed - in the same way that he didn't question that the house changed. He just knew that his role was to help people get out.

And some of them did. He knew that, because he didn't come across them again. They made it out the first time and that was the best sort of feeling, when you realised you hadn't seen them again and so they *must* have made it out.

But others he saw again, and again. A new set of directions, a new set of instructions "But I did that!" they would say, with an edge of frustration or disappointment. "I followed your instructions. I took the route you showed me. But I didn't find the door. I don't know where I went wrong?" And Luke would nod and smile and try again. He encourage them, and would show them the map, and they would talk through it again, and he would set them on their way saying "I'm sure you'll get there this time."

And then, after some time he might see them again, and go through the whole process again - or he might not. Sometimes The Lost were so lost they became something else: they became The Disappeared. This was one of the hardest things of all: finding

evidence of someone who had been in the house for so long that the house had somehow absorbed them completely, and they simply cease to exist. Or worse, he might hear them calling - their voices echoing down the stairs or from the end of a corridor, where they'd lost their sense of self because they'd been in the house for so long. All of that potential, all of that possibility, just lost in the endless corridors, rooms, and stairways of the house.

Sometimes Luke wondered whether he was doing enough? He wondered if he had understood all the instructions properly and if he'd remembered it all correctly? He wondered about the map and whether there was perhaps, a more updated version which would be more effective to help him help other people leave the house?

But then he remembered that the map always seemed to know where he was, when he met The Lost and so he reasoned, the map must be the best version of map that they could have. He tried so hard to help the people that he met and some days were good, some days were successful, but others... were not. He could spend an entire day - however that worked - walking through the house and meeting no-one. Or he might spent a day walking through the house and meeting someone in every other room, giving them instructions, advice, and encouragement. And then meeting them sometime later and wondering if it was actually his fault somehow - that he was doing something wrong and that's why they were still stuck inside this place.

But something changed, when he met Kelly. He found Kelly in a room that looked exactly like all the other rooms. She was in her mid 30s, tired, frustrated but determined.

"Hi!" said Luke, in a calm, professional tone. "I'm here to help you find a way out."

"Hey," she replied, somewhat dispiritedly. "Haven't I seen you someplace in this house before?"

"Quite possibly," Luke nodded. "It's er, not always easy to get out the first time."

"Or the second... Or third... I've lost track now," she muttered.

Luke nodded. There was nothing he could say to make it any better, he knew that by now. His job was to help people from where they were. He'd likely missed his chance early on, so this was the next best time. He held up the map to show Kelly where they were in the house.

"So, this map..." He began.

"Yeah, yeah, I've seen that. I've looked at it plenty. I have a good memory for pictures, but it doesn't seem to make any difference when it comes to getting out of this place. I'm doing everything I've been told, following all the directions, but it makes no difference. At least not to me. Anyway, are you sure that thing works? It doesn't seem very accurate?"

"Well," Luke began, reciting the familiar explanation: "The map possesses certain qualities which enables me to -" but Kelly cut him off.

Kelly sighed heavily. "Yeah, I know that. You've told me that before. The other people with maps have also told me that. Nobody ever listens when I say that the maps aren't right. It's kind of annoying."

"But..." Luke began.

"No, seriously! I mean it's not actually showing all the doors in this room. See?" And she pointed across the room to where there were two doors in the wall. Luke looked down at his map - it only showed one door in the wall, not two.

"But how can that..." Luke looked at the wall, looked down at the map, and then looked back at the wall. He could clearly see one door on the map. But the wall showed one door and... What seemed to be a translucent image of a door next to it.

"See?!" Kelly pointed at the door again. "I can see it," she insisted. "Why can't you? Do you trust your map more than your eyes?"

Luc checked the map again and then checked the wall. The second door was there, barely visible to him, but clearly visible to Kelly. He frowned, trying to process this new information.

"We were always taught to trust the map," he explained. "They said there would be consequences if we didn't. That things could go badly wrong, for the people we're supposed to be helping. But..." he paused, clearly struggling with the evidence of his own eyes. "But I can see, the outline of a door over there," he admitted.

"Consequences? What kind of consequences?" Kelly asked, frowning.

"I'm not really sure," Luke admitted. "We have tried other things in the past, but...well, this is the best option we have. We have to try and be consistent in how we help people - otherwise everything could start to unravel pretty quickly, and then the team would become just like The Lost - none of us knowing exactly what we're supposed to be doing, or how to do it." Luke could feel his emotions showing on his face. He'd never really spoken to one of The Lost like this before. It was unsettling, but also...kind of a relief. Only the team ever spoke to each other about the difficulties of helping people to leave the house. And even then, not very much. This was the first time he'd ever admitted to someone outside the team that perhaps not everything was working the way that it was supposed to.

"So, if you... um... If you put down the map, or like, fold it up and put it away, would that still work? I mean, are you still allowed to help me?" Kelly asked curiously.

Luke shrugged. "I don't know to be honest," he admitted. "I've never tried."

They looked at each other for a moment. Then, somewhere in his gut, Luke made a decision. He took the map and placed it on the floor a couple of feet away from him. He held his breath as he let go and straightened up stepping back just one or two steps.

They waited.

Luke turned to look at the door - and realised that it had solidified. He turned back to look at the map, which was open on the floor just a short distance away. The map still showed only one door. But as he turned to look at the wall, there were clearly two. Luke leaned to pick up the map from the floor and as he did so he noticed from the corner of his eye, that the second door began to fade again. He paused in an awkward position, like a strange game of musical statues. He leaned away from the map, and the door solidified again. He leaned towards the map, and it began to dissolve.

Luke mumbled something quite unprofessional under his breath, before trying once more for the map, to test his theory. Sure enough, just as before, the closer he got to the map the less visible the door would become. Kelly watched this strange ballet in thoughtful silence.

“So, you can only see the other door, if you're not holding the map?” she asked

“Seems that way.”

“So now I'm kind of wondering, how many other doors there are in this house, that you've never seen?”

Kelly watched, as Luke received this information and suddenly became ashen as he stared at her and then back at the wall.

He shook his head gently, his voice barely a whisper, “I don't know.” This went against everything he'd ever been told. Extra doors? *Other doors*? How many were there? Would people get more lost with these new doors or - he swallowed uncomfortably - would they provide a quicker way out? Why hadn't anyone told him? Did the others know? Did anyone know about these hidden doors? His head swam as he tried to reconcile what he knew, with what was clearly visible in front of him.

Kelly looked at him for a bit longer, seeming to recognise the deeply shocking and unnerving nature of this revelation. Luke's face had changed from ashen to almost green in colour and he felt lightheaded

“Erm, do you, um, need a minute?”

Luke stared at her, his face awash with different emotions, as he tried to make sense of what was happening before him. He took a deep breath. Then another.

After a moment he pulled himself up to his full height, shook his head and said “No. We need to test this, and see how it works. I think that's the only way I'll know for sure,

whether this is just a glitch in the house - or the map or whether this is...something else."

Kelly nodded "OK!" She started walking towards the second door "So let's see what's behind door #2!" she said brightly and reached for the handle.

Luke opened his mouth to say something - he wasn't sure what - but it was too late: the door was open and beyond it lay... another room.

"Good news!" Kelly announced with a chuckle. "We have not exploded!" She grinned at him and walked straight through into the next room. Luke shook his head, feeling very out of his depth, and followed her through the open door.

In the next room, they found three doors in the opposite wall. That was unusual enough, but these doors were all different. That was completely new. One of the doors looked like all the others in the house. But the other two almost seemed to come from different houses. One of them had been painted a soft green colour, with flowers and leaves all over it. It seemed to have been painted by hand, which added to its charm. The other door looked like it had come straight out of a gothic castle. Kelly snorted.

"So that's the door to the dungeons, obviously. I don't think I'll be taking that one."

Luke was still staring at the doors, as he asked, "So which door do you want?" It suddenly occurred to him in that moment, that he had never asked anyone he'd met in this house whether they would like to choose a door. He had always given them directions - he had never asked where they wanted to go. He stared for a moment as this revelation hit him in the chest.

Kelly, oblivious to his inner turmoil strolled calmly towards the painted door. "I like this one," she said. "I used to enjoy painting at school, even if I wasn't always very good at it. It made me feel peaceful."

They walked through the painted door together and came to a hallway. Again, there were three doors down the hallway, each of them different. One of them looked like all the other doors in the house, whereas the other two looked like they'd been transported in from somewhere else. One of the doors was white, and covered with all sorts of childish stickers, and posters from children's TV shows. The other was a pale birch colour, inlaid with some other kinds of wood to make pretty patterns.

"Oh, that looks pretty!" Kelly walked up to the birchwood door and traced her fingers over the patterns. "I read something about this somewhere," she said. "Or maybe it was a video on YouTube? I think they call it marquetry, when you, you know, put other bits of wood on top to make a pattern. It's clever isn't it?"

Luke walked up to the door. Close up, he could see that different types of wood had been inlaid into the door, to create the design. The more he looked, the more he could

see different types of wood grain, and how carefully each piece must have been chosen in order to make the patterns fit together so well.

"It is clever," he agreed. "So would you like this one?"

Kelly nodded, reached for the handle and opened the door.

It continued like this for a little while. Each new room or corridor presented them with choices: three doors, or sometimes four, all different. There was always one of the original doors from the house, but the others were all different. It sparked a really interesting conversation between them as they explored the doors and the spaces beyond. It made them think about all sorts of different things: memories of school, where they'd lived, things they like to do for fun, memories of people and places. And subtly, as they walked, the carpet became less threadbare, the walls a bit brighter and the air just a little bit warmer.

And then suddenly, without warning Kelly opened a door and found...

The outside.

She stared, in silence. Her breathing became ragged and as Luke turned to look at her, he noticed her knuckles had gone white clutching on to the door handle.

"Is it real?" she choked out. "Is it real?"

Luke could feel a soft breeze brushing against his face. He took a deep lung full of air, and realised it was the first time in a very long time that he had been able to do so. Outside the door was a simple sandstone paved path, with an uninspiring patch of green grass. Across the way was a pavement, the road, and more ordinary houses.

Kelly's breathing was harsh and erratic. "*Is it real?!*" she almost shouted.

She stumbled out of the door and across to the lawn. She collapsed to her knees and pushed her face into the grass, taking deep shuddering breaths. She made a sound-somewhere between laughing and crying. She turned to look over her shoulder and said joyously "It *is* real!"

Kelly pushed her fingers down into the turf and yanked out a clump of soil, the blades of grass crushed in her hand. She turned and walked back towards Luke, who was standing in the doorway. She held the clump of soil up to him.

"It is real. We made it. We made it out," as she held the soil up to him.

Luke took the clump of earth and grass in his hand and held it for a moment. He could feel the cool crumbly texture of soil, and the slightly damp feeling of crushed grass. He too held it up to his face and took a deep breath. And then he looked at her and grinned.

"It is real," he said. "You made it!"

They stood for a moment in silence, appreciating the glorious ordinary everyday nature of the space where they were standing.

“What would you like to do now?” Luke asked.

Kelly paused, and thought for a moment.

“I’m going to go home. I’m going to go and make the place where I live, somewhere where I *want* to live. I’m going to reclaim some of the things I lost while I was in the house. And I’m going to use the things I learned to make things better.”

Kelly turned and held Luke’s hand which still clutched the clump of grass. She held his hand in both of hers, and squeezed for just a moment.

“Thank you,” she said. “Thank you for helping me. Thank you for bothering to come into the house in the first place. But most of all thank you for trusting me, and believing me. We might never have got out, if you hadn’t been willing to do that.”

Luke nodded. He had no words in that moment.

Kelly squeezed his hand once more and then turned and set off at a sprint. Luke stood outside the house, his face tilted up to the sun, feeling it warm his face, his body and his soul.

He carefully tipped the clod of earth and grass into his shirt pocket, chuckling as bits of soil fell down onto the floor. And with a last look around, he turned and walked back into the house.