

## **The Bridewell House**

by

Scott William Foley

Speeding through the dark town in the old Mustang, the newly defeated teammates thought little of their customary loss as they listened to the booming music. Even the primordial roar of the car's engine was a weak challenger to the music, and so the four boys were happily forced to yell and laugh over the clamor.

Steve suddenly realized that his forever-lucky friend, Breaks, was shouting at the top of his lungs for the car to pull over. Once Steve had successfully crossed the 7<sup>th</sup> Street railroad tracks, he accommodated his old friend.

"What's up?" Mark questioned from his place in the back seat with Richie.

"Look over there," Breaks demanded.

The other three boys refused to acknowledge Breaks' request because they knew, as did all of Kithlessville, what lay to the east after crossing the 7<sup>th</sup> street tracks.

"So?" Steve asked in mock confidence after turning down the music and glancing into his rearview mirror. Although he knew what had suddenly taken such a hold of Breaks' interest, he asked anyway, "What are we looking at?"

"The Bridewell House," Breaks answered without trepidation.

Three backyards to the right was the location of the Bridewell House. Its backyard, like all the houses along King Street, fed directly into the railroad

tracks. However, unlike the other houses along King Street, it was completely dark with not a body stirring within.

More than a little unnerved, as any sensible person would be, Richie questioned, "What about the Bridewell House?"

"Let's check it out," replied the fortuitous boy with eyebrows raised as he made eye contact with his uncomfortable teammates. He relished the slight groan he heard come from within their souls.

The Bridewell House was one of those dwellings of lore that every small town has as routinely as a barbershop and an apothecary. Sadly, however, the circumstances leading to the inauspicious legend of the Bridewell House were firmly rooted in tragic reality.

Decades ago, when Kithlessville actually had a winning football season, a catastrophic accident occurred upon the railroad tracks that bisect 7<sup>th</sup> street, the very tracks that the young men just passed over. Difficult as it is to describe, a school bus from the town's elementary school was approaching the tracks at the same moment as the impending passing of a freight train. Of course, the warning lights were flashing, signaling 7<sup>th</sup> Street's automobilists to halt. Leading the commute on 7<sup>th</sup>, heading north, was "Rocket" Pabst. "Rocket" was a nickname given to Charles Pabst in jest of his extraordinary reluctance to go over 15 mph while driving in town. Many felt that this character trait made him the perfect choice to transport the town's future before and after school. They were horrifyingly wrong.

Understand that it was no fault of Rocket's. An autopsy revealed that he had been a narcoleptic. No one realized that Rocket's famed napping was much, much more than just an amusing trait of an old, seemingly tired man.

Although the train was well within the parameters of the legal speed for a locomotive passing through town, the dead-center impact was horrendous. The bus was mauled several hundred feet before the train came to a stop. When the screaming of child and machine finally came to an end, both were parallel with the Bridewell's backyard.

Once they were loosened from the ravages of the bus that was fused to the train, the emergency personal had little choice with where to place the bodies of the children. There was little choice in the matter because several more tracks lay on one side of the catastrophe, and backyards lay on the other. Therefore, the bodies of twenty-four little boys and fourteen little girls were placed in the nearest yard, that of the Bridewells.

No town should ever have to go through what Kithlessville went through that day.

It wasn't long before the Bridewells moved out of their home, relocating to Texas. They claimed, understandably so, that they could no longer look at their backyard without seeing the desecrated children of that day.

Because this was an otherwise industrious era for Kithlessville, a new family from out of town moved into the Bridewell House. They soon moved out without an explanation to anyone. This began a trend that lasted for fifteen years. After a decade and a half had elapsed, the town finally left the Bridewell

House alone, and it seemed perfectly content with the decision. It has stood devoid of life at 55 East King Street ever since.

“Maybe we should take Richie toilet papering instead,” Steve apprehensively replied to Breaks’ request of “checking out” the Bridewell House. Richie instantly became excited at the prospect of his idea from earlier on how to spend Friday night apparently being re-opened.

After noting a brief comment of approval from Richie, Breaks retorted, “What are you guys, scared?”

“Yeah, Breaks, we’re afraid of some old house. Give me a break, um, Breaks,” Mark stumbled out, obviously aware of his pun far too late.

Triumphantly, Breaks said, “Well then, let’s go have a look.”

After taking a quick right onto King Street, the boys found themselves pulling up alongside the dilapidated old house. Steve cut the engine and the silence screamed at them to leave immediately without looking back.

“Look, guys, why don’t we just head downtown; you know that the rest of the guys will be there. Maybe we’ll even see Anita and you can try to get back on her good side after ditching her tonight,” pled the uneasy Richie.

Laughing, Breaks retorted, “She’s not mad! Why would she be mad? I told her something else came up.”

The rest of the winless Kithlessville Cougars within the Mustang shook their heads in disbelief to one another. After all, there was a reason that they called him “Breaks.”

“Let’s head on in,” continued the all-state fullback.

“Um, look, Breaks, I’m with Richie on this one,” began Steve. “I really don’t think this is a great idea.”

With anger growing stronger by the instant, Mark raged, “He’s totally playing us, don’t you realize that? He doesn’t want to go in there any more than we do; he’s bluffing!”

Blue eyes suddenly open wide, Breaks irately rebutted, “You think I’m hustling you, Botrip? I’ll go in there right now, alone if I have to. Heck, I’ll even stay there the whole night just to prove you wrong!”

“Whatever,” Mark dismissed.

“Guys, maybe we should calm down a little,” Richie mumbled.

“No way, Naderi!” Breaks yelled as his adrenaline mounted. “In fact, I’ll give each of you ten bucks if I can’t last the whole night in that place.”

“You’re both being stupid—” Steve began.

“Tell you what, Breaks,” Mark blurted out, “we’ll each give you twenty bucks if you *do* last the night in there!”

Aghast, Richie appealed, “Hey, you’re betting *my* money. That’s not cool.”

Lifting his square, stubble ridden chin high, Breaks proclaimed, “You’re on, Mark!”

“Chris, come on, this is pointless,” Steve begged.

Taking hold of his friend’s shoulder with his powerful left hand, Breaks whistled, “This’ll be the easiest money I’ve ever made. Easier than the time I ate that earthworm for fifty bucks at football practice. You remember that?” After

waiting for Steve to grin with his nodding, Breaks continued, "You're not going to hold out on the Chris "Breaks" Ralson fun fund, are you, buddy?"

Taking a deep breath and then exhaling a slow sigh, Steve shook his head while answering, "If you want to do this, I'm in. Richie?" Looking behind him and waiting for Richie to hesitantly nod in the affirmative, Steve finished, "Let's do it."

The friends got out of the car and stood before the Bridewell House. They noticed that they saw every feature of it perfectly within the bright moonlight. Every crack of the paint, every window that was broken, and every missing shingle they mentally catalogued. They treaded up the walk between the jungle of grass. Three of them swore that they heard a warning as they stepped onto the creaking porch. The fourth claimed that it was just their stomach rolling because they were about to soil themselves.

Exchanging hesitant glances to one another and then to the doorknob of the abandoned dwelling and back to each other again, Breaks finally chuckled a bit and made contact with the house that didn't want to be entered.

The door to the Bridewell House was easy enough to enter. All Breaks had to do was turn the knob and push. As he did so, years of dust was pushed aside by the moaning door. Because there were no curtains or shades, the moonlight provided enough light for the boys to see by fairly well.

They noticed the dust lying as a sheen of gray snow on the floor after having collected undisturbed for decades. There was very little furniture in the deteriorated, rather eerie house, only an end table or two that must have been deemed unworthy for retention, as well as an old rotary phone still plugged into a

useless jack in the corner of the entry hall. As the athletes walked by, it inexplicably rang thirty-eight times.

It took an eternity for the ringing to complete, and as the phone shrieked at the boys to get out, they simply stood inertly with their hearts firing rapidly.

Finally, the ringing died. Fighting against their instinct to turn and run, thanks to Breaks' encouragement, Richie, Mark, and Steve instead continued to walk through the musty house. They listened neurotically to the weeping of a floor that was no longer accustomed to bearing human weight. Soon, they entered what must have been the family room and noticed a staircase leading upwards. A large, rectangular window across from the staircase gave a perfect view of the moonlit backyard and the railroad tracks.

"This is it," Breaks mused gleefully, "I guess I'll see you guys tomorrow!"

"Wait a minute," Mark contended in the illuminated family room, choking slightly on the particles of dust that he and his friends sent airborne with each movement while trying very hard not to let his voice quiver. "How do we know that you're not going to walk home as soon as we leave? You can come back in the morning before we get here and collect sixty bucks!"

"What do you want to do, glue me to the floor!" Breaks sarcastically responded.

Not really knowing why he said it, Steve whispered, "I've got jumper cable in my car."

Richie cocked his head to the side and gazed at Steve with narrowed eyes, "You want to tie him up with jumper cable?"

“That’s perfect!” Breaks happily joined in. “You can tie me to these rungs,” he said while quickly running his finger along them and producing a sound that could cause insomnia. “That way you’ll know that I can’t cheat you out of your money! Go get the cable, Steve!”

Steve turned and jogged out of the family room to his car while feeling not quite himself and oblivious to the disapproving glares of Richie and Mark.

Shaking his head, Mark finally said, “Breaks, this is crazy. You’ve got me. If you’re bluffing, you win. We’re not tying you up in this freak palace. I’m getting the creeps just standing here. You win, okay? We need to get out of here. You win . . .”

“I haven’t won yet, Marky,” the muscular athlete sang. “But I will when you come back tomorrow morning.” Motioning to the quickly returned cable-wielding Steve, he quipped, “Let’s go, bud. Wrap those things around me.”

Realizing that Breaks was unreasonable at moments such as this, Mark said, “Let me at least get you one of those end tables to sit on if you insist on this idiocy.” With that, Mark began to leave the room, then abruptly stopped as he hit the doorway.

Richie and Steve quickly gawked at Mark, apprehensive due to the sudden halt in fluid movement. “Richie,” Mark began with a hint of shame in his voice, “come with me. I don’t want to be alone in this place.”

“CHICKEN!” yelled the exhilarated Breaks. “You are such a coward, you can’t even walk a few steps by yourself?”

When Richie and Mark returned with the abandoned furniture, they saw that Steve had already secured Breaks to the rungs of the banister. At Breaks' order, Steve pulled hard on the fullback to verify that the cable had no give at all. It did not. They placed the end table under the dark-haired young man and he took a seat with a wide smile.

"Listen, boys," he said after shifting around a bit to get as comfortable as he could with tight jumper cable binding him, "I want you to go straight home. Don't go downtown or anything, because you know that one of you will tell the rest of the team what's going on, and then, when you come back here tomorrow and see me with a smile on my face and sixty dollars richer, you'll think someone came and set me free overnight. Deal?"

"It's past eleven already," Steve said after lighting up his digital watch, "I don't have a choice. My parents are going to kill me." At the mention of that word, Steve, Richie, and Mark felt the room grew very cold and he instantly regretted having said it in a place like this. Breaks, of course, seemed to notice nothing but his own delight.

Throwing off Steve's comment, Mark attempted one last appeal with Breaks, "This is not a good idea . . . Chris, are you sure you want to do this?"

"I'll be fine!" Breaks laughed. "What could happen to me? No one knows I'm here but you guys! Nothing's going to come and get me if nobody knows I'm here! You all seriously need to relax."

Mark dropped his head and mumbled against his will, "You've got a deal then. We'll see you in the morning . . ."

“I’ll pick Richie and Mark up around seven, then we’ll be right over. Okay, Chris?” Steve asked with eyebrows raised in distress.

“Why don’t you make it noon?” Breaks teased. “I’d hate for you guys to miss your Saturday morning cartoons!”

And with that, the boys began to walk out of the family room while listening uncertainly to Break’s good-natured jabs at their bravery. Following Richie and Mark, Steve took a last look and saw Breaks smiling at him, white teeth shining brightly in the moonlight amidst all the dust beneath him.

They left their friend within the Bridewell House.

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“So you left him alone that night. What next?” asks the blonde-haired man.

“Kyle, you realize that we were found completely innocent of any wrongdoing, right?” Steve responds with stone in his voice.

“Yes, Steve, I do realize that . . . You were saying?” the man named Kyle prods.

Irritated, Steve begins, “Kyle—or should it be Officer Cooper?”

“Kyle’s fine, Steve. I’m off duty. Otherwise I wouldn’t have this in my hand,” Kyle says as he lifts a bottle of beer up from the table.

Nodding to himself in embarrassment, Steve mutters, “Of course. How stupid of me . . . Kyle, why are you asking me about all of this? It’s old news. Everybody knows the story. What’s your interest?”

Before Kyle can answer, a woman that Steve doesn't recognize approaches the officer and begins to whisper in his ear. Steve takes a sip of his whisky and cola as he waits for the interruption to end. He knew it was a mistake to come. Mark and Richie had been smart enough to avoid Kithlessville from the moment that they graduated. Now with Mark studying to be an eye surgeon and Richie already a wealthy dot-commer, they didn't want to dig up any old bones. Steve had been optimistic. Life was going so well for him, he didn't think that there could be any harm in attending his fifth-year reunion.

He was wrong. It was obvious from the beginning that no one was going to have anything to do with him. He'd been sitting alone at the bar chosen for his class' rendezvous since the moment that he had arrived. Kyle Cooper, the least likely candidate in his youth to become a police officer in Kithlessville, was the only one willing to converse with Steve. Unfortunately, Steve had already realized that it was not out of friendliness.

Steve cannot understand his classmates' frigid reception towards him. His last year and a half at Kithlessville High School had been uncomfortable, but never had people acted so blatantly loathsome towards him. He begins to desperately wish that he had gone to visit Richie as his old friend had begged him to do instead of coming back to his hometown.

"When I hear it all, all of it, from you, I'll tell you what my interest is," Kyle answers as the woman walks away from the police officer, but not without a dirty look shot at Steve. "I know you don't want to talk about it, Steve, but I need to hear it from you—personally."

Steve takes a deep sigh. He doesn't really trust Kyle. He never has. But, Steve has been drinking alone long enough by this point to feel that talking to someone about an uncomfortable topic is better than talking to no one at all, so he continues:

"I picked up Richie and Mark the next morning and we drove across town to the Bridewell House. It was just after six in the morning. I don't think any of us slept a wink that night. But, with the early morning signs of daylight, our fears subsided and our spirits rose.

"I think we all felt like we had been pretty silly for worrying about Chris. I mean, after all, *he* was the one who wanted to spend the night tied to the rungs of a staircase banister!

"As we drove, we actually began to laugh at how Chris had revealed us all to be nothing more than scared little boys. Now, of course, I wish he had been one as well. We all had our money out and ready to go, and we all agreed that Chris had most certainly earned it this time."

"Right," Kyle interrupted, "Get to the part where you see him."

Slightly unhinged by Kyle's rudeness, Steve refuses to cut his story short, "You said you wanted the personal version of what happened, or did I misunderstand?"

"Don't get cocky, Walls," Kyle grunts with eyes barely more than gleaming slits, "You may be a big shot college teacher now—"

"Graduate student with an assistantship," Steve interrupts coolly with his chin lowered and his eyes raised.

“Whatever,” the dismissive officer responds. “Just get to when you saw Chris.”

“In a moment,” Steve reassures. “We once again walked up those steps onto the porch of the house. This time, however, it looked like nothing more than an abandoned building in the early light. And, thankfully, we heard no more warnings from it. In fact, we were already yelling to Chris, calling him ‘The Man’ and other such names, when we pushed on the door. Our rejuvenated spirits disappeared as it didn’t open nearly as easily as it had the night before.”

Eyebrows furrowed, Kyle asks with his head slightly cocked to the side, “Why’s that?”

After sipping from a drink that does nothing to quell his ever-growing torment, Steve takes a deep breath and says, “The door was blocked from the inside. It took Mark and I both pushing while Richie turned the old knob to get it to open enough for us to slide through. Once through the door, we turned as gray as the foot of dust piled along the borders of the rooms within the house. This dust was blocking the door from within the house!

“Kyle, it was disturbing,” Steve utters with a far away look on his face. “While looking at the dust piled up so unnaturally, I began to feel a sort of primal fear within myself. I had to force myself not to scream, abandon my friends, and sprint back to my own house! There was not one speck of dust within the interiors of those hardwood floors. They had been wiped clean. It’s just like centrifugal force had bled the dust to the edges.”

“Is that possible?” Kyle asks.

Although Steve gives no verbal response, Kyle ascertains from the other man the answer. Steve then continues, “As I fought against running away, Richie was already sprinting to the family room, howling out our friend’s name. I took off to the family room also, with Mark behind me. I quickly overtook Richie—”

“You were the tailback,” Kyle interrupts.

“Right,” Steve answers without interest. “I passed by Richie and beat him into the family room. He was right behind me. I remember hearing his scream when we saw what was before us. Unlike Richie, I no longer had a voice to scream.”

“Chris?” Kyle says.

“Chris . . .” Steve whispers. “Chris . . . I’m so sorry.” Tears begin to fall from Steve’s eyes as the off-duty officer shoves him a napkin.

“What next?” Kyle prompts.

After taking a moment, Steve resumes, “Richie and I were frozen solid, but Mark ran to Chris without a second’s hesitation. Even then, I think he had a doctor in him . . . I felt a hand push me from behind. It was Richie inciting me to move forward. I looked at my friend still held captive by the rungs of that staircase as I approached him step by step. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing.

“Chris was trapped by my jumper cables just as we had left him, still sitting on the end table. He was staring out the window into the backyard without blinking. A very slight stream of drool was stretched from the corner of his mouth to his thigh, unbroken.

“This alone had turned my stomach to stone, but it was not what was causing my blood to race.”

Steve takes yet another sip of his drink as he tries to maintain his composure and says with difficulty, “Chris . . . his hair had turned completely white. It was completely . . . white.”

Kyle searches, “What happened?”

“Chris hadn’t said a word,” Steve answered. “Mark was trying to untie him while wailing for Richie and I to help him. He had managed to get the jumpers unhooked as we stood in front of Chris, and, once freed, he immediately reeled forward and fell onto Richie. Both tumbled to the ground. Understandably, Richie began screaming again.

“I grabbed onto Chris and pulled him up. It must have been pure adrenaline; I never could have picked him up under normal circumstances without getting any leverage. I threw his arm around my neck and propped him up while Mark helped Richie to his feet. We were all looking around the room and pleading with Chris to tell us what had happened.

“The only response we got from him was a whisper into my ear to get him out of that house. I took off in a dead sprint, dragging Chris next to me with Mark and Richie close behind.

“Once we got to my car outside the house, out into the sunlight, we asked Chris again if he was all right. He mumbled nearly inaudibly that he was fine, to take him home.

“Mark settled Chris into the passenger seat and then crawled into the back with Richie, and then I left a set of tire tracks in front of that house that were there for the rest of my days in Kithlessville!”

“They’re still there,” Kyle interposes, “although time should have erased them years ago.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised . . .”

“Go on; what happened then?” Kyle interrogates.

“As we got farther away from the house, we all got to feeling a little better. It was obvious, though, that Chris was not improving whatsoever. We began to joke with him, trying to get some semblance of reassurance from him. He wouldn’t have any part of it.

“We finally pulled up into his driveway, behind his old RX7, and began to ask him if he needed any help getting into his house. He was already out of my car and walking up his driveway before we could finish. Finally, in one last desperate attempt to see if our friend was okay, I yelled, ‘Hey, Breaks, what about your sixty bucks?’ He didn’t even turn around as he entered his house.”

Squinting at Steve as he takes another gulp from his drink, Kyle goads, “That’s it?”

“That’s it, Kyle,” Steve answers. “You know as much as I do from that point on. Of course, the minute his parents laid eyes on him, the police were at my door, as well as Mark’s and Richie’s. Although Chris wasn’t breathing a word to anyone, we gave every last detail of everything we knew. Unfortunately, the only one who really knows what happened to Chris is Chris, and he hasn’t

spoken unnecessarily to anyone since the morning we freed him from those jumper cables.”

“He was never the same . . .” Kyle contemplates.

“No,” Steve says as his voice begins to tremble, “he quit the football team, broke up with his girlfriend, and dropped out of high school. He moved out of his parents’ home and took up work on the river. He didn’t have a thing to do with anyone from that morning on. He wouldn’t even respond when Richie, Mark, and I would try to contact him. It’s almost as though part of him died that night, and I’m afraid that we killed him.”

It is with this that Steve finally breaks down and begins to sob uncontrollably.

“No, Steve, you boys didn’t kill Chris Ralson. That’s the only thing that I know for a fact,” Kyle sighs.

With tears rolling down his face, Steve whimpers, “What?”

Taking a long drink, finishing off the beer, Kyle finally asks, “Do you have any suspicions as to what happened at the Bridewell House that night?”

Finally controlled to a faint degree, Steve shakily returns, “No, not really. I mean, we all have our theories, I guess . . .”

“Tell me,” Kyle demands.

“Well, Richie won’t talk about it. Once the police cleared us of any wrongdoing, Richie never spoke a word of it again. Mark and I talked about it quite often, however. We still do. Mark’s studies in medicine over the years have led him to the idea that Chris went through some kind of shock that night.

He says that any shock severe enough can cause a person's hair to go stark white. Mark maintains that once we left, Chris began to freak out. It's his belief that Chris basically had an anxiety attack for five and a half hours. The part of his explanation that Mark can't explain, however, is the cause of that dust piled up along the walls."

"And you believe?" Kyle begins.

With a cloudy veil suddenly covering his eyes, Steve says, "I think that whatever moved that dust and made that phone ring turned our friend's hair white that night."

"That's not telling me much, Steve," Kyle states impatiently.

"Why are we talking about all of this all over again, Kyle?" Steve restlessly asks.

"Everything I've told you can be found on public record, and it's certainly in your police files."

"I was hoping for a lead . . ." responds the officer vaguely.

Stunned, Steve responds with, "A lead? What are you talking about?"

Barely audible, Kyle answers, "Chris has gone missing."

"Chris has been missing since his junior year in high school," Steve sarcastically notes in a desperate attempt to hide his growing terror. "I think he likes it that way."

Shaking his head, obviously disturbed, "No, Steve, no. He's gone completely missing. He stopped showing up for work, stopped paying what few bills he was responsible for; he's gone. I've been assigned to his case."

“You have no idea . . . what’s happened to him?” asks the graduate student with his tremulous voice returning. The primal fear he felt the morning that they freed Chris from the Bridewell House was returning as well. Sweat begins to seep from his forehead.

“No. We have evidence. What we don’t have is an explanation,” Kyle answers.

“What . . .” Steve pauses as he tries to control his voice and his stomach. “What evidence?”

“We found his Mazda parked outside the Bridewell House,” Kyle says with cement in his voice. Steve’s heart instantly plummets to his ankles as his shirt sticks to his back.

“Why was it there?” Steve whispers.

“I don’t know,” Kyle responds, he himself sounding unnerved. “We went inside the Bridewell House and found a pair of size thirteen shoeprints in some pretty deep dust. We followed them to an end table at the foot of the staircase.”

“And?” Steve prods involuntarily, feeling as though he’s about to pass out.

“They stopped at the foot of the staircase . . . facing the window.”

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