

## The Mansion at Solwyin's Hollow

Once upon a time, in the back isles of nowhere, in a small town called Solwyin's Hollow, there lived a group of friends. Max, Alex and Charles were inseparable; they met each other when they were three years old and have been best pals since. Living in a small community, everyone knew everyone. Locals were friendly to their peers in this tiny town tucked away in a mist valley, surrounded by woods. One warm, sunny day, in midsummer, Max, Alex and Charles went for a walk in the woods and spotted an old, abandoned mansion. Surrounding it was a huge fence with a sign on it that said "**DO NOT ENTER – DANGER**". Further down the road, another sign had the word "**HAUNTED**" written on it. Sceptical and confused, and like all curious teenagers, they ran back to town and asked around about this mansion. Everyone warned them to stay away but didn't really explain further, except that strange things happen in this place. These warnings didn't come from solid proof, only the superstitions from the generations before them. Then came this old timer, a blind fellow whom people believed he was older than a century. With age usually comes wisdom, therefore the boys listened closely. He told them that travellers who visit this mansion never make it out. *"The air is poisonous and makes them lose their mind"*, he said, and then added *"The energy that flows through that place is dark and evil"*. The teenagers, flabbergasted and even more curious, decided to find out for themselves. Having a false sense of bravery and judgement, they wanted to make it even more of a challenge and visit this place at night. Naïve.

On the next moon, they gathered up supplies and flashlights, and headed towards the mysterious mansion. Once they got there and realised how black and silent the area was, far away from civilisation, they were overcome with fear and doubt. Max suggested to abort and turn back. Alex agreed and suggested they come during the day. Charles, being slightly older than his pals and feeling like the brave leader of this group, reassured them that everything would be fine and that the stories were old wives' tales. *"Don't be cowards"* he said. *"Imagine the look on that old fool's face when we go back tomorrow and tell him that there is nothing supernatural about this place and it's all fiction"*. Charles knew exactly what to say and convince them to not back down. They quickly climbed the fence and were inside the perimeter. They couldn't break through the front door therefore Charles, decided to split and find another way in. Max and Alex managed to break through a window and entered the house. They noticed a lot of dense vegetation growing within its walls, a naturally occurring phenomenon in old, abandoned buildings. There was a weird smell coming out of these plants. They started feeling drowsy and decided to go outside for some fresh air. There, they met with Charles and told him that they got in and decided to come out because the air was hard to breathe. *"See? This place isn't haunted. I can't wait to go back and tell everyone!"*

Alex noticed that the mansion had a swimming pool. Feeling excited and accomplished, he decided to go for a swim. Max and Alex decided to sit this one out. Since entering the house, they weren't feeling quite like themselves. What they didn't know was that the vegetation that they saw was fungi and the air that they breathed was their spores. Specifically, *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*, also known as the “zombie-ant fungus”, is known to bend their prey's will to their own and control their brain function, by secreting chemicals that mimic neurotransmitters and subsequently govern the host's motor function. Research has shown that these parasitic organisms are unable to control a mammal's brain, hence the name “zombie-ant”. Mechanisms are unclear as to why they cannot but it is suggested to be due to the complexity of the mammalian brain. Another assumption is that these fungi cannot survive the internal temperature of a homeotherm, an organism that produces its own heat from within. Who knows? It was clear that these kids were infected and unknowing of their actions. Is it because of evolution? Have these multicellular organisms evolved in warmer climates such as the one in Solwyin's Hollow, able to tolerate the higher temperatures of the human body?

Without consciousness, they started heading back inside the house. Meanwhile, Charles, unaware of what is happening, was celebrating in the pool, unsuspecting of what was crawling beneath. A swimming pool that is hasn't been maintained in some time can be easily contaminated and be the home of all undesirables. This was the beginning of the end. Charles was infected with *Naegleria fowleri*, a single-celled organisms known as “brain-eating amoeba”. Colonising the water, these bugs entered through his nose and reached his brain. As soon as he entered the water, his fate was written. His brain started to feel as if it was on fire and started screaming in pain. He couldn't climb out and drowned in the water. His body slowly submerged in the water bed. As for the other two, they were in a state of trance. Their bodies were completely controlled by the fungi which led them even deeper in the mansion. There, they joined the other unlucky souls who once shared their curiosity to explore.

Charles was right. There was nothing “evil” about this place. I guess, the old timer was right about one thing – the air being “poisonous” in the form of mind-altering spores. It was just nature taking its course. All organisms are trying to survive, trying to evolve. Some prey on hosts, while others form symbiotic relationships where both organisms benefit. In nature, sooner or later, everything evolves. Abnormal and unusual phenomena were happening in that mansion, that no one could explain because they simply didn't know and everyone was superstitious and scared enough to not go see for themselves. A famous quote says “*absence of evidence is not evidence of absence*”. These kids had to bear the horror of an act far greater than them.

The end.