
The House on Summer Street



A Novel of Ghosts
by Jim Menick

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A short sample to put you into the mood for reading the whole thing (and more to the point, buying it on Amazon, so that the author can continue to live the high life in the style to which he has become accustomed).

Chapter One

It was the weirdest summer ever. Really.

I mean, first there was the whole moving up to the middle school thing, then there was the business with Dad and Michelle and little Pesto, and then there was moving to the house on Summer Street and everything that happened there, which had to be the weirdest thing of all. I mean, the house *was* haunted, right?

The weirdest summer ever. It was really something. Really.

You can trust me on that.

The house on Summer Street is probably the best place to start, since if it wasn't for that house, there wouldn't be much to say. Or at least not much anyone would want to hear about. Dad and I had lived in an apartment for as long as I could remember, a condominium, actually, which is sort of like a half house, half apartment. You own it like a house, but it feels like an apartment because you've got neighbors all over the place, sometimes right on top of you. We were in one half of a three floor building split down the middle, and there was this other family in the other half, except they weren't really a family, they were just this couple that worked during the day in the city and looked as if, if they ever had kids, they would probably kill them just for fun. Some people are simply not kid-friendly, if you know what I mean. You can usually tell right away who are the

people that like kids and who are the ones that would be perfectly happy to hit them on the nose with a rolled-up newspaper like a cocker spaniel or something. They say that dogs can also tell who the good people are and who the bad people are, but I don't know about that because I have never owned a dog, or a cat, or any other pet, for that matter. The doctor says I'm allergic, and I have to admit that when I'm at somebody else's house and they do have cats or dogs or something, it isn't long before my face turns red and I get this pain behind my eyes and I start to sneeze like nobody's business. I guess I could have a fish or maybe a gerbil or something if I really wanted to, because nobody's allergic to fish or gerbils, except for this kid in my old class who was allergic to shellfish, but nobody has a pet clam, if you know what I mean, and I think he has to actually *eat* the shellfish to get a reaction to them, not just pet them on the head or take them for a walk or something. Whatever. This story is not about this kid in my class and his allergies, or even *my* allergies, for that matter. It's about the house on Summer Street, or at least that summer in the house on Summer Street.

Funny, isn't it? Summer on Summer Street. Except it wasn't funny at the time. Not one giggle. Not a single chuckle. Not even the least tiniest ho-ho-ho. No, sir, not for a minute.

Now the reason we were moving to the house on Summer Street is because my dad was getting married to Dr. Mangini, also known as Michelle the dentist. Which seemed to me like the weirdest thing in the world. I mean, I have nothing against dentists in general. The couple I have gone to, including Dr. Mangini—I mean, Michelle—have not been particularly horrible to me. They polish you up, give you some fluoride, and that's about the end of it. I've heard stories of people long ago, like Grandma talks about,

for instance, about their going to the dentist and getting their cavities drilled and their teeth pulled with rusty pliers and blood flying around all over the place like some really nasty slasher movie, and they have to shoot them up with Novocain and they look like Popeye the Sailor for the next couple of days, but that's not really true with any of the kids I know. Dentists have got kids' teeth under control nowadays. They seal you up with some fluoride and you're good to go forever—no drills, no rusty pliers, no shots, no blood all over the place—at least until you need braces. Michelle told my dad years ago that I was eventually going to need braces, right around the time I would be going to middle school. Great, since that time was now lurking directly in front of me. Not only leave grammar school and have to go on a half hour bus ride to a school with seventh through ninth grade—I am not a fan of ninth graders, let me tell you—but you have to do it with a mouth that looks like the George Washington Bridge. As I said, great.

I think it was also around the time that Michelle said I was going to need braces that Dad started going out with her.

Also great.

You're probably wondering how come Dad would want to start going out with my dentist, which is a good question for a lot of reasons, but the key answer is, my mom died a long time ago. I was five years old, so it's not like I was some really really little kid who can't remember anything from back then. I can still remember her perfectly seven years later, and not just because there are pictures of her all around and videos and stuff. I remember her because I remember her. She was my mother. You don't forget your mother, not when you've spent a whole five years with her, like I did.

She died because there was an accident. Although you've got to wonder, is it an accident when some guy is driving his car drunk? That doesn't sound like an accident to me, let me tell you, but everybody called it an accident. If it was up to me, they would have sent that drunk guy to the electric chair or something, but if you want to know, they didn't do much of anything to him. My dad never talks about it much, but my grandmother told me all about it not too long ago, when I was old enough to understand it. I'll promise you one thing. I'm never going to drink any alcohol, not ever, not one drop. Would you drink the thing that had killed your mother? I didn't think so.

Anyhow, I guess that for a while my parents were a little like the couple that lived next door to us in the condominium, the ones that would kill their kids for fun if they had had any, because they had been living in the condominium ever since they got married, way before I came along. Except it turned out that Mom and Dad liked kids and wanted kids, which is where I came in. If I hadn't been allergic, maybe they would have had a dog too, but that's just guessing on my part.

I'm typing this on the computer, by the way, if you're wondering why all the words come out spelled correctly. When words aren't spelled right, they're underlined in red, which makes spelling them correctly very easy. And on top of that, I'm a very literate person and I know what most words mean and I'm not afraid to use them. My mother taught me to read when I was little, before she died. Really. And after she died, I have to admit I had a lot of time to do a lot of reading. Last year I finally had to work out a deal at the library with the people in charge there to let me take out books from the adult side, because the rule is that it's children's books only until you're in middle school. But I sort of graduated from Dr. Seuss a long time ago, if you get my drift, and

middle reader books aren't my kind of thing. I like science fiction, fantasy, and maybe every now and then a classic like *David Copperfield*, which I actually really did read the whole thing just a couple of months ago and I really did like it. A lot of people seemed surprised that a sixth grader would read a book like that, like I was some kind of nut or something, or maybe pretending to be smarter than I am, or maybe just showing off—I don't know. But, I'm sorry, but I won't pretend that I'm dumb. I'm probably one of the top three smartest kids in my class, maybe the smartest on a good day. I wouldn't spend a whole month reading a book if I didn't like it. And I liked *David Copperfield*. It was a good story with a lot of funny parts, although it sort of petered out in the end with the two wives and everything.

Which sort of takes us back to Mom and Michelle. My dad's name is David, by the way, like David Copperfield, but that's just a meaningless coincidence. I wouldn't read anything into it if I were you.

So Mom died a long time ago, but Dad and I stayed in the condominium, and a lot of years passed, and I went to Dr. Mangini, the dentist, and one way or the other, my dad started looking at the dentist—Michelle—as something other than a dentist.

I am not an idiot. I know how these things work.

Michelle, aside from being a dentist, had a story of her own. She had an ex-husband named Bruce who divorced her not very long after little Pesto was born. Having met little Pesto, whose name is actually Matthew, I could understand why Bruce the ex-husband felt the time had come to put the old egg in his shoe and beat it. Of course, I really didn't know for sure why Bruce the ex-husband left, or if little Pesto had anything to do with it; needless to say, I never exactly had a heart-to-heart talk with Michelle about

her former love life. All I knew is that Bruce the ex-husband left, and that part of the deal was that he came around every couple of weekends and grabbed little Pesto and took him away, which was good enough for me. In those early days I came to wish Michelle had half a dozen other ex-husbands to take little Pesto away the rest of the time, if you know what I mean.

Okay. You've figured it out. I was not a big fan of little Pesto—I mean, Matthew. The thing is, he was six years younger than I am, and we had totally, completely, nothing in common. He was too young to really do anything with, which means that if I did do anything with him, it was some dumb thing geared for a little Pesto and not for a big Benjamin.

Oh, yeah. That's me. Benjamin. Ben, mostly. Benjamin Merritt North, to give you the whole thing. Merritt was my mother's name; North, or course, is Dad's name. Benjamin—Ben—is all mine.

To get back to the story, when Michelle the dentist told my dad that I was going to need braces someday, I guess they looked deep into each other's eyes and the violins started playing and whatnot, and so they started seeing each other. Grandma would come and stay with me on those occasions; she was the only babysitter I ever had, at least that I can remember, and not that we called it babysitting after, say, second grade. Grandma is my father's mother, and she lives about twenty minutes away in the next town over. Mom's parents live in Chicago, which is where Mom came from, so I don't see them much, except they do write me emails all the time and I write them back and send them pictures and videos and stuff. It's weird having this whole set of relatives really far away that you never see, but that's the way it is. You can't do anything about it, because if you

moved to be closer to them, then you'd be further away from someone else, like my grandma in the next town over. See the problem? I mean, you can't win.

At some point in Dad's and Michelle's dating, they decided that their kids were going to need to be drawn into the picture. I don't know about Matthew and my dad, but I certainly already knew who Michelle was, having had her poking around in my mouth for the last couple of years, so it wasn't that major an introduction. But things were different now, and I guess they thought they needed to do something formal, so the four of us went on a little day trip down to Playland, which is this amusement park on the Long Island Sound not too far from us, and we went on a bunch of rides and stuff. Even then little Matthew had to go on the kiddie rides and I wanted to go on the big rides, so a planned family event didn't really work as well as Dad and Michelle might have hoped. When we played miniature golf—they have a miniature golf course there—Matthew was, well, let me put it this way, Tiger Woods has nothing to worry about, not now, not ever. Anyhow, Dad and Michelle were trying, I'll give them that. But it's hard to find the perfect family activity for everybody, and afterwards we went back to Michelle's house and she made dinner, and that was, well, a horror story all its own. You might have heard of this, but back then I hadn't: there's this Italian spaghetti dish that's called pesto, which has to be the number one most rotten food ever devised by a human being, Italian or otherwise. It's made out of basil leaves, which stink to high heaven to begin with, and enough garlic to bury a mastodon, and then you throw in nuts and about a pound of cheese—really!—and one bite of this stuff put me off Italian food for the rest of my life. Meanwhile Matthew, sitting next to me in the dining room, was shoveling this stuff in like a football team in training. There was no stopping him. You've got to imagine this little blond nursery

school kid with green pasta coming out of his mouth, which he never exactly closed while he was chewing, eating like there was no tomorrow, while civilized people like me were only pretending to eat by chewing on bread and staring up at the ceiling and hoping no one would notice a non-shrinking pile of green glop on my plate. Nobody said anything about my not liking it, probably because nobody could take their eyes off Matthew who ate about ten pounds of the stuff. It was like watching a reality show on TV: America's Biggest Eaters.

Any wonder that after that I started calling him little Pesto? Of course, he was also a pest, period, but that was just the icing on the cake. Or the cheese on the spaghetti. Whatever.

The whole day out at the amusement park followed by the home cooked dinner was just the beginning. Dad and Michelle the dentist acted like they were really pulling one over on the little people, but they never fooled me for a minute, and probably not little Pesto either. They were up to no good, from my point of view. And there wasn't much I could do about it.

It's not like Dad hadn't gone out with a few women now and then in the last couple of years. He tried to be really cool about it in front of me and pretend it wasn't happening, but Grandma would turn up and then Dad would casually head out at night for reasons that were never terrifically explained, and this would happen regularly for a few weeks, and then it would stop and we'd be back to normal. But Michelle was the first person he didn't pretend he wasn't going out with, if you know what I mean. He was seeing her, and as you can tell, before long I was seeing her too. I guess you could throw into this that little Pesto was also seeing Dad, and that little Pesto and I were also seeing

each other—a lot of good that did, but I don't think that little Pesto or I were big factors in the whole business. Dad and Michelle were doing their thing, and whatever it was, short of our murdering them in the night like pirates with daggers in our teeth and patches over our eyes, little Pesto and I were going to be stuck with the results.

So what does any of this have to do with haunted houses? Well, I know you want to hear what happened that summer, since that's the whole point of my telling you this story, but I don't think you can appreciate it unless you know everybody involved pretty well before it all gets started. If I'm wrong about that, you can skip ahead, but I wouldn't recommend it. I'm a pretty thorough writer, I think, and although I may not be a Charles Dickens, I know that you've got to start at the beginning before you go to the middle. This is the beginning. I'm sorry about that, but we're stuck with it, you and me both.

Anyhow, my dad, who I've said nothing about except that he's my dad, is what I like to think of as an average kind of guy. He's not big and he's not small, but he is in pretty good shape because he runs almost every morning. He's got brown hair, like I do, and as far as I can tell, he's a pretty good dresser. He used to work for a big law firm in New York City, but after Mom died he started a family law practice not far from our condo because he said he didn't want to go off for hour after hour leaving me alone to fend for myself. He tends to wear sporty suits that make him look like he should be the star of some sort of detective show set in Miami or Los Angeles or some place jazzy like that. Sporty suits for a sporty guy, if you know what I mean. The important thing is, he's a nice guy. He and I were always pretty close, and I guess with Mom gone, that's sort of to be expected. He always liked to say that all we had was each other, except of course we also had Grandma, plus some aunts and uncles and my other grandparents and so

forth and so on, but I knew what he meant. We were a pretty good team together. We were a better team with Mom, but we were still good, and since Mom wasn't coming back, well, we were the team we had to work with. The core team. Everybody else was benchwarmers and the B team.

As for Michelle, aside from the fact that she was my dentist. I can't say that I started out knowing too much about her. I mean, she *looked* like a good fit for Dad, since she was also sort of average size and shape, and also a runner, and also sort of sporty looking, so I can't fault her for any of that. But getting together is based on more than just looks, if you know what I mean. Just because Dad and Michelle looked good enough together didn't mean that they were supposed to actually *be* together. There's plenty of famous people out there who look good together and the next thing you know they're on the front pages of the newspapers because they're getting divorced and they're cutting their kids in half so that they can share them better and so forth and so on. Looking good only goes so far, in other words. And looking good was only as far as I got with Michelle.

You've got to consider the whole picture with her. First of all, as I say, she was a dentist. Now, I've got nothing against dentists in general, because somebody's got to do it, and the world would be a lesser place if we all had rotten teeth all of the time. I understand that. But why had she become a dentist in the first place? It wasn't as if she came from a long line of dentists or something and she was taking up the family business. That I could understand. But she was a dentist because, out of all the things she could have been, she decided that capital D Dentist was the number one pick. Now, unless you're a dentist yourself, I guess, you've got to think that that is an odd choice. It's not like you can just wake up a dentist some day. You've got to go to dentistry school for a

bunch of years, so you've got to decide when you're a kid that you want to be a dentist so that you can get into that dentistry school in the first place. And I ask you, what kind of kid do you know that decides, as a kid, to become a dentist so they can get into dentistry school? Trust me. I know a lot of kids. Not one of them wants to be a dentist, not even the weird ones. Everybody wants to be either a game designer or a musician or maybe one or two serious things like doctor or a teacher or a veterinarian, but at least in the circles I travel in, which, I'll grant you, have been limited so far up to and including sixth grade, the kid raising his hand on career day and saying "I want to be a dentist" hasn't been heard from yet.

There were other things about Michelle, too. Obviously there was little Pesto. She treated him like the Prince of Persia or something, but trust me, little Pesto was no prince. He wasn't exactly evil or anything—quite the opposite actually, which we'll get into later—but he wasn't what you would call a ball of fire either. Whenever we were together he would follow me around like a dog or something, which, as I said, I'm allergic to, and maybe I was sort of allergic to little Pesto as well, except without the sneezing. But as far as Michelle was concerned it was Matthew this and Matthew that, and the idea that he and I might not be made for each other just didn't occur to her.

The thing is, I just couldn't trust someone who could be the mother of little Pesto. If you were capable of doing that, who knew what else you had up your sleeve? Plus, I have to admit it, I was not taken with the idea of Bruce the ex-husband. In my life, there haven't been a lot of ex-husbands. I mean, obviously there aren't a lot of *any* kind of husbands in sixth grade, but the parents of my friends were, for the most part, intact. There were no exes lurking around that I knew of. Of course, I only knew the parents of a

couple of my friends, but if there were all kinds of divorces and marriages and stuff going on, you have to think that I would have been aware of it, and as far as I knew, there was nothing. Plus, in our family, the Norths, there had never been a divorce since forever, as far as I knew. The Norths were like the truest bluest married people you would ever want to meet. People who were married and weren't true and blue were something I didn't have much experience with. I'm sorry, but that's just the way it was.

Anyhow, I saw pretty early on what was happening between Dad and Michelle, and before long he started dropping hints and asking me questions, saying whenever something didn't go the way it was supposed to that what we needed around the house was a woman's touch, or asking me if I'd ever wanted a bigger family, stuff like that. Not very subtle for a guy who was normally pretty suave, but you know what they say: once you fall into the hands of a dentist, you're lost.

All right. Nobody actually says that. But they would, if they had thought of it first. Trust me on that.

This whole dating thing, and then trying to mix and match everybody with what I guess you would call extended family events, went on for quite some time, and I have to admit that after a while I sort of got used to it. Nothing much more seemed to be happening, and maybe once a week I had to put up with Michelle and little Pesto for a couple of hours, but never anything other than that, and Dad seemed to be enjoying himself, so if that's the way it was going to be, I could put up with it for his sake. I mean, he deserved to enjoy himself once in a while, if he didn't take it too seriously. In other words, I was lulled into this false sense of security until he dropped the bomb, which if I had had any sense at all, I would have seen coming a mile away.

He and I were home that night, eating Chinese takeout. Moo shu pork, shrimp fried rice and beef with string beans. I remember it specifically not so much because I have this photographic memory or something, but because those are my three favorite Chinese foods, and we tended to always have them whenever we ordered takeout. We were sitting at the dining room table, and it was snowing outside, and we had been talking about the possibility that they would call off school the next day, which seemed pretty likely to me. If it even *looked* like snow around here they usually called off school, because the last thing the schools wanted was for a busload of kids to get buried under a snowdrift or something.

As we sat back after dinner, with the food containers pretty much empty, my dad gave me this funny look. "I've got a question for you," he said.

"Shoot," I replied. My belly was full of my favorites, so I was ready for anything.

"What do you think about Michelle?" he asked.

This should have set off alarms in my head, but somehow I missed the obvious. "She's okay," I said. I mean, what *could* I say? He obviously liked her. I knew that. Could I tell him that she was a born dentist, and therefore totally suspect?

"Just okay?" he asked.

I started to put things together when he said that. I sat up. "Yeah," I repeated. "Okay."

"More than okay?"

"She's..." I struggled for the right word. "She's fine. Michelle is fine."

He gave me a look that was even funnier than the first look, except of course it wasn't all that funny. Not funny ha ha, anyhow. "Well, I think she's more than just okay," he said.

Uh-oh.

"In fact," he went on, "I think she's pretty special."

By now I figured I knew where this was going, but I wasn't going to say anything, just in case. I mean, maybe I was wrong, and I didn't want to jinx it. Saying what was in my mind, if I was wrong, might put it into *his* mind, and whatever I was wrong about would turn out *not* to be wrong after all, because the thing I wanted least was the thing that I had planted in his mind, and it would be better if I just kept my mouth shut completely. You know what I'm saying?

It didn't work.

"Michelle and I are thinking of getting married," he said. He spoke quickly, as if he was afraid that if he didn't say it all at once he might not say it at all. "If that's all right with you," he added. "And with Matthew," he also added, although since little Pesto wasn't there at the moment, throwing him into the conversation seemed pretty unnecessary. This was between me and Dad.

I didn't know what to say. Normally I'm not a speechless kind of guy, and I knew that that was where he had been heading with the conversation, but when he actually said it, clear as day, I felt a real physical reaction, like a cold shiver going slowly from the top of my head all the way down to the bottom of my toes. If you don't believe that words can do that, have someone say something really shocking to you, even if it's not that

great a surprise, and see what happens. If you don't shiver like I did at that moment, then whatever they said to you wasn't all that shocking in the first place.

Dad waited a minute or two, and when he realized that I wasn't going to say anything, he dug in himself. "I think it would be pretty cool. Don't you? We'd have a family again. We'd *be* a family again."

I started thinking back to all the times when he had said that what the two of us had was each other, how we were the core and all that, but I kept it to myself. Being a kid doesn't mean you're totally ignorant. I had a pretty good idea that if he wanted to marry Michelle, there wasn't going to be much that I could do about it.

So I said, very noncommittal, "That would be okay."

And you would have thought that I had just set off a bunch of fireworks during the Fourth of July parade or something. He was nodding his head like it was falling off, and smiling, and as happy as I had ever seen him. "You'd like that. It would be great, wouldn't it?"

We had gone from okay to liking it to it being great in about three seconds flat, with no help from me whatsoever. I could have been asleep in my room and Dad could have had just a life-sized picture of me at the table and gotten about the same results. But it didn't matter. Obviously.

The thing is, I really liked Dad. I loved him. He was my dad. This was obviously going to make him happy. How unhappy could it possibly make me at the same time?

"It *would* be great," I said to him. And maybe, for a second, I really believed it. It would be great.

But it wouldn't be great. Deep down inside I could tell. And there was nothing, absolutely nothing, that I could do about it.