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Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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Abstract

Sandy Moore stood in front of Boom 41-D. Her palms were moist, and her mouth felt like she'd just awakened from an all-night binge.

Keywords

Mythellany; Mythopoeic; Fiction; Fear In Room 41-D; Diane Webster

FEAR IN ROOM 41-D

Diane Webster

Sandy Moore stood in front of Room 41-D. Her palms were moist, and her mouth felt like she'd just awakened from an all-night binge. She hadn't wanted this assignment, but Larry had said it would make a good human interest story. Sandy thought it was a hoax. After all, Fear was an emotion. It wasn't human, but still -- Oh, well, a story was a story. Sandy straightened her back and knocked on the door.

"Come in," sang a sweet, almost grandmotherly voice.

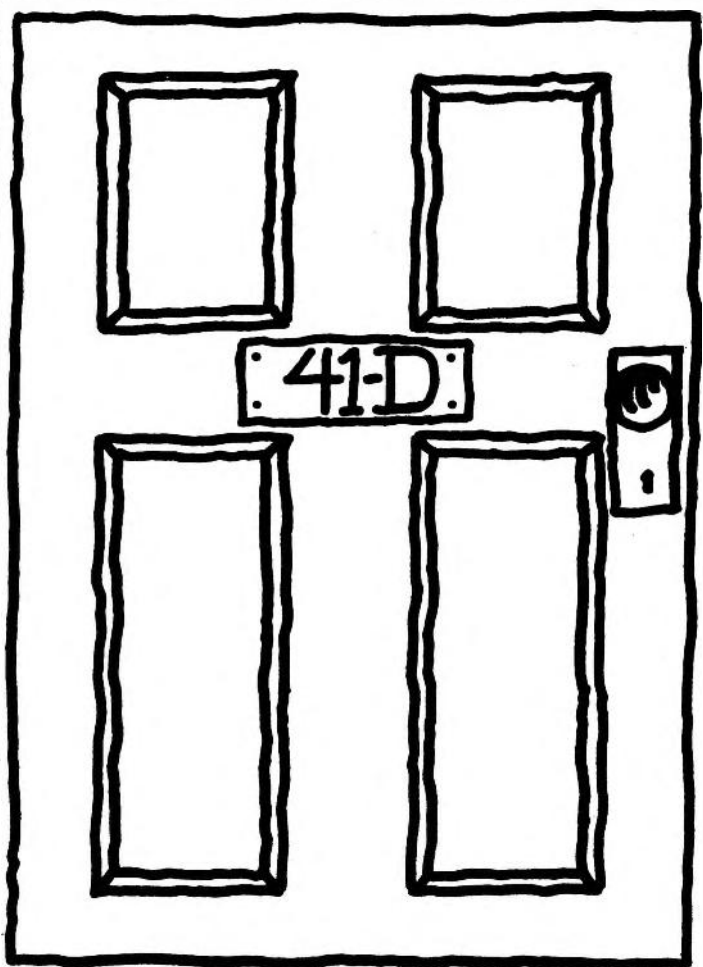
Funny. Sandy did not picture a grandmother when she thought of Fear, yet, Little Red Riding Hood and The Big Bad Wolf popped into her mind. The wolf in grandmother's clothing. Maybe it was a man, and he was only trying to sound like a woman to throw her off guard. Maybe -- Here you go again, Sandy. Letting your imagination lead. Get a hold of yourself. This isn't a horror show.

Sandy spread a smile on her face and opened the door. The room had the warmth and coziness of a room heated by a fireplace, but a cold shiver pricked Sandy's neck when she saw the massive screen looming in the corner. Before it sat a battered easy chair and a small round table with a pitcher and a paper cup. Waiting for her. A picture hung crooked on a faded wall.

"I'm so glad you came," said the same sweet voice from behind the screen. "Come in. Come in. It's quite all right. I won't harm you. This lead screen will shield you from any powers I might have. Please. Sit down. The chair is very comfortable."

Curiosity began to weave its tentacles through Sandy's mind. What does Fear look like? Can it even be seen or would it be like Medusa and too horrible to look at? What am I doing? This isn't real. I have a job to do, and I had better concentrate on that, even if it is with a crazy man. Sandy shook her head as if that simple act would shake her thoughts out of her mind.

"This is my first interview you know," spoke Fear. "Most people don't seek me out, but I suppose I know why. I have a very bad reputation."



"Well, you must admit the feeling you give people is not a pleasant sensation," said Sandy. "Why do you want to give this interview?" Sandy's pen was poised over her writing pad, but Fear didn't answer. "Did you hear my question?" Still no response. Sandy looked at the screen. I wonder what's really behind it, she thought. Probably some little old man who gets his kicks by calling the papers and then holding these phony interviews. He'll probably play me along and then jump out at me from behind the screen. I have half a mind to go over there right now and spoil his game. Oh, well, maybe this could turn out to be fun after all.

"Okay. I guess you don't want to answer that question." Sandy knew he didn't have an answer.

"Let's try another. Do you enjoy scaring people?"

"Do you really believe I go out of my way to scare people?"

"Don't you?"

"Not in the least, deary. You people call me. Let's say you're walking down a lonely street at night. What are you thinking about? The terrific evening you had with your boyfriend? Maybe, but more likely you're thinking about what could jump at you from around the next corner or who could be sneaking up from behind. Only then do I show up. Sometimes I think you enjoy a good scare."

'All the better to see you with, my dear,' thought Sandy, but she said, "I suppose sometimes we do. Horror shows do seem to be drawing large audiences these days."

"Oh, good. I'm glad you agree with me. I can

see we're going to get along nicely. Can I tell you something, Sandy?"

Oh, here it comes. The big clincher. What a disappointment. I thought he'd carry it longer than this. "Of course."

"I have been told that I am somewhat of a practical joker," and Fear laughed a high, almost screeching laugh. "I love to see people run. The park at night is my favorite place. You should go there sometime, Sandy. It has such large trees which are excellent for hiding behind, and the bushes are easy to rustle. It has high benches I can hide under, too. You should see people running and screaming after I've grabbed their ankles under the bench. It's a delightful sight! And the sounds they make are like classical music to my ears."

Oh, God, he sounds like a rapist. Sandy reached in her purse and found the little leather pouch holding her mace spray. She laid it on top so she could get at it faster if she had to.

Fear continued talking. "One time I was hiding under my favorite bench when a little girl sat down. She was quite alone, and she had been crying. I figured she had either run away from home or had lost her parents. She was such a sweet little girl. So small, so vulnerable. I wanted to comfort her so I put my hand on her arm. I thought her heart was going to leap from her chest. She started to cry and call for her Mommy. Something deep inside of me stirred. I felt myself primed for the pounce. I wanted to scare that little girl with all my heart, but a policeman walked by and took the little girl away. I was frustrated! I was angry! I followed the policeman, but he was too busy comforting the little girl and paid no attention to me."

During the last outburst, Fear's--or whoever's--voice had changed. It was definitely male now, a powerful, awesome man! And it filled the room. Sandy wondered if it was such a good idea to stay. This wasn't turning out to be much fun. She glanced at the door. Why did it seem so far away?

"I think I have enough information now," she said. "I want to thank you for your time, and --"

"But we only got started, deary." Again the grandmother voice.

Sandy started to get up. "Really. I think I have enough."

"You're getting upset, aren't you? I'm sorry. Please. Try to relax. I won't harm you. I'm just trying to provide you with some good information. I guess I got carried away, didn't I? Maybe you'd like a drink of water?"

"No, no. I'm fine."

"Well, try to relax. You're making me nervous."

Sandy sat down and pulled the mace out of her purse. If anybody jumped out from behind that screen, they were going to get a surprise themselves. The screen towered in front of her. It seemed to throw a shadow that was sapping her willpower, and the room was getting colder. Sandy wanted to escape. She didn't know why she was sitting there. Maybe she wanted to get a good story. Maybe she didn't want to provoke whoever was there. After she got out of here, she'd have that drink. Or two drinks. But it wouldn't be water.

"My ultimate goal in life is to find a fearless

person," continued Fear. "I'm not sure how I would react to that, but it would be an excellent challenge. I enjoy a challenge every once in a while, don't you, Sandy? It breaks the monotony."

Fear didn't wait for Sandy to answer. "One challenging case comes to mind. I remember it quite well. A teenage boy was trying to commit suicide by jumping off the East River Bridge. He was so young, and I figured if he could just have another chance at life, he'd make it. So I set out to scare him from committing suicide. I know what you're thinking. You're probably thinking I never do any good; but I do, Sandy. I'm not everything people say I am. I hope your story will reflect that."

"I'll do the best I can."

"I'm sure you will, Sandy. You're a beautiful woman, and beautiful women have a certain sensitivity, a certain empathy for others."

What's that supposed to mean, thought Sandy.

"Well, back to my story. I told the boy he wouldn't die instantly. The fall certainly wouldn't kill anyone and he would probably still be conscious when he hit the water. So if he wanted to drown, he'd have to work at it. I told him he might do only half the job. Someone might see him and rescue him, but before they could revive him his brain would have gone too long without oxygen and he'd end up a vegetable.

"I know. All of these are gruesome thoughts, but I saved the boy's life. He hasn't thought of suicide since. I check up on him once in a while and he's doing fine. You might even know him. He's the star athlete at the High School. People say he could play professionally if he chooses. And all because of me. So, you see, Sandy, I do do some good."

"I'm sure you do." This is stupid. Here I am, pointing a little can of mace at a lead screen. I must really look stupid. Well, I've had it. I'm getting out of here. Whoever or whatever is behind that screen is a little bit more crazy than I care for.

"What's that?" whispered the voice from behind the screen.

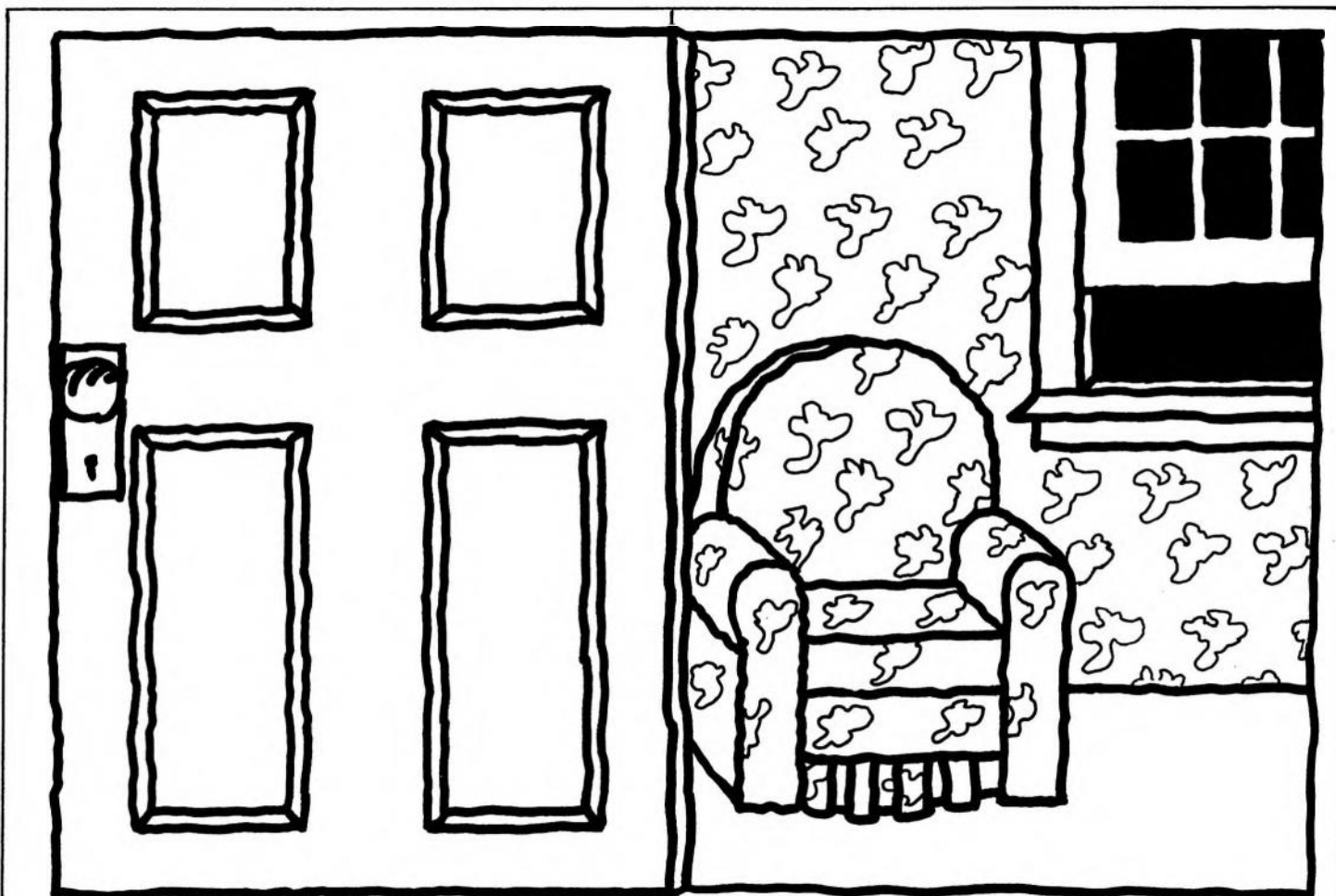
"What's what?" asked Sandy as she looked around the room, hoping she wouldn't see anything, yet also hoping she would.

"Why, it's your heartbeat, Sandy! Oh, what a beautiful sound! I could live on that wild beat. It's as beautiful as you are. And your body. Oh, Sandy you're beginning to tremble. What a feeling! What a feeling! What's the matter? Is something wrong? You're beginning to perspire. Would you like me to open the window?"

Before Sandy could say anything, the window slammed open.

"There. Feel that nice, cool breeze whisper over your skin. It will be night soon. Oh, do try to relax, Sandy. You're making me very nervous. With night coming on, you're making it very difficult for me to control myself."

Oh, God, what have I got myself into now! I should never have come. When I get back to the office, I'm going to tell Larry where he can put this stupid human interest story. Sandy stood and tried to sound calm. "I don't know who you are, but this isn't funny anymore. I'm leaving."



"Leaving? But you just got here, Sandy. I haven't told you everything yet."

"I've heard enough."

"Please. Sit down. I'm almost done."

It could be the breeze from the window. It had to be the breeze from the window, but whatever it was it felt like someone was caressing Sandy's arms.

"Why, your heart is almost ready to burst.

What a fabulous sound! But, please, don't be afraid. I won't harm you. It's not dark yet so I am still very weak. Please, don't be so nervous or I may be forced to do something you will regret."

Sandy felt an icy touch on her arm. She could stand it no longer. She sprinted for the door.

"Oh, that did it, didn't it? Yes, run for the door, but you'll find it locked. I locked it after you came in. Oh, don't look so scared. It won't be long now. Just give me a few more minutes. Then I'll show you a real good time."

"This isn't funny!"

"It isn't meant to be."

"Open this door. This has gone on long enough."

The room was very quiet now. Sandy strained her ears for any sound that might come from behind the screen, but there was nothing.

"You'd better unlock this door." Still no response. Still no sound. Damn it! This character is making me mad. Sandy kept the mace held in front of her as she crept toward the screen. She rested a hand on it to steady herself, but jerked her hand back. The screen was as cold as dry ice.

Laughter erupted inside the room. Sandy dashed

behind the screen, but no one was there. The laughter grew louder. Something touched Sandy's leg. She ran to the door and began pounding on it.

"Let me out! Let me out!"

"You can't escape, Sandy."

Sandy grabbed the water pitcher and hurled it at the screen. It shattered in a splintering explosion. Never before had she noticed the room being so sparsely furnished. In desperation she tore the picture from the wall and flung it at the screen. Frisbee-like, it lumbered through the air, then plopped harmlessly on the floor.

"Oh, yes! Throw things. Throw things! It will be much more interesting if you struggle. But you can't win, Sandy. I have you trapped, and it's almost night."

I have to get out! I have to get out! echoed in Sandy's mind. The open window! Yes! It's my only chance.

Before Sandy could reach it, the window banged shut. The lead screen slammed against it. Sandy glued her back to the wall. Her eyes darted wildly about the room.

"What do you want?" she screamed.

The door swung open. Sandy braced herself for whatever she was about to see. But nothing or no one came. She glanced quickly around the room and dashed for freedom. Just as she reached the door she was goosed from behind. She didn't bother to look. She ran. She ran as fast as she could, but the laughter followed her. Uncontrollable, tear-wrenching, rolling-on-the-floor laughter. ●