

ALL I KNEW ABOUT GHOSTS

By Maria Starr

On my grandmother's riverfront farm, which was, in its very earliest days, a plantation, there is a graveyard, surrounded by an ancient, black, elegant, rotting, and rusted wrought-iron gate. Growing up, I didn't much visit the graveyard, which was filled with gravestones and boring names (Smith, Jones) of fine-old families that had owned the farm before Gran. But I liked to imagine the inhabitants as I walked by from the relative safety of a distant cornfield: the fine gentlemen and ladies in the soil below, all dressed in their Sunday best, aiming to put their best foot forward into the next world, or leave their best foot behind in the old world, whichever perspective you prefer. When I had moved us, me and my little family, from Baltimore back to the little town where Gran and most of my family had lived since eternity, I did not visit the graveyard any more frequently, nor did my husband, who was not much interested in the ancient anyway. We were too busy building a new life for our kids in the pristine rural stillness of the town; it was our retreat, back to the cleanliness and vast, eternal blue skies of the open country. I pitied those who couldn't feel it.

I guess I should preface the remainder of my tale with the caveat that, in retrospect, what happened was not entirely unexpected. I was a bit run down from our move, carrying obsolete notes and yellow stick-ems around in my purse until it was more a heavy, disorganized storage unit for confetti and memories of week-old tasks (call the contractor today!) than a purse. And my hair was a little messy- I hadn't yet found a hair stylist I trusted in town to replace my tried-and-true highlighter from Baltimore (Sven), so I had let the roots grow out and the ends go split. And I was a bit obsessed by stove burners (had they been turned off?) and locks and doors and keys-had we truly locked the back door before we settled in for the night? Check once, maybe twice. The door handle could come off in your hand from so much stress testing. Local folk didn't bother to lock doors.

So maybe I was not completely unaware on some level about what was going to happen before it happened. Maybe I half expected it. But lest you think me completely complicit in the arrival of the ghost, I was not. When the ghost came to visit us, I didn't fling the back door wide open to let it in. But I might have left the back door unlocked.

We had been living in our new house for about two months. The move was mainly my idea, although my husband kept offering helpful suggestions and coos of appreciation- "Look at these old pine floors!" - to indicate that he was on board with the idea. The truth is, he would have gone wherever I did. He is a physics professor, and most of his mental and emotional life is spent in the realm of the equations. He viewed himself as in no position to object to my ideas about where we should live. But I also think he agreed with me that a return to the country wouldn't be a bad idea. My job (marketing) and his job in Baltimore had made family time virtually nonexistent over the past few months. So, when we sold our house in an affluent section of the city, we had some money left over, and I didn't need to work right away. He was decorated and accomplished, and he had no trouble immediately landing a job as a physics professor at the local college. We were moving back to the country in search of a better life. And the house itself was beautiful-empty, old, airy, and drafty. A big wide-frame farmhouse on ten acres of cornfields and forest. We both loved old houses, and we both loved fixer-uppers. Mostly, we just loved to be working on projects, observing the slow evolution of works in progress.

We had moved to the outskirts of a small town on Maryland's Eastern Shore, a town that I will call Stop, for want of a better name. This isn't the town's real name, but my husband is concerned about how this

story might affect real estate values, so I have agreed not to use the town's real name. It was a pretty little town, with old brick sidewalks, soft and fuzzy as peachskin, lining a historic district. Canons and courthouses, old-fashioned drugstores. That sort of thing. A shitty little street called Milltown for the poor people that most people avoided if they could.

As I may have mentioned previously, the town welcomed us with open arms. We had two pretty kids, and we were young and hardworking, coming to restore the old Parker palace and bringing with us a certain amount of big-city panache. There were cakes and gifts left as housewarming gifts on the back stoop, invitations to a couple of cocktail parties. My light coloring and fine features made a nice contrast against my husband's dark, mildly exotic features. When my husband isn't cultivating his mad scientist look, his solid build makes him look something like a football player, a fact on which the pretty moms in town quickly picked up. They were always bending low over their carts in the parking lots of Ames or Roses, just off Rural Route 775, to show him the pretty tops of their thighs underneath their short denim shorts, as they unloaded merchandise into minivans. They were young moms mostly, balancing a baby on both hips and struggling with bags, but still finding the time to bend real low for my husband. Being a daft scientist, my husband mostly didn't notice.

Oh. Here is my daft husband, and despite his daftness, he has the presence of mind to say he also doesn't want me using our real names in this account. He's afraid, I think, that we will become freaks, notorious phenomena unable to find lodging or purchase real estate. The real estate thing again. Fine.

I'll make up names to describe the people too, then. My husband I will call Mark Lark, my daughter will be Shark, and my son, best, beautiful son, will become Dark, because he inherited his father's dark eyes and hair. I always wanted my daughter to get them, as well as his thick, curled eyelashes, and I always wanted to be darkly beautiful myself. But Shark is blonde and fizzy like me. Some people are just meant to be pretty little creatures and skate along the surface of things. Blonde and light green-eyed. Pretty and golden, not deep and dark. A surface creature, through and through. Skate, skate.

But I will tell you my own first name. This much I can do, at least. I was named after my father, Winthrop, though people predictably call me Winnie. A fine old Episcopalian name hailing from a fading, under-appreciated people associated with straight backs and good brown oxfords. My name combined with my husband's name (not really Lark, of course) becomes something sing-songey, absurd and even rhymey. There, I have left the door open just a crack.

What turns a person into a ghost? I have asked myself this question many times since last fall, but I haven't arrived at any definitive conclusion, the single solution, as it were. Millions of people die every year, and most of them depart without a backward glance, I think. But some linger on to re trouble us with their troubles.

But what about the shades of people you liked or even loved, the ghosts you wish had stayed on? Both my grandfathers, for instance. I thought I saw one of them squeaking, jibbering and butting up against the ceiling of an upstairs hall near his bedroom like a helium-filled balloon in the days just after he had died, and the next morning I saw him on the kitchen table as a parrot, playing cards with Gran the way he always did (he held the cards in one talon and balanced with the other). But then he left. And my other grandfather – I think he stayed in purgatory for about six weeks after he died and visited me in dreams every night for those six weeks. But then after six weeks in purgatory (his sins were relatively minor), he, too, left and I was alone again.

As I said, we had been living in the house for about two months, and, other than being personally a little run down, I thought things were going relatively o.k. Then one bright Thursday morning, I was alone after Mark, Shark and Dark had all departed for their respective destinations (the college for Mark, the

elementary school for the kids). I was sweeping the luminous old pine floor of the big back bedroom on the third floor, and I noticed an inky black stain covering about two feet of the floor and two feet up both walls in the southeast corner of the room, and right away I knew something was going to happen. I'm not sure why I knew this, it just came to me like one of those premonitions that lodge in your heart at certain times. Like when you hear a sad story, and you say, "That will happen to me one day, too."

I looked at the stain, debating whether to even try to use Windex or maybe dishwashing soap on it. Instead, I walked out of the cold, empty room in our chilly, drafty house and closed the door behind me. I didn't say anything about it to Mark and the kids that night, and we had a nice fire in the worn brick fireplace. I felt snug and toasty in our little circle of light, as the wind battered and roared through the empty husks of the October cornfields outside. The dark oaks and pines in the forest beyond the fields looked far away; the night sky was inky and opaque, but sprinkled with frozen, distant stars.

The next day she was waiting for me. No inky black stain, but instead a lady, dressed in what appeared to be a black, musty long dress at least a century old. She was sitting in the corner of the room where the stain had been.

She nodded politely. I wasn't scared, although maybe I should have been; it all seemed normal to me, like in a dream.

"You were expecting me?" she asked. It was a light voice, a young lady's voice.

"Well, maybe I was, just a little. Something. I couldn't be sure."

But then suddenly, I felt sick. I knew who she was. My cousins and distant relatives in Stop (a subset that sometimes seemed to encompass the whole town) had sometimes talked about the ghost – she was even mentioned in a local tourism book – although with the passing of the older generations who knew the story, the talk had faded. I hadn't thought about her in years.

She was a little bit notorious, my ghost, a young lady who had fallen from her horse one night trying to elope with her lover. The rock on which she hit her head still bore traces of her blood. I had seen it once in some great-uncle's backyard.

By the next night I was trying to convince myself that she was an apparition, that the stress of the move was wearing me down. So I decided to take Mark and the children upstairs to dispel my visions and fears. I used the pretext that I wanted to show them how much progress I had made on the room. They clomped up the stairs dutifully behind me and saw her at once, sitting in the same position as when I had closed the door on her the night before.

"Oh, it's a lady," said Dark, and took a step back. He was still a little intimidated by women.

"A very pretty lady," said my ever-gregarious, surface creature Shark, and took a step forward. I think she even bobbed downward in an approximation of a curtsy (!), something she and Dark may have seen on History Channel.

"Winnie?" Mark turned to me. "I didn't know we had a visitor. And in fact," he muttered, turning around, "I don't think you've made any progress at all in this room?"

"She's not a visitor, she's a ghost," I hissed furiously in his ear. Christ, what was happening? She was supposed to have disappeared by now, my apparition, supposed to have vaporized like steam when exposed to the cold scrutiny of other peoples' gazes.

"What did you say, Mom?" Shark piped up.

"Yes, what indeed, Winnie?" the apparition echoed. "Perhaps you'd like to share with the group?" Probably a teacher or a counselor in her former life.

I took a deep breath.

"I said, you're not a visitor, you're a ghost."

She gazed at me mournfully. The group was silent. Finally, one member ventured an opinion. Shark, of course.

“She doesn’t look like a ghost. She looks like a lady.” Shark paused for a second. “A very beautiful lady.”

Shark smiled winningly and the spirit smiled back. I knew Shark wanted to stroke the ghost’s hair – all the girls in Shark’s second grade class were at that stage where they were forever braiding and playing with each other’s hair, and Shark had a thing for brunettes. The lady’s hair was a deep chocolate brown. Her skin was richly pale, and her eyes were a vacant, powdery blue. It was easy to see that she had been a luscious beauty in her day, but her lips and mouth had a certain grim cast to them now.

“Here, here!” Mark chimed in. “Very pretty, indeed!” A-ha, he had decided the problem was mine, that I was being rude to a real visitor.

“I don’t think we’ve been introduced,” he continued, thrusting out his right hand. “Mark Lark, we’ve just moved here from Baltimore. I teach physics at the college.”

She smiled at him and nodded, saying “Pleased to make your acquaintance,” in her lilting voice. Then she reached out her hand graciously, stopping just short of touching him, and disappeared. Just vanished right into thin air. The slick black oil patch reappeared in the corner of the empty room, oozing about two feet up the walls like mold. The group stood dumbfounded, mouths open in shock, and, if I am to be perfectly honest, slight disappointment, though I think this feeling was a distant second to the roar of confusion in their brains. It certainly was in mine.

The kids looked at me once, then began to wander around the room as if in a nervous daze, maybe looking for her.

Mark seemed less stunned. “It wasn’t cold near her hand,” he said, looking directly at me. “Winnie?” I didn’t know what to think. So I resorted to my tried-and-true method in times of confusion, which was to boss everyone around.

“Come on, kids, it’s late,” I half-shouted. “Time to get ready for bed. Has everyone had their baths? That includes you, too, Mark” – he shot me a look – “I’m sure Daddy still has preparation to do before tomorrow’s class even if he has already had his bath.”

By this time, they were all gazing up at me with wounded, dazed eyes, and they allowed themselves to be herded back down the stairs and nudged back into their normal routines, even Mark. He disappeared into his study and didn’t reemerge for four hours, by which time I had the kids washed, in bed and hopefully asleep. God knows they were exhausted enough. When Mark climbed into our bed beside me around midnight, I had the lights out and was pretending to sleep. Mercifully, the day was over. We would worry about it all later.

“Maybe she’s a sea coyote,” Shark offered helpfully the next morning.

“There’s no such thing as a sea coyote,” I said. I didn’t bother to ask what a sea coyote was; I knew she would tell me.

Mark had departed in his Land Rover for the college about a half hour before, and I was trying to do three things at once: pack Shark’s lunch, find Dark’s parka, which had mysteriously disappeared, and replace the kibble in the cats’ bowl; it had arched all over the kitchen floor in a dazzling trajectory when Dark accidentally (he said) stepped in it. Also, let the dogs out. Let the dogs in. Try to get the kids down to the end of our dusty lane in time to meet the school bus. Try to think about the latest equation Mark was working on – he sometimes took mild pity on my lack of intellectual stimulation and shared the equations

with me. Maybe I'd study to be a teacher when I had finished settling us in this town and working on the house.

"Sure, there is," said Shark. "Sea coyotes are regular coyotes that an evil witch has made swim in the water forever because they didn't finish their chores. They look like people, but they're really coyotes." She paused for a second. "I'm a sea coyote."

Hmm. What books had her class been reading? Was I a witch? And which chores had she missed? What was she trying to tell me? I had exposed my little girl to a ghost and now her thoughts were garbled. But I didn't have time to waste on contemplation just then.

"Come on then, you little sea coyote. Grab your lunch and knapsack and load them into the car." She put on her little pink parka with the polyester fur-trimmed hood. I had worried that the funky little jacket might not be cool here, but, of course, I needn't have worried, Shark was a hit, popular almost immediately and whatever she wore was cool, too, with the fickle little second graders. Other girls would softly stroke the fur around her hood in admiration, she told me proudly. She graciously allowed all of them a feel – a regal, generous and, for the most part, indiscriminating queen. I overheard her tell new-best-friend Rebecca that the fur was "minx" and very expensive, but that she thought she could get some for just Rebecca (don't tell Brooke or Zoe!) back in Baltimore.

Yes, I needn't have worried. Shark, her protestations to being a sea coyote notwithstanding, was strictly a surface animal, like me. We all have our fates to bear, and I had passed this one on to my daughter. Dark was more complex, but he usually adjusted in the end. I loaded him into the car, too, and drove down to the end of the lane, just in time to catch the departing school bus, which graciously backed up on gravelly Rural Route 775 to swallow up my kids. The glass doors buckled shut behind them, and they were gone for the day.

For a space of days after that, as if by tacit agreement, none of us spoke of the ghost. As far as I know, no one ventured up to the third floor, although sometimes I caught Shark sneaking furtive glances in the direction of the stairs. We didn't really know what to do. It was as if the idyllic mood I had been trying to create for my family by this move had been severely challenged and nothing had yet emerged to take its place. What had happened to us? Had it really happened? Mark began to spend more time at the college, the kids became slightly rude, a little inconsiderate at times, and I got tense, walking around with deep furrows developing between my brows and checking all the locks in the house and the burners on the stove at least seven or eight times a day now. We seemed to receive fewer invitations to parties, although maybe I was imagining it. We were the same and yet different. This went on for about five weeks.

Then, the holding pattern broke. It was Esmerelda herself, as we came to know her, who broke the pattern by floating lightly down the stairs one morning after I had dumped the kids off. I nearly jumped out of my skin when she spoke, even though I had seen her as soon as she passed the first-floor landing, the edge of her black, shimmery dress brushing dust off the tops of the stairs as she deliberately descended. Here she was again. She asked if I needed her help.

"How can you help me?" I replied bitterly. "You're a spirit. Can you move things? Take out the trash? Paint a wall? Call the contractors or refinish a floor? Feed the dogs? Drive my kids to school? Scoop cat shit out of the litter box every morning?" This last was a little nasty, but I was feeling besieged. Everything seemed, figuratively, on the verge of turning to shit.

To her credit, she didn't wince.

"No, but you seem distracted and I would like to help. There are other things I can do. For instance, I know things, like the solution to Mark's latest equation or where the children are right now, or what the

teachers think of Dark (he's very bright, you know). I know that Shark gave away some fur as a mark of eternal friendship. I also know the price of all the construction you will need on the house this year, which might help with budgeting."

I considered her proposal. She was basically offering to serve as some sort of personal assistant spirit, and, to her credit, she didn't speak in the kind of stilted language I associated with creatures from previous centuries. Given the constraints of the admittedly bizarre situation, she seemed cool and nice. And I could use a personal assistant. Also, anything was better than the edgy emotional siege we had been living under for the past weeks. I would have given almost anything to end it. The kids walked around with dire, woebegone expressions, as if I had permanently barred them from ever returning to the circus, and even Mark, obtuse Mark, managed to subtly convey that my hostility had driven away someone that the rest of them liked. I relented and admitted Esmerelda back into our lives again. I didn't bother asking for references.

"O.k., that would be nice," I said. "Anything you can do or want to do would be helpful."

"I think that it will be nice, also," she said, and then floated back up the stairs and out of sight. If anything, the air was warmer after her departure. So much for the theory about spirits manifesting themselves through frigid bursts of cold air.

After that, she floated down the stairs almost every evening, and our lives definitely took a turn for the better. She was unfailingly patient with the kids and possessed an encyclopedic, near-to-perfect knowledge of almost everything, including the math and physics that Dark and Mark liked to discuss. She was fun and gentle with Shark and seemed to enjoy discussing fashion with her and the differences between modern and olden times. Under her gentle tutelage, Shark slowly gained more academic confidence and started receiving top marks in history for her papers about 18th century fashion, folktales, and customs. With Mark, Esmerelda was slightly more reticent, perhaps out of deference to me or some ingrained prior-century modesty. She rarely spoke directly to him, but they enjoyed a lively written correspondence about physics. Mark would leave his written thoughts about a physics problem on his desk each night, and the next morning would find the equations neatly filled in with Esmerelda's tiny, feminine script, along with little side notations on possible other avenues of approach. Everyone loved her and we started becoming superstars in the community; with a couple months, my children had become straight-A students, Mark had been put on tenure track and started working on an experiment (something to do with ball bearings or pyrotechnics) that would eventually make us very wealthy.

Contrary to the idea that spirits and house pets are natural enemies, she was even nice to our two dogs and two cats. She would graze into them, her translucent petticoats and skirts in their faces, and they would look up, mildly confused, as if a pleasant but invisible breeze was passing. For my part, I was no longer disorganized and disheveled. The little bits and scraps of paper in my purse had mysteriously disappeared, and I found I no longer forgot or missed things like appointments with contractors the way I did before. I found I could remember everything and didn't have to write appointments down. Not only that – the children volunteered to walk themselves to the bus stop every morning, suggesting that the one mile walk down our wooded country lane would be good exercise. They brought the yellow Lab with them for protection, and she always came back promptly at 8:15 a.m. to the back door, dragging her leash behind and giving two barks, which I interpreted to mean a safe trip. I was at peace with the world: I had a personal organizer. Dare I say, we bloomed under her touch?

Which is why it was such a surprise, such a depressing, awful surprise to us when she began to pull away. Or disintegrate, whichever it was. We all eventually felt it, we all eventually were saddened by it. But it happened, nonetheless.

It started one Monday morning. I was alone, as usual, two barks had come and gone, and I was resting on the bed in our second-floor bedroom. When the slow, steamy baseboard heat clicked on, words started seeping out as well. They started relatively mild, but then they turned mean.

Was I dreaming?

“You don’t really need a maid, Winnie,” the voice started. “But then you always did have a streak of the vain little minx about you, didn’t you? Ever since you was a pup. Oh, yes, all those airs and this grand house. And even now, now that you’ve come back, can’t do an honest day’s work, can you? Has to get a righteous girl to come in and help her family. Such a lazy girl. I always predicted you would come to this.”

Christ! Those words certainly knocked me to my feet. I remember them as clearly as if they had been uttered yesterday. But who was talking? “Lazy girl, lazy girl, lazy girl.” That last chant hung on the air like black letters cut into stone with a smelly torch until the heat clicked off again. Sooty, stinky letters. The next day around the same time, it was a loud wail, again activated by the heater. “I will never get out, never get away,” the dolorous voice mourned. “Never, never, never...” And so on, continuing for some time, intermittently accompanied by weeping.

The next day, according to my diary, the voice was concerned with badness, wailing and crying things like “Bad, bad, everlastingly bad girl.” And then, in a flat, mean voice “You don’t serve our master, do you? Bad, lazy, disgraced girl thinks she’s too high to serve anyone. Poor master has to make do on his own, with such an ungrateful, wretched wretch for a wife. I, too, would be sad if I were Mark.”

This was on a Wednesday, promptly at 10 a.m., over by 11. Would the mad voice’s ramblings continue, spilling over from the week into the weekend when Mark and the children were home? I thought I was losing my mind. As if having a much-beloved spirit in the house who tutored my family at night wasn’t enough to already call my sanity into question. But the rest of them saw and heard her, too.

The next day, I did what any self-respecting housewife would do and hauled out an army of cleaning products – lemony furniture polish, powdery bathroom cleaner, ammonia, bleach, dishwashing detergent, mold remover, wood putty, plain old soap, and even some scented dryer inserts that I sprinkled liberally over the stone basement floor. I cleaned that house from top to bottom, doused the corner in the third-floor room with bleach and vinegar until it stank and was discolored to the point of blanched whiteness. Opened the windows and let the frozen December air that was swirling around the dead oak leaves outside swirl through the house. The sky was a pristine, moist blue, so crisp and biting it almost hurt, and the white clouds moved by, high up in the sky, little white, pustulant cotton balls.

The voice didn’t sound at 10 a.m. that day, although truthfully, I might not have heard it because I had the vacuum cleaner going full tilt to sweep up all the animal hair on our beat-up red Oriental rug in the living room (white and light brown hairs tipped with black from the cats, thick golden hair from the Lab, nothing from the poodle). But when I at last threw down the mop and poured out the bucket of hot, dirty water into the sink, I thought I heard a faint echo of the voice, as if sounding from the rafters: “Too late, too late, too late.”

Esmerelda floated down and visited with us that night and was very cordial, especially to me, complimenting my fine complexion, which she likened to “unsullied white porcelain.” Then, the next morning, the mutterings and voices did not return, so I thought perhaps we were through with the negative aspects of spirituality and that my cleaning efforts had won me an idyllic life, with the best little ghost companion a family could have, the most wonderful husband and children, and a fine house in the country. I was rhapsodizing in this manner around 4 o’clock Thursday afternoon, waiting for the children to be spit out by the bus, and decided to bring my teacup upstairs and visit a moment with Esmerelda. I

didn't usually visit her at this hour, but I was feeling above-average contentment, and thought that if anyone would share it, she would. I wanted to kick back with her a while and self-congratulate ourselves on our successful transformation of this family.

She wasn't there, but the air on the third floor felt chilly and wet, and the mold was back, if anything, more fungoid, virulent, and dripping than before, climbing a good three feet up the far corner. Also, I noticed a small, dry pile of what looked like crumbly old cat feces with bugs in the corner. Not terribly clean. The cats must have been up here. Perhaps self-congratulation was premature. I closed the door and walked downstairs to wait by myself for the children, thinking that maybe I should just mention the incidents of the past few days to Mark and the children tonight. They might be able to come up with a solution. A group effort had cleared the air before.

I mentioned the events to them that night, as we were sitting on the battered sofa around the fireplace after dinner. The fire made a nice roar, cracking and spitting little orange sparks high up into the darkness of our dimly lit living room. When I had finished my detailing of Esmerelda's transgressions, there was a shocked silence. They looked uncomfortable. The fire popped and crackled in the silence. They looked at each other, then back at me like I was crazy. Mark began to cough. Dark looked at his fingernails. Finally, Shark broke the silence.

"That doesn't sound like her, Mom," Shark offered. "Esmerelda's nice."

Then, of course, with exquisite timing, Esmerelda herself arrived in a swirl of air and vague scent of lily-of-the-valley. She seemed to already know the topic of discussion. She made some gentle cooing about how tired I must be, how hard I had been working lately, but that she knew I would get better soon. Mark looked up at her with something like gratitude – or was it admiration? – and she came fluttering around to hover just behind him protectively. He smiled at me and then reached behind him to take her hand. I tried to shake my head "no" at him (something seems off, Mark, better not touch), but he was so grateful for this loving little nurse of a ghost that he just had to take her hand. He took it, her powdery eyes went a chilly sapphire, and then she was gone. Very warm, he muttered.

I had had enough. I walked quickly into the kitchen and without saying a word to any of them, pulled out a bottle of wine and poured myself a glass. I heard Mark vaguely call my name, but I ignored it. As I was climbing the back stairs behind the kitchen, headed for a hot bath and carrying the bottle under my arm plus a swirl of Cabernet that twinkled like red light in the gold-etched tumbler, someone pinched my arm hard. "You little minx," a voice whispered furiously in my ear. "Trying to disgrace me in front of my own family when it's just your own foul imaginings."

She had followed me. I wanted to get away from her and away from all of them; she was confusing me, I was confusing myself. She was just one more entity that wanted to ride my ass and get away with it. I shook her off, shook her voice out of my head, and continued marching up the back stairs to the bathroom and my steaming bath.

Then I felt and heard her again as I was on the second-to-last stair. A pull, rather than a pinch, on the same arm.

"Missy, let me tell you, I have never been so vexed!" Emphasis on the word "been", sparks and small pops like electrical shocks on my arm. "I have half a mind to—"

I knew exactly what she was going to say.

"Half a mind to what, little Jezebel pretending to be so refined and dainty?" Two of us could play at old-fashioned-stupid language. "I know what you're threatening. Just say it. Just do it then."

Silence.

“You have half a mind to leave, don’t you?! Who doesn’t? I think about leaving every single stupid day, more since you’ve been here. Do you think I don’t look at those rotten houses on Milltown that are falling down and think about moving in just to get away?”

“Do it, bitch!” I screamed. “Just go ahead and do what we all want. Leave!”

There was a sharp crackle, then the air went empty and still. I stood there for a moment, pretending not to hear Shark’s vague cry (“Mom?”). A moment more then I climbed the last stairs.

The bath was hot and luxurious, and I stayed in there a good three hours reveling in the suds and replenishing my swirl of vino as needed. When I emerged, the house was cool and quiet and dark.

Everyone was asleep. Fumbling around in the dark, I found the cold cream on my dresser; I rubbed some of it onto the red mark on my arm, then climbed into bed beside Mark and went to sleep.

The next morning found Mark and the kids at the college and school, respectively, and me on the sofa in the sunroom, nursing a glass of Cab at 10:30 in the morning, which gives you an idea of my mood. I dipped my finger in the Cab and smeared it on the red mark on my arm, rubbing it around and around in little circles, feeling the alcohol evaporate off my skin. Yeah, real helpful. A pinnacle of mental health. I thought of prisoners smearing their own shit on walls.

I called Great Aunt Freddie in Toronto. She had moved away a long time ago. Her real name might have been Frederika, but, knowing us, it was probably Winifred. We recycled things ad nauseam. I watched the sun slanting mote-filled diagonals through the French doors onto the pale pine floors while I listened to the phone dully sounding. The house, at least, felt still and happy. Perfect me, living a fucking dream life in a dream house. She answered on the third ring, as we had all been taught.

“Why Winston! What a wonderful surprise!” She always got my name wrong. “I was just thinking about you back in that town. How’s your mother?” Mother and Daddy lived in Charleston.

“Oh, she’s fine. I texted her yesterday.” Something about paint colors. Robin’s egg blue or ice blue. I was leaning toward ice blue. Mother, of course, wasn’t.

“Aunt Freddie, I have a question for you. Something about our family.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“Do you remember that story about the rock? Some ancestor of ours hitting her head on one, dying. Eloping with her true love one rainy night?”

A pause, just a tiny bit of silence slicing in. I could hear the click of her knitting needles, classical music in the distance. She probably had a fire going.

“Yes, my great grandmother.”

“What? I didn’t realize it was that close.”

“Yes, and she did elope with her true love.”

“Okay.”

More silence, the emptiness moving for control.

“So that was the end of it?”

“Well, no, not really the end, there was about 30 more years after that. She had the children. And the fall didn’t kill her, she committed suicide. Because of the shame, I always thought. It was more like a slow fall from grace rather than a real fall. She had to get married, you know, like so many. Just not many in our family.”

Bam! There it was. The judging tone. A tiny sniff of superiority. I almost didn’t catch it, I was so blown away by the news. Aunt Freddie started moving on to other subjects, asking if we had chickens, had I visited so and so, she had heard about an algae bloom on the river this summer.

“Aunt Freddie? Why did I not know this?”

“I thought you knew.”

More silence, like the monstrous secrecy that blooms in our family.

“Well, I DIDN’T of course!” I yelled at her. “Don’t you think we should have talked about it?”

More silence, wielded now like a weapon by Freddie. The demure old lady, wronged again, but ever patient. Familiar territory for her.

“Well, really, it was just too sad. And I thought you knew,” she said again.

“Is everything alright, dear?” she asked in her sweet voice. And, of course, it was sweet, she was genuinely concerned. Hopelessly broken, but concerned.

I sighed. I wished I could tell her. I wished I could tell anyone. But we didn’t have that kind of relationship. I told her I was fine, chatted a bit more, said I’d pass on her greetings to Mother, blah, blah, blah. Time to climb back under the rock, everyone, we don’t talk about stuff round here.

I hung up and finished the wine. To hell with it all.

Then I wondered why I had wanted to move back here, to this murky little town, with its marshy river and graveyard with a rotting fence. Why indeed? (“You knew, but you did it anyway,” said the voice in my head.) Why did I like the graveyard? It had a certain cachet, of course: our family has its own graveyard.

Though truthfully, most of the people buried there weren’t us: they were the long-ago owners.

I liked to think of the old graveyard baking in the field from the sun off the river, surrounded by that black boundary keeping stuff in. Or keeping stuff out. Boundaries for special people like us. God, this place was beautiful. And maybe destructive. And the fence didn’t seem to do be doing its job that well.

Rotting away in serene vigil.

I got up, threw away the empty bottle into recycling, and busied myself with aimless tasks around the house for the rest of the morning. I lay on the kitchen floor for a while, looking for old spills to mop up, like magically erasing something. How I used to spend time before Mark and the kids. It wasn’t as easy to find stains on the wood as it was on my crummy white linoleum floor before. I wished for a cigarette.

That afternoon Mark came home early from the college, saying that he wanted to spend more time with; he was there to greet the children when they stepped off the bus. I didn’t feel like dealing with any of them, so I stayed up in our room reading a book. Let him deal with the children in the afternoon for once; maybe Esmerelda, his little helper/my nasty ghost, would be there, too, to spend some quality time.

I was deeply engrossed in my novel when I heard a loud crash that didn’t sound like one of the dogs knocking over the trashcan in the kitchen. I pulled on my slippers and headed down the stairs just in time to see the astonishing, terrifying sight of Esmerelda, the suddenly strong, almost-electrified specter, swinging and swaying, supporting a massive boulder in her two little hands which she had brought inside through the shattered French doors.

Oh, Christ. The rock looked like that flat stone in the garden out front that the poodle lifted his tiny leg on every morning to shower with his little poodle piss. But that rock had been small and sandy; this rock was massive. (Yeah, Freddie, that rock wouldn’t kill her, right? Something that big? We just get over it, move through it... cuz’ we’re strong, right? And respectable... I write this now from the vantage of time past, but at the time, I could feel those thoughts coldly dropping into my head.) I could see a crater in the garden out of the corner of my eye. How had I not noticed it before? Maybe most of it was underneath. The specter began to speak. Actually, she began to howl and wail, horrible sounds but still distinguishable as words. “Told you not to touch me,” she wailed. “Told you, told you, told you. And didn’t protect me, didn’t catch fall. Don’t touch me, catch me. Fall, fall, fall.”

She looked around the room and finally saw Mark. I think she wanted to hurl the boulder at him, but she couldn't seem to get her bearings and Mark, of course, had gone still as a stone. I think she might have been activated by movement, but the only ones moving were the kids, who were squirming and fidgeting and crying. "Don't hurt children," she screamed in one loud, last wail and disappeared. The boulder came crashing down into our living room, narrowly missing the dog who had bravely mustered his poodle strength and approached the rock, either to battle or piss on it again.

But in the midst of this, all this chaos with loud shrieks, air shimmering with bright menace, crashing boulders, crying children, husband Mark wearing a terrified, frozen mask of a face; a tiny different voice had manifested itself.

A tiny voice, peaceful and quiet, but just loud enough to be heard, resonated inside my mind:

"It's me."

"What?"

I think I say this last question out loud.

"It's me," the voice said again.

Oh. Of course, it is. Of course, it's always me, it always has been.

"It's me," I say, this time aloud.

I look around at the faces of my family, suspended in horror, and everything is small. I can handle this, I can accept it.

It IS me and everything will be alright.

The boulder dropped with a gentle thud, the specter disappeared, and Mark and the kids started walking around the garden with vague expressions, like members in a dance troupe that's cancelled for no reason.

"Winnie..." Mark walked over tentatively toward me with his hands out.

The kids just walked out the door, probably to watch television in the sunroom by the garden.

"I was so worried, I was....," he dropped off.

"I know. It's alright. I was worried too."

"But now?" His eyes questioned my face.

"It's alright, I'm not mad anymore."

"For real?"

"For real. I'm not angry anymore. It will be alright."

And it was.