

Ghosts

There are ghosts in this house; the house of my grandparents, the house they are moving out of in less than a month. This is the last time I will stand here. I usually come with my brothers and my parents, but today it's just me. Me and the ghosts.

When I was younger I used to believe that there were real ghosts in this house. Downstairs in the room at the end of the hall. There was a ragdoll in there that was sewn by my great grandma that I assumed was haunted by an evil spectre with unfinished business. That ghost was different from these ones. These ones aren't scary; they aren't something to run from.

The ghosts are ahead of me as I walk slowly towards the house dragging my bag. Pale shadows of me and my brothers racing to the door and pressing the doorbell before abandoning their bags and darting down the pathway to the side of the house, trying to be as quiet as they can be while sprinting. Their grandparents answer the door, feigning surprise at the lack of grandchildren. I know that around the side of the house the ghosts of us continue their mission along the narrow strip of balcony above the inlet. They will reach the sliding door to the main room and creep inside, sit down at the table, pick up a newspaper and wait for their grandparents to come back up the stairs.

I push through the cobwebs of those images and ring the doorbell myself. I don't run. I can make out the shape of my grandparents through the stained glass. My grandma opens the door. As I hug them, I wonder if they have their own ghosts in this place, haunting their every step. I wonder if my grandparents can't wait to leave here or if they'd rather stay surrounded by these ghosts, perhaps making more.

Up the stairs I see ghosts hiding, flashes of colour just out of my eyesight, in the corners, behind the doors. One passes me and I catch a glimpse of it racing up the stairs, a younger version of me, exploring the house like the castle I thought it was. A beautiful palace from which I could rule over my kingdom of yellow-washed paper skies and folded hills.

We have mild conversations as we sit down, discussing school and moving and stress and friends. I think that perhaps the ghosts have retreated, that maybe this won't be too hard, until I'm asked to fetch something from the dining room. There are a lot in here, waiting to ambush me, to make me remember times that are far out of reach. I walk quickly to the drawers, searching for my grandma's reading glasses. The shadow of a smaller hand passes over mine, reaching in to grab a pack of cards before retreating. I see the ghost of me sit back down at the table and I pause to see if she will deal forecast whist, poker or bridge.

I find the glasses. Pull them out and take them back through to the kitchen, but a familiar scent of apple crumble sends me careening into another smaller ghost.

I excuse myself. Head downstairs under the guise of unpacking and sit on the floor in the warm study, where a mattress has already been laid out. I've always loved this study, completely cluttered with books and papers and newspaper cuttings. The walls coated in picture frames and the door covered in pinned-up printouts of my brothers and my results from old swimming competitions. There are ghosts down here as well, maybe more than upstairs. Walking down the hallway, I let them come at me, one after the other.

The ghost of a girl sitting beside the marble run, rolling the marbles from one end to another and trying to fill up the entire thing before releasing it and spilling them all over the floor, worrying my grandad and his walking stick. Her pocketing one or two, glancing around guiltily. Another girl sitting on the old grey elephant that might once have been white, that rolled around on wheels and was called Ellie. It now belongs to my cousin's children. A third ghost is a past version of me from when I brought my best friend to stay. There's a ghost of her past self as well. I'm surprised I can see them given how recent they are. While I miss the ghosts of me as a carefree child, it is the later ones that make me more regretful. My friend and I had so many plans to come back alone, to roam the big city wild and free, now none of those ghosts will exist to haunt me.

I can't help but wonder over dinner why the ghosts stay. Why they choose to haunt these rooms, this house in particular.

Some of them are so old, ghosts of the younger versions of me who crawled between the cupboards that linked the bathrooms; who played with little toy animals on the green rug in front of the TV, pretending the patches of colour were different continents separated by a green ocean; who thought the glass decanter of whiskey on the sideboard was a secret forbidden elixir of the gods.

Some of the ghosts are inherently sad, representations of times I won't miss. Ghosts of me half-listening to disagreements between my parents and grandparents over their driving. There's one staring down at the massive landslip that tore down the hillside beneath the deck while we slept, taking trees, plants and the old green fence down with it. In the bathroom where I used to cry during dinner, ghosts crowd into the mirror's reflection, wishing that the person who stared back looked different, a different body, different features, a different smile.

Then there are ghosts of the times that I don't think I'll ever forget, and for these at least a part of me is grateful for their presence. One walks the surrounding roads, with my dad and grandparents talking about life and the world and my plans (or lack thereof) for my future. Another lies underneath the dining room table, where she has decided to sleep, much to her parents' annoyance. She peers through the table legs at the photo frames that cover the sideboard. Photos of the whole family, of the three of us as kids, of our cousins growing up, of my brothers beside Grandad in their New Zealand swimming uniforms, of me riding a horse along a beach, of my cousin's wedding and her children, of times I don't remember and times I miss.

Finally, I stop in the doorway of the first bedroom and face the worst of the ghosts. The one that I knew would be waiting for me. She's lying in the bed, the duvet pulled up over her head, face lit by the light of her phone. It's past midnight and she is up having a conversation over

Instagram about things that thirteen-year-olds shouldn't have to think about. Dread smothers me, because I know the burden that ghost has yet to carry.

Over the next few days, as I pack up the boxes, leaving empty rooms behind me, I wonder why the ghosts linger in the corners. As I wander the house for the last time, exploring each room and saying goodbye to the things I'll never see again, I wonder why the ghosts remain. As I hug my grandparents goodbye, promise to visit them in their new apartment as soon as they move in, I wonder if the ghosts will follow them, or if they will stay in this house, in the rooms that they know, to haunt the next owners.

Now though, sitting in the car on the way home from my grandparents' new apartment, music loud in my ears and thoughts louder in my head, I wonder if perhaps I was wrong, and that the ghosts that I saw will stay with me. I think that maybe my grandparents and parents have their own ghosts, a lot more than I do, and that they never really go away. I think being haunted by them comes down to a choice. But for a while at least, mine will haunt somewhere in the back of my head, where the forgotten things go. I think that's okay.