

NEVER GONE

& other tiny haunts



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NOT HAUNTED, YET

I wasn't haunted when the family arrived.

'A fresh start,' the dad said. His daughter looked to the ghost trailing behind. 'What about the grey woman?'

'The house will keep us safe.' It wasn't his promise to make. After dark the grey woman roamed. Sometimes she put hands on my walls, whispered secrets, said she was waiting. For what? I asked.

You'll see.

But when the grey woman reached for the girl as she slept, I unpeeled my wallpaper and pulled her in.

I wasn't haunted when the family arrived, but I kept his promise. They, at least, were safe.



HOW TO HARVEST GHOSTS: A FIVE STEP GUIDE AND INVENTORY

1. Gloves: This is essential if you don't want ectoplasm on your hands, which could lead to side effects like hauntings, possession, and in extreme cases, evaporation. If you accidentally touch any ectoplasm, wash your hands thoroughly with a mixture of salt, sage and the blood of your enemies. (Regular warm water will suffice if you don't have any blood to hand).

2. A vessel: This can be anything from a glass bottle to an ordinary household object. Please note that whatever you choose will no longer function as normal. For example, my possessed-by-Great-Aunt-Magda teapot likes to whistle while I sleep. In cases of vengeful spirits, cover the item in flour or cotton wool. Ghosts hate anything white and fluffy.



3. A lure: Spirits like misery. Try playing melancholic music or reading a scene from Shakespeare to draw them out. Or, even better, bring along one of your enemies and make them cry.

4. An offering: You're going to want to appease the ghost before any gathering. If you have any of the aforementioned blood left, that will work perfectly. Alternatively, offer some silver or a Sunday crossword puzzle.

5. Grit: Not the literal kind. Please don't throw tiny stones at the ghosts – that will just make them angry. But you can't face your average ghost with a few household items and a charming personality. You need determination and resolve.

And remember: if at first you don't succeed, you might not live to try again.

*



NEVER GONE

I can't bear the creak that comes from my chair at night. Steadily rocking, back and forth, back and forth. Ghosts have no respect, honestly. This particular one is called Gertrude. She's been rocking in my office chair for the past three weeks and it's probably time I do something about it.

Occasionally, just as I'm drifting off, she will say in a croaky voice just loud enough to hear, something like, 'you forgot to turn the oven off.'



I'll know that I haven't used the oven all day, yet I'm unable to get the oven out of my head. So, I get up to check, just to make sure. It is, of course, switched off.

'Made you look,' Gertrude says on my return.

'Shut up Gertie.'

She tuts. 'Kids these days, no respect.'

I sigh, turn over and close my eyes. Ten seconds later, the creaking begins again. And a few more seconds after that another whisper. 'Did you remember to lock the door?' And the whole process begins all over again.

Sometimes the threats are more sinister, like last night as I was drifting off, she said, 'your teeth would make an excellent necklace. My husband never bought me pearls.' Three nights before that, she mused, 'have you ever thought what it would be like to be buried alive?' My teeth are still intact, and she's never attempted to suffocate me in my sleep. She's not a particularly committed ghost at least, but I still don't like her being there, always watching. So, what do you do with a slightly annoying ghost?

I've tried pouring salt on the chair, nailing a cross to it, burning sage in the room. The usual stuff. I've even tried sitting and sleeping in the chair itself, but it only gives me a sore back and Gertie comes back the next night as soon as it's unoccupied.

*

I've decided to visit Gertie at the cemetery – maybe I'll find something out there that will help me. The cemetery is quiet, and I wonder why she doesn't just stay here as it seems the perfect haunt for a ghost. Peaceful, green, open space. No chairs though. After a few hours of searching I find a gravestone that fits the bill: Gertrude Wilson, written beside a Marlow Wilson, her husband. The epitaph reads: Forever in our hearts, never truly gone.

Never gone.

There's construction noise from my left. They're moving some of the graves. It gives me an idea.

*

That night, I stay awake, lights off and wait for the creaking to begin. Before she can speak, I say, 'Gertie, have you remembered to check your grave hasn't been disturbed?'



Silence, then. 'Good try.'
I smile and sigh. 'I was just at
the cemetery today. They're
moving some things around,
plots and such.'

'They wouldn't dare'

'Maybe not, maybe it's totally
fine. Good night Gertie.'

It's been five minutes, and I've
not heard a single creak.
Satisfied that she's finally gone,
I close my eyes.

I'm awoken in the night by a
scraping on my door. I jolt
upright. A shiver runs through
me.

You left the window open,' a
deep voice says. Not Gertie.

I look over to the curtains which
are, right enough, moving with a
breeze. Odd. Tiptoeing out of
bed, I go over to the window
and close it.

The bed when I return is full of
dirt and grass. Silvery white
stones glisten in amongst the
soil like seeds. No, not stones,
teeth.

'A gift for my Gertie,' the voice
says. 'She sends her regards.'

THE WHISPERING BONES

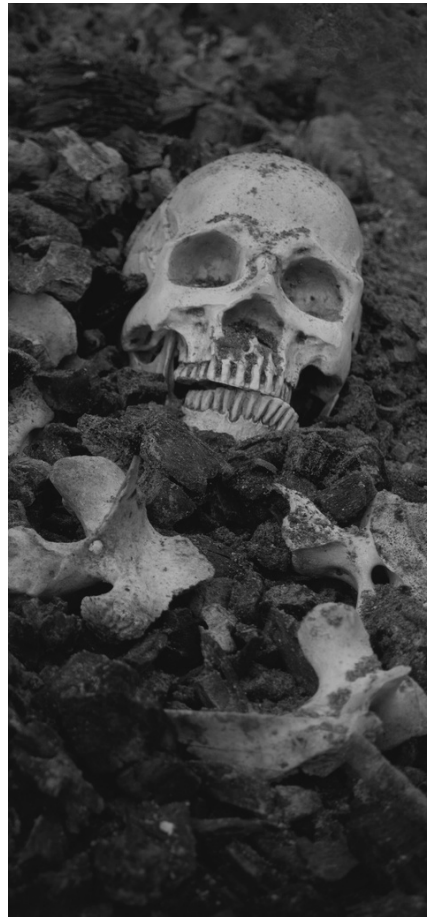
The bones whisper to me in my sleep,
in my waking,
in my moments of thinking
nothing at all.
They whisper stories of pain,
loss,
and of wishes that never came
true
when they were living.
I try to drown them out with
dreams of my own,
but I cannot compete with the
dead.
Not when they are so many,
and I am all alone.



Sometimes, I find fragments of
them
beneath ashen soil or sunken
sand,
or somewhere they were never
intended to be found.
I put them together, piece by
piece:
femur and rib,
skull and wing,
jaw and toes.
For a time, the whispers still,
so quiet they could just be a
breeze
or the sea kissing a pebbled
beach
or a cold breath lingering too
long on the back of my neck.
But the peace is short lived.
There are always more lost and
forgotten voices
waiting to be laid to rest,
waiting for someone to listen.

And so, I let the whispers in,
a flourish of wants,
a blossom of demands,
a bloom of desire.
I use the voices to find the
bones,
gather them one by one,
day by day,
night by night,
until all the whispering bones
lie together in a mosaic
ready for assembly.
I plant the bones in freshly tilled
earth:
seeds of decay, bulbs of
marrow, fruits of sinew.
Finally, the whispers still, and
the bones can sleep.
Until the first sprout grows,
breaking from the soil
with skeletal fingers reaching
for sunlight.
They are jointed stems with
darkened veins,
pale white branches, and
hollow buds.
Soon there is a whole forest of
them,
whispering in rhythm with the
wind,
almost drowned out by rustling
leaves
or birdsong at dawn.

But now it is peaceful here,
roaming and listening.
Between the living and dead,
or the dead and living,
for I am no longer sure
I can tell the difference.



HOUSE FOR SALE



It was the furniture that stood out the most. In each room, it had been arranged against only three walls, as if part of a doll's house display.

'I suppose you'll want to see the basement too?' the owner offered.

There was a chill in the air as she led me downstairs. The house had been on the market for a year –maybe the basement had a damp problem. 'How many viewings have you had?'

'You're the sixth.' She switched the light on.

My breath caught. Beady eyes stared up at me, dolls sitting in a row. Five of them.

THE BONE TREE

The bone tree grows in the flowerbed at the end of our garden. It started off as a mushroom-like stump, before reaching upwards, branches twisting and hollow. When the wind blows, it makes a sound like a whisper.

The tree is different from the other plants. No leaves, and it smells funny – not sweet like daffodils, or fragrant like lavender, but musty like Daddy's old slippers. The ones Rowan used to steal and bury.

Nobody knows about the tree except Mama, Rowan, and me.

When Mama's sad, I hide by the bone tree. I feel safe there. Like if monsters came, its branches would curve outwards and wrap me in a hug.

Then, I tell it I want to be a gardener when I grow up. Because I only ever feel properly happy in the garden.

Rowan joins me sometimes, though he usually gets bored and starts to tug at the tree's joints until he pulls a piece away. He runs into the house with it, brings back Mama to play. But she scolds him and returns the branch to the earth.

Maybe a new bone tree will grow from it. Though, if it were that easy, another Daddy would have grown in the flowerbed too.



I NEVER WANTED A ROSE GARDEN

Last night wasn't an accident. It happened as I was standing in the garden looking out across his flowerbed, the crumbling orchard walls behind me, the windchime trilling its sinister tune that haunted my dreams. Upon seeing the thick stems of the roses taunting me with their stupid prickly little thorns, and their ostentatious petals that he had looked after oh so tenderly, there was nothing to do but to take the secateurs and cut them off, one by one, stem by stem.

After, I gathered them in a pile and plucked off every thorn, then every petal. The petals I trampled over and over until the blood-red mulch seeped into his perfect lawn.

The thorns, I've placed around the house – under the rugs, inside pillowcases, stitched into the inner lining of his favourite slippers. I hope it hurts as they are discovered. They are sharp enough to pockmark flesh, rip it to pieces until it seeps with blood, infection, and rot. It would be enough to drive one to madness, tiptoeing around the house, fearful of where the next thorn might be, never certain whether or not there are still more left to be found. It doesn't feel very nice, does it? Being betrayed in such a way by the very thing you love more than anything else. And he loved those roses.

Sometimes, I thought he loved them more than me.

I always hated them. Ever since we moved here. Since he took me to this empty place with its decaying walls and stairs torn apart by woodworm and rot, and a chill that could never be chased away, no matter how much I tried with thick heavy curtains to keep the outside contained. The cold still crept in through the gaps in the windows and walls, while draughts blew up from damaged floorboards. He never had time for the house, to make it better, to make it a place we could live together as a family, or maybe one day more than just he and I. But he had time to look after those godforsaken roses in his godforsaken garden. He may as well have been haunting the house for all the attention he gave me inside it.

Of course, he'll probably never find the thorns. And my feet are the ones that are red and bleeding now.

Still, I am angry with him. I am angry that he left me all alone here, in this rotting house, with only his beloved roses as company, and now I have destroyed those too. It's only that every time I looked out one of our rattling windows and saw their extravagant bloom in the bright sunlight, I thought of him. That when they swayed in rhythm with the wind, and not a single petal fell, as steadfast as they were beautiful, I thought about how stubborn he was in life.

How stubborn he seems to be in death.

I keep hoping his ghost might come back and haunt these walls – ghosts ought to be attracted to cold and empty places such as this. I want him to see what I have done to the garden, then find the thorns beneath his spectral feet. Can ghosts bleed? Perhaps it depends upon their manner of death.

When I was a child, I saw a ghost in my mother's flowerbed in the middle of the day, the sun shining down upon the pale form, eyes devoid of life, blood seeping down skeletal arms, soaking into the soil and turning the daisies crimson. Of course, she was not really a ghost. She was her, my mother, and to this day I think of her body lying at my feet every time I step into the daylight, which is seldom enough that my skin has become as pallid and grey as hers was in death.

I keep waiting for him to return. Keep waiting for the softness of his breath on the back of my neck. For the cool touch of his lips on my cheeks. I wait to hear his voice telling me to go outside, to enjoy the sunshine, to look at his flowers. But all I can hear now are the echo of the last words he said to me as he lay at the bottom of the staircase, his legs bent where he'd fallen through one of the rotten wooden planks.

'My Rose. My love. Help me.'

That wasn't an accident either.

Though, it doesn't mean I planned it. I didn't intend to lose my tempter, to push him. I certainly didn't mean for it to be his end. It's just, he was talking about the roses again and going on and on about how I needed to leave the house, to get some fresh air. He told me to come out into the garden and to see the flowers in bloom. And I had said to him only the night before, 'if you mention those damned roses one more time...'

I warned him, and he didn't listen. Why did he never listen to me?

So, I suppose this all to say, I am sorry for what happened. I wish he would return but perhaps this new loneliness is my penance. The thorns, my curse.

Everything has become so dilapidated and dull since he left. And now, as I look outside from my bedroom window, the garden is as gloomy as the house inside.

I think on the words he used to say to me on summer mornings when I would refuse to leave the confines of the house.

'My Rose, come to the garden. It's beautiful in the daylight. If you stay inside, you'll only catch a death.'



STORIES AS SEEN IN...

"Not Haunted, Yet" - Hungry Shadow Press - Deadly Drabble Tuesdays

"How to Harvest Ghosts: A Five Step Guide and Inventory" - National Flash Fiction Day

"Never Gone" - Ellipsis Zine and Metastellar Magazine (reprint)

"The Whispering Bones" - Orion's Belt Magazine

"House for Sale" - Hundred Word Horror: Beneath - Ghost Orchid Press and reprinted National Flash Fiction Day

"The Bone Tree" - 206 Word Stories: A Horror Anthology - Bag of Bones Press

"I Never Wanted a Rose Garden" - Tales to Terrify Podcast

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lyndsey Croal is a Scottish author of strange and speculative fiction, with work published or forthcoming in several magazines and anthologies, including with Flash Fiction Online, PseudoPod, Flame Tree Press, Apex, and Dark Matter INK. She's a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Awardee, British Fantasy Award Finalist, former Hawthornden Fellow, and a Ladies of Horror Fiction Writers Grant Recipient. Her debut novelette "Have You Decided on Your Question" was published in 2023 with Shortwave Publishing and she is currently working on a number of longer projects. When not working in her day job in climate policy, or writing, she enjoys exploring Edinburgh haunts and looking after her unruly plant and book collections.

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BOO!

