

# Notes from the House Spirits

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THERE IS A sudden silence and then everything is the same. An empty house is never silent for long and a house is never empty because we are here. There is a sudden silence and then everything is the same. Nothing is ever exactly the same, but it goes back to how it was. The staircase creaks and relaxes, the air slows and stills in rooms.

The buddleia in the attic is growing. We dream, as we have always dreamt, of doors and windows under water, of walls under water. We try not to dwell on these dreams.

Dust drifts across the room and settles on skirting and curtain rails. We can see it, every single piece, as it piles up and no one brushes it away. Dust is static and lazy; it lands on the first thing it sees. It fills the house bit by bit and no one brushes it away. It is not our job to brush it away.

This one left suddenly in the night. She sat up quickly in bed, swung her legs on to the floor and walked down the stairs. She stretched out her arms but there was no one else there. She talked to someone that we couldn't see. 'There you are,' she said. 'You didn't take your boots off. Will I need a coat?' She went out the front door and she left it open.

Things we glimpse out of the front door:

Other rooms.

Other houses.

One huge space like a silent kitchen, with small lights on and one crescent of light, as if someone had left the fridge door open.

It is rude to leave suddenly, without any notice. She didn't give us any notice. There weren't any boxes. She didn't take any of her things away. Didn't she like it here? She left all her things behind. What does she expect us to do with it all? There is nothing that we can do with it, except count it, except look carefully through it, and we have done that already.

We back away, us, the house, towards keyholes and gaps. Now there is the house and there are the other things. We have retreated. They have become left-behind things. They have become awkward and extra, things that don't belong. It is inevitable.

Now we notice what we didn't notice before: that the paint is actually a strange blue, a cold blue, a blue that wasn't the right decision. We don't want that blue any more. We pick at it and bits fall on to the carpet. We notice how thin the carpet is getting. We notice how the clocks make the walls sound hollow. We don't like the walls to sound hollow so we stop the hands on one or two clocks, but only on one or two, and maybe we loosen the battery in the back of another.

Sometimes a light shines through the window and it looks as if someone has turned on a light downstairs. Sometimes a voice calls through the house, we feel some weight on the stairs; or a coat, a dress left hanging in a cupboard seems rounder, body-shaped, like there is someone inside it. There is a flash on a door handle as if a hand were reaching out to open it, but there is no hand. We are the only ones left.

Things we miss about the one who left suddenly in the night:

Her laugh, which was as loud and sudden as the gas flame igniting in the boiler.

The kettle's click and whoosh and teaspoons tapping like rain against the windows.

Her television with all its bright colours and its other houses.

The way she jumped when the doorbell

rang.

The way we had to make sure the walls caught her when she stumbled.

That smokiness brews up and gets into the curtains. We don't know where it comes from. There is a spider's web behind a door handle and one under a light switch. We like spiders; they are quiet and make good use of the space.

Leaves come in under the door and we pick them up by their stalks and let them out through the letterbox.

Somebody comes and turns off the fridge and the freezer and the boiler. Perhaps we have seen her before. We are not good with faces. For a moment, we think that the woman who left in the night has come back. This new person watches as the freezer shudders, then starts to drop pieces of ice. She stands there, watching. She doesn't do anything except watch as the ice drops and melts on the floor.

Now that there is no noise from the fridge and the freezer and the boiler, we can hear other things. We can hear the pictures beginning to tilt off centre.

The telephone has been left plugged in and sometimes it rings. Sometimes we hear a familiar voice, always saying the same thing: 'I'm not here

at the moment. Please leave a message and I'll get back to you.' It is strange, hearing that voice again, and we look around, half expecting to see someone. At least, we think the voice is familiar – we are not good with voices. It is easy for us to forget.

Sometimes we listen to the messages but we do not understand them.

'Hello, I thought I'd ring for a quick catch-up. It's been a long time. Sorry it's been so long. How is everything?'

'The book you ordered is now ready to be picked up.'

'Is this the right number? Do you still live here?'

The shoes are packed into boxes and the boxes are stacked up like bricks. The mirrors are taken down and the walls are just walls again, which is a relief.

There is always somebody who sorts through the left-behind things and turns off the boiler. The woman's footsteps are light and slow. She stares out of the window. She talks on the phone. She puts on one of the jumpers from the wardrobe and wears it all the time, even when she's asleep. It is too small for her. Once, she drops a glass as she is packing, and she looks down at the pieces and then drops the rest, glass by glass, which is probably the clumsiest thing we have ever seen.

She takes the cushions off the sofa and moves it away from the wall. There is something in the

empty space. There are small round balls, made out of butter, covered in dust and hair. The woman who left in the night used to cover them in sugar and make anyone who came over eat them. We didn't know that most people dropped them behind the sofa. We didn't know they were there. They are covered in dust and hair. The woman with light, slow footsteps puts her hand over her mouth and stares down at the butterballs. We didn't know they were there. It is not our job to clear things away. They are the only thing we have ever missed.

The house is bare. People come and go, mostly in pairs.

We didn't know those butterballs were there. They are the only thing we have ever missed.

'Would this be our bedroom? I'm not sure if I see this as our bedroom,' they say. They say, 'What do you think?' They look at their reflections in the windows and they look faint and lost. They keep to the edges of the rooms. They sit on the edge of the bath and look down into the plughole. They investigate the pale grey fingerprints on a wall. They lean backwards and measure out invisible objects with their arms.

They are always drawn to the attic. We don't know why.

Things left behind in the attic:

A rocking horse with a missing eye.

A plastic skull.

A suitcase stuffed full of receipts and discount vouchers.

A roll of carpet.

A cricket bat and a deflated football.

Four nails and six drawing pins.

A bunch of dry white flowers.

The attic is a strange place. There are gaps and spaces that lead outside. There are silverfish and seeds and pollen and old cooking smells. Buddleia is growing through the wall. There are things that people have hoarded and left behind.

Once, somebody's legs went through the attic floor because they weren't careful. They didn't step in the right places. Just their legs dangling and us wringing our hands and watching. Plaster everywhere. It is our job to protect the house. Why do they always want to go into the attic? We don't know why.

The buddleia shrivels and dries to husks. The cold enters the house and so does someone new. The boiler is switched on and there are boxes. He moves them in himself, without any help. Most of the boxes are left in the second bedroom and they are not unpacked. There are no proper beds. He unrolls a mat and sleeps on it. He stays up late,

staring at the television or at the computer. The room flickers blue and green. He goes to the fridge, to the sofa, to the bathroom, and on his way between rooms he knocks into the walls with his shoulders.

We dream, and in our dream there is a sudden rush of water. Doors and windows soak and split. They lift away from their frames and disappear. Lampshades and clocks float past.

Two children come. The man makes them food and puts it on their plates in the shape of a face. He hadn't turned the oven on before they arrived. The boy looks pleased with his food but the girl scowls and picks at the eyes. The table is too small for three people so they keep knocking knees and elbows. 'What do you want to do?' the man asks them. He isn't eating anything. They shrug. 'Is there a cat here? You said you would get a cat.'

'I haven't got a cat yet,' he says.

'You said you would get one,' they tell him. They look around at the bare house.

We have seen cats before. They stare at us and bristle. We don't like them. We have seen children before. They move around so quickly that we can't keep track of which room they are in. These children are different. They don't move quickly; they kick at the edges of things. They don't seem interested in the house. They trail after each other and when they sit, they fall back with all of their weight so that the sofa bumps into the



wall.

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Now and again, when the children aren't there, a woman comes over to stay. We don't know if we recognise her. We aren't very good with faces. Sometimes, when she goes to the bathroom, she turns up the television first, but we don't know why she would do this. We are probably the only ones who notice. When she can't find her watch, we find it for her, and put it in the pocket of her coat, but then she shouts that she has already looked in the pocket of her coat. We were only trying to help. It is not our job to find things. They step on each other's feet in the kitchen. They move their chairs closer together, slowly, during dinner.

'What are you thinking about?' she asks him, smiling, leaning close.

He looks at his fork. 'The Spanish Revolution,' he says.

'OK,' she says. 'OK.'

They raise their forks and lower them in unison.

Number of tiles on the roof: 874. There were 876 but two disappeared and no one has replaced them.

Leaves come in under the door and we post them out through the letterbox.

Two new ones. They keep close together. There is only ever one light on because they are always in the same room. They don't have any real furniture; they have furniture that doesn't look solid. You can fold it. We have never seen folding furniture. There's no fridge yet, only a gap where the fridge should be. They keep their milk in a saucepan of cold water. We are not sure how well they will look after the house. Nothing they have looks solid.

On their first night, they drink a lot and then dance around the bare room without music. They are lighter than the others – when they walk the boards barely creak. They use more of the space, too, flinging themselves into every corner of the room. They sit first in one place and then another. They are moving all the time. They are touching all the time: if one leaves the room the other one follows soon after. They leave the bathroom door open and their dinner plates unwashed.

The windows are huge and black without curtains.

They have put up a shelf and they have done it badly. It is going to fall off. We know it is going to fall off. We can feel the screws loosening millimetre by millimetre. We can feel the shelf slipping. We knock off a book, then another book, to try to make them notice. They don't notice. The man picks up one of the books and reads out loud from it. 'Listen to this,' he says. We

listen. The woman listens.

We don't like them very much. They look after each other more than they look after the house.

There is a night when, as if from nowhere, bright lights and flashes fill the house. We can smell smoke. Whenever this happens we think that perhaps it is the end of the house, but it is never the end of the house. They watch the flashes, their noses pressed up to the glass. They write their names in their own breath and their names stay embedded in it. We can see all the names that have been drawn on the windows, looped and layered over each other. We don't watch the flashes. We prefer to hide from them with our hands over our ears, waiting for them to stop.

They get a piano and put it in the empty room. He plays and she stands behind him with her eyes closed. The music spreads through the house like hot-water pipes. We have never heard noises like it.

They shower together before leaving in the mornings, slipping their bodies around each other in the water. It is like only one person lives here. Their dips in the sofa are just one big dip in the middle. They live with only one light on, in the one room they are both in. We straighten their shower curtain to stop it getting mouldy. We shouldn't have to do such things.



The shelf falls. It makes us jump, even though we knew it would happen.

‘How’s the book?’ he calls through from the kitchen where he is doing the washing-up.

She is reading, her feet curled up under her. ‘Hmm? I already got milk,’ she says, turning a page. ‘I already got milk.’

He fumbles with a wet plate and water sloshes down his knees.

The shower switches on. It switches off. The man gets out, and after a pause, the woman gets in. The shower switches on and off again. This is much better. It allows the humid air to cool and disappear. This is much better. Maybe finally they are learning to look after the house.

They tread carefully and slowly – there is no jumping or dancing. They buy solid furniture. The lights are switched off earlier than usual and the television is on almost all of the time. They don’t come back as early as they used to – they come home separately and later, sometimes covered in tinsel and glitter. They bring a tree into the house and we notice every needle that drops.

Other people come and they fold out a spare bed. They all sit together and look at the house. They

have never paid this much attention. One of the new people is a curtain-straightener, a cushion-plumper. She insists on doing the dishes then purses her lips every time someone carries in another plate. When a bird crashes into the window she doesn't jump. She refolds the towels. 'The shelves you put up aren't straight,' she tells the man. She straightens out the shower curtain so it doesn't go mouldy. We like her very much and are sad when she leaves.

We have seen this before. All day, the woman has been pacing between the bathroom and the bedroom. Her steps are slow and heavy. She flushes the toilet and the pipes sing and hiss. Then she walks back into the bedroom, stands still in the doorway and then lowers herself on to the edge of the bed. Then she gets up again and paces. Then she lies down quietly on the bed. She is already carrying herself differently. We have seen this before.

The man starts coming downstairs in the night. He opens the fridge door and watches the light spill out on to his bare feet. Sometimes, he pulls open the front door and stands on the mat. The cold air rushes into the house. We shiver and get impatient. Why doesn't he close the door? He stands like that for a long time, until something makes him sigh and shut the door and go back upstairs.



The piano has disappeared. They have replaced it with a small bed and other noises and mess and lights clicking on and off, endlessly.

The boy is in the attic again. He is always in the attic now that he can walk up the stairs by himself. He is a small boy and he doesn't weigh very much. We know this because he fits easily through the hatch and he doesn't make the floor creak as if his legs will go through the ceiling. We don't have to worry about him going through the ceiling. He likes to be in empty rooms. He likes gaps and small spaces. Once, he hid (we knew where he was) and nobody could find him. A lot of people came to look. We knew where he was all along – inside the rolled-up carpet, for hours.

He has a tiny bird in a box. Three times a day he comes into the attic and leans over it. He puts little things in there. When he leaves, he pulls the suitcase in front of the box. 'Marty, Marty, Marty,' he sings to it. 'Marty, Marty, Marty.' This is what we have learnt from children bringing animals inside the house in boxes: never name them, never ever name them.

He stares at the box for a long time. Then he closes the lid and takes it away.

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Conversations the boy has with himself, or with someone we can't see:

Do birds sleep while they are flying?

I am a ghost and no one can see me unless I want them to.

If everybody else disappeared, would it be boring?

He also sings, whistles, hisses, burps and clicks. He is like a miniature house.

Warm light comes through the windows and lies in slabs on the floor.

The buddleia is growing back. The woman comes up to the attic and tells the boy to go downstairs. She hasn't been in the attic for a long time. When the boy has gone, she does the strangest thing. She gets on to the rocking horse and she doesn't fall through the ceiling.

Brick by brick by brick, more houses are being built somewhere near by. When do we arrive in them? We don't know. Were we already there and the house was built around us? We don't know. We don't exist without bricks and slate and glass, and bricks and slate and glass do not exist without us. There is no need to think about it any further, but sometimes we like to think about it a little bit.

The boy makes louder noises and puts more weight on the floorboards and stairs: bang bang bang. He doesn't go up to the attic now. He stays in his bedroom with the door and the curtains closed.

One day he disappears, but nobody seems worried this time. We can't find him anywhere in the house. No one else is looking. The house goes back to the way it was. There is only a toothbrush left behind in the pot, the banister he pulled off hanging askew. The house gets its quietness back; it gets its echoes and its quietness. Once or twice, the man goes into the boy's bedroom, talking, as if he has forgotten that the boy isn't there.

Things we miss about the boy who left:

The girl who came to visit him and wrote her name behind a corner of the wallpaper and then stuck it back down with spit. The smell of the stuff he put on his hair – sometimes we would take off the lid and scoop out tiny little bits.

The house is bare. People come and go, mostly in pairs.

When they come in the front door, they bring with them one or two dry leaves, one or two variations of light, and then the door closes and the light is the same.





There are dark patches on the walls in the shape of furniture and pictures that aren't there any more. The rocking horse nods forwards. The carpet is thin and threadbare. Why doesn't anyone replace it? We would have replaced it by now. Light moves up the stairs and then down the stairs, and the house is dark again.

We miss lamps. We didn't think we would. We must have got used to them. At night, colours ebb away as if they were never there. The corners of the house darken and the hallway becomes narrower. A door bangs open and closed but we don't know which door it is. It isn't one of our doors. We would never bang our doors like that. It makes us nervous. We miss lamps. The windows are huge and dark. The curtains are still here, they usually take away the curtains. One night, we decide to close them. It is not our job to close them but we prefer it when they are closed.

At night, the house closes into itself and then it stills and quietens and sleeps, and we dream of it under water.

A strong breeze comes in under the door and chases us around the house. It slams a loose cupboard door. It furls and unfurls the corner of a loose piece of wallpaper in a bedroom. Underneath, someone had written something,

which they shouldn't have done because that will be hard to get off and we can't remember who it was.

It's always the same – feet, feet, feet and dirt on the carpet and now everything is being moved, now everything is being changed. There is noise and there is more noise and then there is the worst thing: walls have been taken away and a door. Now there is a gap where the door was and there is a bigger room instead of two rooms and one less room where the wall was before. We have been rearranged. We hide behind the curtain poles and under the loose tiles in the kitchen. Things have been changed and things have been taken away. We are not sure. We are not sure at all. We have been rearranged. It is not what we expected to happen. How can you take away a wall or a door and not expect the whole house to fall down? How hasn't the whole house fallen down already? We cower, covering our heads, waiting for it to happen.

It hasn't happened yet.

The man who did all the moving and all the rearranging is staying here with a woman. They have put in a new carpet. We actually liked the old carpet. We actually miss the old carpet. They don't get up early and leave for most of the day like most of the others. Instead, they stay in bed for most of the morning and they eat breakfast in

bed and get crumbs everywhere. We are not sure about them. But the woman sings in the shower and her voice is deep and beautiful, almost like the piano, and the man downstairs in the kitchen starts humming the same tune and it seems like he hasn't noticed he is doing it. They stand under the crack in the bathroom ceiling. They say it looks like an ear; they say it looks like a heart. Why are they so good at finding bits of themselves drawn on to the house?

We miss the piano.

They talk about things they are going to do to the house. They are going to get rid of the crack in the bathroom. They are going to pull out the buddleia. They are going to paint everything. They are going to rearrange more walls. We don't want to listen, but we have to listen. It seems like they have nothing to do except change the house. We push against the wall when they're drilling and break their drills. We cling to the wallpaper. It is our job to protect the house.

Now they have gone away and they have covered everything with sheets. We like everything covered with sheets. It keeps everything clean and less dusty. It is not our job to dust.

Sometimes we think of the butterballs. They are the only thing we have ever missed.

The new carpet is fraying. There is no stopping it.  
The buddleia is growing back. There is no  
stopping that, either.

Shadows that have passed across the keyhole:  
twelve.

Number of silverfish in the attic:  
seven, but one is not moving.

Dust that has floated past so far:  
four million, seven hundred and forty-eight  
pieces. There is a lot less dust than you'd  
think when a house is empty.

Number of times we have banged into a wall,  
forgetting that things have been changed:  
too many to count.

We dream, and in our dreams, there are whole  
houses under water, and streets and trees. It is cold  
and quiet. Bubbles rise slowly out of chimneys.

They have come back. We think they are the  
same people but we are not sure. We are not good  
with faces. They seem much older. They walk  
slowly up the stairs. They only take some of the  
sheets off the furniture. The woman stays in bed,  
not just late into the morning but for the whole  
day. The man lowers her gently into water. He  
sponges her back and washes her hair, keeping her  
propped upright. He is silent, he is concentrating  
hard. We, the house, hold our breath.

And we must have lost track of time because when we release it, the house is bare again. The rocking horse nods forwards. The air slows and stills in rooms. Nothing is ever exactly the same, but it goes back to how it was. We watch the door and wait for somebody to come through it.

