



An Unusual Haunting

The car traveled over curvy one-lane highways snaking through evergreen forests. After several hours, the sea foam-blue house finally came into view. As the car approached it, Laura could almost see her Great-Grandmother Lillian there. She often spent time tending the plants or standing before her easel painting the hummingbirds flitting around the red blooms. For the first time during the long trip, Laura’s often-chatty parents were quiet as her mother navigated the car down the narrow drive toward the house trimmed in white.

The car stopped and Laura hesitated before opening the door. Even though the structure was large enough to contain eight bedrooms in three stories, with all the trees surrounding it, it gave the impression to anyone passing that it was simply a cottage. Laura’s parents had already gotten out of the car—her father carrying her baby brother Jacob and her mother lifting the carrier that contained Callie the cat. Blakely the dog scrambled up onto the large front porch right behind them.

Laura finally opened the car door and stepped outside but didn’t move any further.

“Come on, sweetie,” her mother told her. “I want you to see your room.” She didn’t hesitate but continued on through the front door.

Laura felt very strange being there. Her great-grandmother had passed away the summer before and for months the house remained empty. Everyone in the family had felt very sad, even though Great-Grandmother Lillian had lived a long and very happy life, reaching the age of 96.

Finally, her father's aunt and uncle decided that the house was lonely and needed occupants, especially children. Great-Grandmother Lillian had left it up to the whole family to decide who would live there, and all decided that Laura's young family would be perfect. It made everyone happy that Laura's family now had a home to live in that wasn't a small trailer more than 200 miles away from where most of them lived.

Laura's parents had turned a plot of land at the corner of Main and Elm in a little town called Foster into a lovely little paradise of trees, shrubs and flowering bushes. Their garden became home to many birds and butterflies, until last summer when a strong storm came up suddenly and the wind pushed the very tiny house they lived in onto its side. No one was hurt, but all of Laura's toys, which she liked to keep neatly stored in small woven boxes, were tossed all around and half of the vegetable garden was crushed.

When only Laura and her parents lived there, the very tiny trailer house seemed very cozy, but after her brother Jacob was born, the space felt very tight. In this new house, they had more than enough space for all, including bedrooms for the cousins and aunts and uncles who wanted to visit the shore. The whole family was also more comfortable knowing that this house would most likely not tip over on its side.

Laura collected the antique metal bird cage from the back seat and brought the two finches with her to the front porch. Once she stepped through the front door, she heard her mother call her from the second floor. "Laura! Come up and see the view from the window!"

"In a minute!" Laura set the cage down on a table just past the entryway. The front room was very dark and smelled of old and stale and damp. Some light did stream into the dining room a few feet in front of her, a light coming from the kitchen. In her memories, Laura could see her great-grandmother there, standing in the kitchen doorway holding a cake she baked. "Come,

Laura,” she’d say. “I made a strawberry and rosewater for you, with petals and berries from my garden.” Or, “Here’s a blueberry lemon with fruit from the farm down the road.” Laura always marveled at the fluffy clouds of white of the whipped cream icing—her favorite—that covered every cake.

“Let’s get some light in here!” The sunlight quickly streamed into the rooms as her father raised the shade of each window one by one.

Laura left the first floor behind to join her mother upstairs. Each wooden step squeaked as she put her weight on it, until she reached the bedroom at the top. Through the open door she could see her brother in his playpen looking out the window while her mother pulled a thick, heavy cover from the large bed, sending up a flurry of dust into the air.

When Laura went to the window Jacob gazed up at her, bubbles collecting on his lower lip as he mumbled a few words in a language only he could speak. Laura pretended to understand. “This *is* a nice window, Jacob. And you can almost see the ocean from here.”

“Wait until you see your room on the third floor. I’m not sure if Great-Grandmother Lillian ever showed you that room since it was so hard for her to climb the stairs in those last few years. It was your Great Aunt Sophia’s room when she was growing up, and several girls in the family also stayed in it for long and short periods. Come on. I’ll show you.”

Laura followed her up the more narrow and circular stairs that led to a small entry surrounded by windows on three sides and a door on the fourth. “I always liked it here,” her mother said, surveying the stained glass that painted sun-tinted colors on her face. “It reminds me of a lighthouse.”

Laura could only think of how isolated it seemed. “Will I stay up here by myself?”

“Yes, but your father and I will be just one floor below you, and you can bring up Blakely to sleep with you.” At that moment, the dog came bounding up the stairs, as if responding to his name being called, and plopped down on the floor by the door just before her mother opened it.

The room behind the door was smaller than the one below it, but it had a very large window above the head of the narrow bed. As Laura approached the window, she saw what looked like a carpet of treetops with an occasional roof of a house peeking out amongst them.

Her mother pushed aside the gauzy white curtains. “And look at the ocean from here!” Beyond the carpet of trees, blue waters broken by white-topped waves moved toward the shore and extended to the horizon.

“It’s beautiful.” Laura could imagine how happy her aunts must have felt waking up to this every morning.

Her mother wiped her fingers across a shelf. “It’s very dusty and musty, but look how much space there is for your books, even though the room is very small.”

“I think it’s big enough.” Laura was accustomed to so much less space than this.

“Well, let’s get to making this house our own. There are rags in a bag at the bottom of the steps and a bottle of oil for all the wood, one just for you. And clean sheets in one of the boxes your Dad is unloading. I should check on Jacob while you clean up here.”

“Okay, Mom.” Laura focused on the work that would need to be done to get the room clean enough to move her things into it. After her mother left, something in the corner, on the other side of the bed, caught her eye. A dollhouse.

Laura had always wanted a dollhouse, but there was never enough room. After studying it for a few minutes Laura realized this dollhouse exactly resembled her great-grandmother’s

house, the very house she stood in, with the same number of rooms and painted blue with a white trim. Laura crouched down to look inside and saw the exact same three floors and the exact same beds and furniture, including the shelves in the room on the third floor.

“This is beautiful!” Laura whispered to herself while opening and shutting the doors and nudging the furniture a bit without completely changing its position. “Hmmm.” Laura noticed something was missing—no dust or dirt or cobwebs, like she found in the rest of the room. Surely a spider or two would have liked to have lived in such a nice house.

Laura didn’t think much of it as she returned to work getting the rest of her room ready to move. She occasionally considered all the miniature furniture and other things that she planned to add to the dollhouse.

Soon after settling into bed that night, surrounded by the smell of oiled wood and sun-dried sheets, Laura quickly fell into sleep, tired but satisfied with all she’d accomplished. Not too long after, something woke her and she sat straight up in bed, not sure where she was. She continued to hear sound: high pitched chirps. She blinked several times and realized that Blakely, curled up at the end of the bed, seemed to be chasing something in his sleep and softly barking at something in his dreams.

Laura lay back, sinking into the fluffy down pillow. Moonlight streamed through the large window, illuminating the music box on the chest of drawers and the quilt resting on the chest at the foot of the bed, waiting for colder evenings. The moonlight and Blakely’s noisy nighttime adventures kept Laura from falling back to sleep right away. While she lay awake, Laura thought of many things—whether or not she’d like the new school down the road when she started next month or whether she’d make new friends which she’d always found hard to do.

Blakely finally calmed down into quiet sleep and a few clouds dimmed the moonlight. Now it was time for Laura to fall back into sleep herself.

Her plans were interrupted by the sounds of scratching followed by the occasional bump coming from not too far away. Bugs, she thought as she pulled the covers up over her chin. Blakely slept soundly, and even when a creak broke the silence, he didn't move.

Laura slowly glanced over to the place where the sounds seemed to come from—the dollhouse. Definitely bugs. She rolled over to face away from it, and just as soon as she did, a sound even louder snapped through the stillness, a sound like a small chair falling over. But what came after most startled Laura, a voice exclaiming, “Oh, dear.”

Laura stiffened, then pulled the covers over her head, determined to stay that way the rest of the night. If there were more sounds, she couldn't hear them, and a long time passed before she found herself asleep again.

“How was the bed last night, Ms. Curley?” her father asked her at the breakfast table, tapping his finger against a curl of her auburn hair.

Laura gazed down at the waffle on her plate, her eyelids seeming very heavy. “Okay, I guess.”

Her mother slipped her palm under Laura's chin and tipped her face toward her. “You look very sleepy, honey.”

“Everything's new here.” Laura yawned.

Her mother patted her cheek. “You're right. Sometimes it takes a while to adjust.”

That's it, Laura thought to herself, taking a bite of waffle and slowly chewing. It just takes a while to adjust.

The rest of the day, Laura shadowed her mother in the garden, occasionally stopping her digging to gaze up at the window of her bedroom. More than once she found herself napping under a bench or bush, awoken only by her mother shaking her shoulder to remind her about lunch. Afterwards, Laura chose to sleep on the cushions in the sunroom instead of the bedroom.

That night, Laura dreaded going upstairs. She tried to get her parents to play just one more game of Forest Cottage, but they finally said in unison, “Laura, it’s very late and time for bed.” She finally gave in.

Her father took her up and tucked her in while Blakely and Callie chose different spots on the first floor rather than to spend the night in her bedroom.

Unlike the night before, Laura didn’t fall asleep right away. She stared at the ceiling and made up stories in her head of brave princesses and adventurous fairies, but couldn’t finish any one. The fear that she’d hear something unusual, as she did last night, kept her from concentrating. And the anticipation that she would hear something usual also kept her from falling to sleep.

Finally, when she couldn’t keep her eyes open, she pulled the covers again up to her chin and let herself slip into slumber.

“Excuse me.”

Laura’s eyes popped open. A white glow in the shape of a small person hovered over her chest.

“Excuse me.”

Laura began to shake as her sight adjusted and she could make out the sheer white image of a girl just a few inches from her face. “Y-y-y-es.”

“Oh, good. You’re awake.” The figure flew up into a figure 8 and settled back down to take her place again just above Laura’s chest.

It flies just like an insect, Laura told herself in an attempt not to be so scared. “I’m awake. W-w-what do you want?”

“I want to know if you’re here to stay, or if you’re going to leave.”

“We’re...too...stay.”

After Laura blinked a few time, it looked as if the figure had placed her hands on her own waist while she hovered above her. “I suppose that means you’ll be remaining here in the house. And you brought dolls with you, I see.”

She hoped that whoever this was wouldn’t do anything to harm the Raggedy Ann and the cloth doll she named Angelica, both sitting among her many stuffed animals on the shelf. “Just two.”

“Oh, I met them earlier. I suppose that’s all right. No breakable ones, though. And will those animals be playing with them? You know, the dog and the cat?”

“Blakely and Callie? No. They have their own toys.”

“Good, good. I’ve lived here long enough by myself that I like to know who I will be sharing the bigger house with, and I prefer to live in my own house alone.”

“Of course.” For some reason, Laura felt a little less nervous, but only a little. “I’ll be living here. This is my room now.”

“There are many other rooms in this house, you know.”

Laura sat up and the apparition moved away from her to stand at the end of the bed. Laura rubbed her eyes and after that could see more clearly that this was a girl wearing a long

dress, her hair a mass of uneven and unorganized curls, all shimmering and ivory. “I can ask my parents, but I think they would rather me stay closer to them.”

“Very well, I guess. If you are going to live in the house anyway it doesn’t matter where you sleep. You don’t snore, do you?”

“I don’t snore...I don’t think.”

“Well, I can’t abide snoring.”

Laura blinked again several times, this time to see if she could make the apparition go away. “Can I ask who you are?”

“Who am I? Why I’m Princess Abalone of the Kingdom of Feather Duster. At least I was until that awful Alice did me in.”

“Alice? You mean my Aunt Alice?”

“I don’t know if she’s your aunt or not, but she was the clumsiest girl who ever lived here, and being her only porcelain doll, I ended up in a hundred pieces after she dropped me. I was left, well, like this. Luckily now I’m still in one piece. She didn’t even hold a proper funeral.”

“So you’re a doll ghost?”

“I guess you could think of me that way. All I know is that I am now no longer at risk of being broken, having been broken once before and for the last time. I’m not counting the incident with my arm, but Gladys repaired it with glue. I tried not to hold that against her.”

Laura had no idea who Gladys was. “I would think you’d be happy to be safe from being broken again.”

“That is one advantage.”

“And you can go wherever you want to go and not just where a child takes you.”

“Not entirely. I can only travel within this house and the gardens around it. Still, you do have a point. I suppose you want me to share this room with you.”

“I think we should try.” Laura wasn’t quite sure. “I do have one more question.”

“And what would that be?”

“Are there other ghosts in the house?”

“Other ghosts?” She started to laugh. “Of course there are. There are the ghosts of some of the other people who lived here and even the ghosts of childhood.”

Laura didn’t like the sound of that, living in a house filled with ghosts. “Do they go around scaring people who live here or visit?”

“Not usually.”

“Okay.” She thought about that for a moment. “And what are the ghosts of childhood?”

“The ghosts of childhood are the ones left behind when someone grows up. I’ve even seen Alice’s childhood ghost occasionally, but I avoid her at all costs. I’m sure you can see why.”

“Maybe. Since Alice is still alive, that means that she has a ghost of when she was a child?”

“Exactly. But all of the ghosts of childhood spend most of their time at the beach, like they wanted to do when they were real children. You’ll never spy them here in the house, except during the holidays when they like to slip into all the gifts and make mischief.”

“But what about...” Laura hesitated to ask, but she also wanted to know. “What about my Great-Grandmother Lillian who used to live here?”

The tiny ghost girl tapped her lips and looked up at the ceiling for a moment. “Lillian...such a nice lady...who unlike her sister never bothered me at all.” She gave

Laura a stern look that didn't last long. "You'll see her every once in a while peering around a corner or you might smell what she's baking in the kitchen, although it's nothing that you can eat. Lillian had always wanted to live in Paris, so that's where she spends most of her time haunting, there with the man she calls Charles."

"You mean she and Great Grandfather Charles are both in Paris?!" That was quite a relief, although Laura didn't think she'd be scared of her even if she did decide to live there.

"They are both there. Now that I've answered all your questions, can I get back to my housecleaning, please?" She swooped over to the dollhouse and came back with a miniature broom. "I'm taking my easel to the garden when I'm done. There's nothing more pleasant to paint than a garden at night. And with winter coming soon..." She darted over to the dollhouse and flew inside.

"I like to do things that are quiet, like read and draw and write poetry."

She popped her shimmery head out one window. "What? That's good to know."

As Laura settled into sleep for the first time that night, the clattering sounds no longer made her afraid and she eventually ignored them. She might eventually get used to this unusual roommate, but she could only sleep if she didn't think about what other surprises the house might have in store.