

I was nine when I first met the ghost that lived in my hallway. We were still in the blue house at the time, and it was shortly into autumn. The shutters had just fallen off of the windows as they did every year when the winds began to pick up. My dad slid them into the garage, cracked his back, and swore that he would get them up once the winds died down. He hated the cold though, so he wouldn't get to them until summer. It was rare that we ever had more than a few months of shuttered windows. My mom didn't mind. She never particularly liked them; they served no practical purpose. They were fake, or rather, they were purely cosmetic. The white paint had begun to crack and curl, like we had covered them in eggshells. If it wasn't for the stains left behind in their absence, she often said she would just leave them off.

It was a small, one-story house, but I loved it. All of the rooms were connected by a central hallway that spanned from the front door to the back door like a tree trunk. The rooms budded like leaves and branches, none particularly large, but all quaint and respectable. Or if you were my mother, all stuffy and claustrophobic. I spent much of my childhood outside, so I didn't mind the small rooms. Our backyard spanned out into a small woods, and well beyond into other people's properties. There were no fences, so I went as far as I could, only hindered by the setting sun and yelling neighbors. You could always tell what season it was by what I tracked across the wooden floors of the hallway; mud for spring, grass for summer, leaves for fall, and snow for winter. The world breathed through the open doors of that small blue house.

She appeared on a Sunday; the ghost, I mean. I thought that was odd, because Mom had always said Sunday was the Lord's day. For our family that meant we all had to relax. I thought that applied to everyone. Even ghosts. Religious enough to take a day off, but not

religious enough to actually go to church, we wouldn't leave the house. There was no assurance we would ever be able to get back into our driveway if we did. Our house was on Magnolia, which was just a few blocks away from the town's main church. All of God's disciples used Magnolia in order to complete their pilgrimage. They would come in droves, herded by the stoplight on Park. We avoided the commotion whenever possible.

But Mom had stumbled while cooking breakfast, spilling pancake mix onto our cat, Cloud. His name was all the more fitting. He scuttled out of the kitchen, a trail of soft white powder following behind him. Mom had been suffering from migraines and dizzy spells for probably two or three weeks at this point; Dad insisted we go to the doctor before it got any worse. She insisted that it would pass; it was probably just her boys running her ragged. She turned and gave me a weak wink. Dad insisted. It was better to be safe than sorry. She insisted. He insisted. I insisted that someone needed to finish making breakfast. I didn't pay much mind to their squabble; I was hungry. Cloud certainly wasn't going to come back and let us shake the pancake mix off of him. For days after we would find his snowy pawprints tracked across the hallway.

We went out for breakfast. I don't remember where, though it was the same no matter where we went. I got something sugary, Dad got coffee, and Mom didn't order. It was difficult for her to eat before noon; her nausea was worst in the morning. It had been for as long as I can remember. Dad felt bad eating without her, though he never said that was why. Always just a simple, "I'll eat something later."

I don't remember much about the hospital. I just remember waiting. "Wait in the lobby, please;" "he'll be in, just *wait* one moment;" "can you *wait* in the car, sweetie?" I spent

Nathan Scott
Scott223@purdue.edu

the whole day waiting. By the time we finally left I felt as if all of my energy had been scrubbed away. Every new doctor to enter took a bit of my spirit as they rubbed at their hands; they washed their hands to wear us down, so we would fight less. The sterilization was just a byproduct. Buzzing florescent lighting bleached the rooms of color as if to sterilize everything, even our eyes. Rubbing alcohol and urine wafted in the air, swirling about like the terminal patient's cocktail of choice. To this day I can't drink whiskey without it reminding me of that hospital.

Everything was done to ensure I understood as little as possible. They spoke in code on the way back home, their meaning concealed behind bright words. I think my parents thought that if I didn't understand what was going on, it wouldn't hurt me as much. Of course, that's not how cancer works. Cancer doesn't care if you know about it. It infiltrates your life and perverts everything it touches. Even before I knew the word, cancer had invaded my family's life. For all the power contained in language, it's difficult to come to terms with how little nature gives a shit.

But I wouldn't discover that for a while. It wasn't like I was listening in the car. I could barely keep my eyes open. It was only midday, but behaving in hospitals took a lot of energy. Everything was stripped of feeling and replaced with drawn on smiles and hushed tones; even as a child I could see that. It took maturity and my parents' whispered threats to keep me from screaming. I was exhausted. I could tell the situation took a toll on my father too. He was normally very quiet when driving; he would slide into his seat and gaze out in front of him dreamily. Driving relaxed him. Nothing got to him on the road.

That's how I first realized something was wrong. He leaned over to my mother, stiff and awkward like a broken bone jutting out of skin. They spoke, hushed and with fake smiles painted on their faces like the doctors. His smile broke as we approached our house. He cursed through clenched teeth. The churchgoers had finished their commune with God and were heading to lunch. A parade of piousness formed in front of our driveway, inching forward with no sign of ending. My dad slammed his hands against the steering wheel. My mom frowned, rubbing her forehead. She whispered something; probably telling him to calm down or be quieter. I couldn't hear. He replied loud, hand outstretched gesturing forward, "If God really loved us, then he would have made all of his disciples hungry an hour later."

By the time the procession had passed, my dad's road rage had fizzled, though not before I learned a few new words. He swung the front door open lazily and dragged himself into the hallway, his arm pulled tightly around my mom's waist. She laid her head on his shoulder, pressing her weight into him. They walked sloppily, like they were taking part in a three-legged race. I pushed hurriedly past them, eager to be done with people. I longed for the solitude of my room. One of them asked how I was feeling. The other asked if I was hungry. I was angry about losing my morning, so I replied gruffly in as few words as I could manage.

"I just want to sleep."

Dad protested. Sunday was family day.

"He's alright," my mother said, giving a thin-lipped smile. "We'll be in the living room if you need us. We could watch a movie when you wake up." They closed the front door behind them, but didn't move farther into the hall. They stood holding each other; their eyes following me. I didn't respond. I shuffled quickly down the hall, consumed by my own tribulations.

I slipped behind the door to my room at the far end of the hall. This was the first Sunday we hadn't spent as a family, and I took it personally. Mom said she was fine. I didn't understand why we had to waste all of our time, all of my time. I flung my covers over my head, muttering some of the words I learned from my dad during the car ride. When the hot, stale air forced me to peek out, I shifted until I found a comfortable position. I don't remember how far into my tantrum it was until sleep finally quieted my spirit, but I do remember waking. A soft, high pitched hum pushed its way into my room. Somewhere between sleep and consciousness, I sat up in bed and stared towards my door.

My door had the unfortunate tendency to squeak. No matter how much oil was sprayed onto its hinges, any movement was accompanied by a shrill warbled whine. Like dragging a nail across the ridged surfaces of a record, the sound wobbled throughout the long hallway. Opening the door quickly would result in a briefer but louder whine. To prevent the wind, Cloud, or any other unwanted presence from disturbing the household, I would latch my door closed. We all knew not to open the door unless it was time for everyone to be awake. I was surprised then when a silhouette stood in my doorway.

It's difficult to say exactly what I saw. My vision swung and blurred, sleep still clinging onto my eyes. The figure hung on the door; long flowing caused forced her silhouette to sway. Only part of her body and head showed, the rest hidden behind the door. My windows were covered in thick blinds, so my eyes were ill adjusted to the sudden scar of light. The hallway light exaggerated the edges of her form, making them seem long and stretched like staring at lights after being in the pool for too long.

At first I thought my mother had come to wake me. She was shaped similarly, small and slender with long wispy hair, but something about her presence frightened me. She seemed frail, gripping the door for support. I couldn't make out her face; a thick shadow blanketed her features. My throat tightened, unsure if I should scream or speak. Being only nine at the time, I did the only thing I could think to do. I pulled the blankets over my head and pressed my eyes closed. If I ignored the figure, it would leave.

And I was right. When I had gathered the courage to peek out of my quilted sanctuary, she was gone. My door was left ajar; the wind rocked it back and forth, a soft hum sounding from its hinges. For a moment I thought I had imagined the whole thing. But I was a stubborn child, and I quickly regained confidence in my infallible experiences.

I called for my mother. My voice was pinched, coming out like a squeak. I cleared my throat and tried again, this time louder and more urgent. It was important that I believed I wasn't scared. I reassured myself I just wanted to make sure she knew that I had seen someone. For her safety. Mom shuffled past the door, flooding the room with golden incandescence. I brought my hand to my eyes, shielding against the sudden light.

"I saw," my voice quivered, "a person." Eyes drooped, she smiled with loving disbelief. She placed herself next to me and wrapped her thin arms around me.

"Who did you see, darling?" She spoke quietly like we were sharing secrets. I told her of the figure and of its shadowed face. I told her how it watched me from the door. I told her I thought the house was haunted.

"It sounds like you have a protector," she said, squeezing me.

I didn't understand.

“She’s just watching you. To make sure you’re safe.”

I assured her, my voice tight from her embrace, I didn’t need protection, especially not while I was sleeping. She finished her hug with one final squeeze and kissed me on the forehead.

“She’s watching you for me. I can’t be with you all the time after all.” She stood up. I stayed sitting, blankets still wrapped around my legs. My mother had asked a ghost to haunt me. I wasn’t sure if that was something I wanted. I had plenty of living people looking after me already; I didn’t think I needed a dead person too. Before I had too much time for contemplation, Mom ushered me out of bed. I was told we were going to do something fun. It was not the first time or the last time I was forced to enjoy myself.

Ms. Berkley was my 4th grade teacher. I don’t remember much about her; it’s interesting what your mind holds onto over the years. Her face is a mystery, but I do remember she loomed over me and my classmates. She would lean over us when she talked, forcing us to crane our necks in order to look her in her eyes. I also remember calling her Ms. Bark-ley under my breath. She had a low scratchy voice for a woman that would come out in short yips. Whenever she yelled at someone, which was frequently if my memory serves me, her scoldings were like a small territorial dog. We were far from the best behaved class, but there were times that I genuinely felt she had it out for us. The other times were excuses for why I had been sent home with a note.

I brought the tale of my ghost to class the next day at school. Some of my classmates met the story with wonder and amusement, their wide eyes begging me to continue. Some even had ghost stories of their own, assuring the others my tale was true because of something

they had also encountered. And some disbelieved everything I said, plaguing the classroom with “nuh-uh” and “no way.” One classmate in particular, Randy, was not content with just his peers knowing that I was lying; Ms. Berkley had to know too. He ran up to her desk before we all had settled for the day and told her my story. Eyebrows furrowed and cheeks puffed in exasperation, he demanded something be done.

I had never liked Randy. The year before, he had told the entire class that Santa didn’t exist, bringing a couple firm believers to tears. He was more concerned with being right than he was with having friends. I think Ms. Berkley knew this, and probably wouldn’t have done anything more than tell Randy to go to his seat. But I had had enough of him. Hearing him spout off his self-righteous claims put my nine year old restraint over the edge. Using some of the words I had learned from my dad, I declared loudly and in front of the entire class what I thought of Randy.

Though I’m sure everyone agreed with me, Ms. Berkley didn’t approve of my word choice. As soon as it left my mouth, I knew I was in trouble. That didn’t stop her from feeling the need to explain how much I was in trouble. Her face turned so red I was sure she was going to burst. “Not in *my* classroom.” “I expect *more* from you.” “Your parents would be ashamed.” I only remember pieces of her tirade, but I do remember feeling everyone’s eyes. My skin felt too small, like I could have crawled out of it. When she finally stopped and told me to go to the principal’s, I practically sprinted. I was just glad to be out of the room.

The principal didn’t seem too concerned about my expanding vocabulary, but nonetheless insisted that I call my parents. Looking back, I’m sure there were dozens of kids coming in everyday for saying things they weren’t supposed to, but at the time the principal’s

calm, possibly apathetic treatment felt like a special kindness. I had never been in any serious trouble before and was convinced that the principal's office was only for the worst punishments. I felt I had gotten off easy.

Even my dad didn't seem to care. Normally Mom decided punishments, but she didn't answer her phone, forcing us to go down the chain of command. He answered the phone gruffly, but quickly changed his tone when he realized the unknown number was the school's line. I explained what happened. He answered with silence. "Dad? Are you still there?" He was. He decided I had had enough school and was going to bring me home for the day. Mom still wasn't feeling well, so he hadn't gone to work yet. He'd be right over, just as soon as he tucked Mom in.

The car ride back home was silent. I sat directly behind him on the driver's side. He glanced back at me occasionally through the rearview mirror, his eyes isolated and magnified. I kept my eyes on my window, doing everything I could to avoid his gaze. I was sitting like an inmate in confinement unsure of my sentence. But he hadn't said a word since he apologized to the principal on my behalf. I remember sneaking glances at my father out of the corner of my vision, trying to figure out just how in trouble I was. His expression was blank; his jaw moved up and down slowly, chewing on his lower lip.

I clung onto the door handle, pulling myself farther behind his seat. When he finally spoke, I nearly jumped out of the car. I panicked, pulling on the handle. The door opened briefly; cold air buffeted against my grip. I slammed the door shut. My father paused, chuckled slightly, and continued.

"So what's this about a ghost?"

I told him of the figure and of its shadowed face. I told him how it watched me from the door. I told him how Mom had asked it to watch over me.

“I see.” He said. He pulled into the driveway, unbuckled his seatbelt, and sat back. I went for the door, but stopped when I realized he wasn’t leaving. “Mom isn’t feeling well.” He shifted to look back at me. “It’s probably best if we just leave her in her room to rest for a while.” I nodded.

We spent the rest of the day on the couch trying to keep ourselves entertained with daytime television. I wouldn’t recommend it. Between the reruns and soap operas, there is nothing for fathers and sons on daytime television. However it did give us some time to talk. I don’t recall bringing up anything serious, but it was the first time I can remember that we were together, just the two of us. It was far from the last.

Mom had been getting steadily worse, but she had her good days and bad days. There were the days that she was my mother, and there were the days when she was the tumor. I didn’t know yet why she was changing. Most of the time I thought she was being cranky or that I had done something wrong unintentionally. My dad would try to recant her statements, saying she was just confused or that she didn’t feel well. But I didn’t understand. He had yet to tell me about Mom’s brain cancer, and I guess she didn’t feel like telling me was her responsibility. I assumed that she was doing it intentionally.

Most days I did my best to avoid her. If I needed something, I would either find a way to do it myself or go to Dad. If I wanted to talk to someone, I’d go to my friends. I would sleep later and later on Sundays to avoid family time. I still loved her; she was my mom, but I began to dread seeing her. I wasn’t sure what would set her off.

I didn't see the ghost again for about a month. Some nights I would hear her wailing throughout the hallway. I would gather the courage to rise from my bed and press an ear to my door, but my courage always stopped there. Another wail like a stray cat would send me running back to the shelter of my blankets. Eventually I understood the wailing was a way of saying she was watching me. She was there.

I'm not sure the exact day she returned, but there was a thick blanket of snow on the ground at the time. I had always liked the first snow. It meant hot chocolate, snowmen, and large blankets. Dad refused to acknowledge Christmas until there was snow on the ground, so the first snow also meant the beginning of the Christmas season. But this wasn't the first snow. We were well into winter, and I had grown tired of the cold.

It had been snowing all day. The land was shimmering white like someone had covered the world in vanilla frosting. There had been talk of cancelling school in the morning. We hadn't had any snow days yet, so I felt like we were due for one. I stayed in my pajamas, eyes glued to the computer monitor. I waited and prayed that more snow would fall; today was not a day for learning. Dad refreshed the screen once more: Two hour delay. I was cheated.

Unfortunately for Ms. Berkley, I had already shut off my brain; the extra two hours in the morning was not enough time to turn it back on. No matter how loud or how much she barked, I was unable to pay attention. My eyes were glued to the white scenery out the window. I was sent home with a note, detailing how inattentive I was and recommended steps my parents take in order to help prevent it in the future. I was informed that she sent an email as well, so "there is no use hiding it. Understand?" I did.

Dad wasn't back from work when I got home, so no one had shoveled our sidewalk. I trudged my way home from the bus stop across the street, and flung open the front door, basking in the sudden warmth. I stomped on the hardwood floors, clearing my boots. Speckled from the dirt and gravel trapped in the snow, the debris formed a faded face. I smiled at my footprints. I stomped again. With each stomp, the print left behind was more and more faded.

My mom called out from her room, "Is that you, darling?" I groaned. Whenever she wasn't feeling well she would lie down in there with the curtains drawn. I had learned by now that trying to hold a conversation with her like this did neither of us any good. But, she insisted I come see her.

I slunk past her door. One foot in the hallway, my toes tugged at the seam between the hallway and her room. I leaned against the doorframe. Dim light struggled against the room's thick curtains; only the deep reds found their way into the room. Squinting to find her, I fumbled for the light switch. She gave a deep throaty hum. "Keep it off, please." She had a headache, and the light hurt her eyes.

She wanted to know what the sound was. I told her I was stamping snow off my boots. "Still snowing?" It was in fact *still* snowing. "How was sledding?" I had learned by this point that there was no point in correcting her. She was stuck in her bed, while the rest of the world happened around her. It was better to just go along.

"It was fine." She reminded me to put the sleds in the garage and to get Dad to help me take off my boots. "Ok, Mom." She began speaking before she had words ready to say; a droning hum left her parted lips.

“Thank you, darling. I love you.” I loved her too. I closed the door gently behind me, and headed to the living room. I slipped the note from my backpack and placed it on Dad’s seat at the table. Flopping on the couch, I waited for him to get home.

Dad came home like a flood. Moving forward slowly but surely, he pushed away anything in his path and left behind remnants of his workday. First his boots were slipped off at the entry way, then his coat was hung on the door handle to my parents’ room, and finally his briefcase was thrown on the couch next to my backpack. He shuffled up to the note and read it without a word. He hooked a chair with his foot and dragged it out from the table; sitting down with a plop, he blew a thin stream of air.

He wasn’t pleased, but I don’t remember what he said about it. So it couldn’t have been that bad. Probably something about education being important and to always respect my teachers. It wasn’t the first time I had heard that speech, and it wasn’t the last. It was given like a performance, grand and verbose. It’s one of the best things I learned from him, as I’m sure it was one of the better things he learned from his dad. There isn’t much to inherit, but at least I got that speech.

Mom didn’t join us for dinner. Some days she did. Some days she didn’t. This happened to be one of the days she wasn’t feeling up to it. Dad learned to cook pretty fast, and luckily for me, he found that he enjoyed it. He used to cook a huge batch of curly pasta, the ones that look like bowties, and that’s what we would eat for weeks. Each night he would find a way to make the dinner unique. Some nights it was a new sauce, some nights it was some kind of casserole, and some nights he just chopped up hotdogs, throwing them in the mix.

He asked me to clean off the table and do the dishes. Of course I was going to, but being the kind of day that it was, I felt the need to put up a bit of a fight. With a grin, I told him he had to do his chores before I would do mine. Mom said he needed to put up the sleds. A slender smile did its best to stifle my laughter. He stared at me, one eyebrow raised slightly higher than the other. I explained.

“Don’t make fun of your mother.” He let his words out like he was being deflated. He seemed smaller after saying them. I defended myself the best that I could. I wasn’t making fun of her; she was just being silly. She was saying silly things. He took a seat on the couch and gestured me over to him. “Leave the dishes.”

Most of his words didn’t mean much to me at the time. I had heard them before from movies and shows; other families had been affected—Aunt Carol had breast cancer, but other than that—they had always been far away. They were explanations to a problem that I could choose to ignore. It was the first time that I ever heard the word cancer in a way that gave it meaning. Before, it was storybook black magic, cursing the kingdom. If the story got too scary, I could close it, but I was in this story. My mother had been the one to take a bite from the poison apple.

“When will she get better?” I asked. In the movies there was always some miraculous cure or recovery at the end, brought about by the love and determination of the family. My dad waved his head back and forth, refusing to commit to a nod or a shake.

“She might not get better.” He asked if I understood everything that was going on. The heating unit buzzed, pushing warm, stale air around the house. I thought so. He added that some people might be coming into the house to help take care of Mom. I protested; I didn’t

like the idea of strangers in my house. “They would only be here to help,” I was assured. He doubted we would even see them very often. “The ghost can watch Mom,” I offered. I didn’t need to be watched over anymore; I could watch myself. My dad smiled. Unfortunately, caretakers have to be corporeal.

Like most nights we spent it on the couch watching television. Between reruns and for-TV movies it was far from stimulating, but it filled any silences. The couch became a limbo before bed, a space to fall asleep before I was really ready to sleep. Most nights my dad would gather my limp and drooling body and tuck me into my own bed. Other nights we would both fall asleep. We would wake up in the middle of the night to a man yelling about some uselessly specific item that we *had to buy, right now!*

I awoke that night to the soft high pitch hum of my door. Assuming it was my dad, I called out for him drowsily. The hum stopped. Soft blue light floated from the hallway into my room; the moon was bright and alive. Squinting, my eyes adjusted slowly, but I recognized the silhouetted figure. She clung onto the door as before; the outline of knuckles jutted suddenly from the door’s otherwise straight edge.

“You’re the ghost.” I spoke in whispers, afraid if I spoke too loud I would scare her away. She hummed an affirmation, swaying slightly on the doorframe. Her head shifted revealing her long hair tied back into a rough circle.

“I’m *your* ghost.” Her words fluctuated in pitch and length dramatically like a bedsheet spirit. A breathy laugh pushed itself past my tired lungs. I didn’t expect a ghost to sound like a *ghost*.

“Why do you talk like that?” I asked. She hummed softly, as if she were pondering a difficult question.

“Why do *you* talk like *that*?” she replied in the same sing-song way. I couldn’t help but laugh. I didn’t really have an answer for her; it’s just how I talked. “And *this* is just how *I* talk.” She swayed on the door like the wind.

She asked me how my day was. I told her. I told her about the little things: the things I really wanted to talk about. I told her about the secret spot Derek and I had found on the playground. There was a parting in some bushes that made a perfect little spot to hide out. I scraped my knee coming out of it. I slipped on some ice and cut right through my pants. It didn’t hurt, but Ms. Berkley made me go inside to get a bandage. I didn’t like Ms. Berkley; she always yelled at me. The ghost listened with a quiet intensity, swaying slowly on the door like a child first learning how to use a swing.

It was some time before I ran out of things to say. The past two weeks had been bottled inside; it was a relief to let it out. Finally the only noise left was the soft rhythmic hum as the ghost swayed back and forth on the door. I yawned. It was time for bed. I pulled the blankets up to my neck and curled into a ball.

“Your mother is worried about you,” she said, her voice now pinched and cracked. I turned to face the door, doing my best to stay lying down. I didn’t reply. Confused by her meaning, I stared at her and then into the hallway when I couldn’t stand to look at the same black space for so long. “She loves you.” She stood in silence for a moment before disappearing behind the door. A sharp whine cut the air, as she drew the door closed just a bit too quickly.

"I know," I whispered back into the darkness.

She died on a Tuesday. It was Summer. She was in bed as she had been the three months before. Joyce, my mom's hospice caretaker, came out to the front yard where Dad and I were grilling hotdogs. Really he was grilling; I was running around the yard, yelling for him to grill faster. Dad apologized to Joyce, though she was quite used to the noise by that point. She didn't respond. She walked slowly, her large build shaking with each step she took. Dad set down his spatula and faced her. She said something I couldn't hear, rubbing her forehead with the back of her hand while she spoke. He nodded and closed the grill. She hugged him. We had all been expecting it. The doctor had been saying *anytime now* for a month or so. Frankly as far as I could tell, the person that was my mother had passed away a long time ago. I thought I was ready.

The funeral was on the following Sunday. Both sides of the families came. Some friends showed up. A few people spoke. With red faces and broken smiles, their words echoed slightly against the blank walls of the funeral home. I didn't hear anything they said. I stayed glued to my father's side, using his suit jacket as a tissue when none were available. Which was often. The families and friends all marched one by one past the casket. They said their last goodbyes, and then turned to shake hands with my father. He did his best to avoid eye contact, picking a spot on the wall, the floor, or their outfit to fixate on. A few clasped around him without saying a word.

After the parade of sullen faces and trembling words, it was time to move the coffin. Dad insisted on being a pallbearer. He grasped onto the cold brass until his fingers were red

and his knuckles white. But despite it all, his grip slipped every time they lifted. A second try. A third try. A fourth...

Dad leaned over the casket, his back heaving. Sucking in air through his teeth, he pinched the bridge of his nose and sobbed. He wiped his slick hands on his pants, and wrung them against the brass that refused to move her. Each person who came to take his place, he pushed away, anchoring himself to the casket. A fog of friends and family rolled in, but I could still hear the waves crashing against the shore.

I stood next to my grandfather, wiping my nose on my jacket. He leaned down and smiled through a damp beard, assuring me that everything was alright. I clasped his hand and squeezed. We pushed our way outside, hand in hand, and waited. He talked about the sun. It shined for my mother, he said, but I wasn't looking towards the sun. I was looking at the door. Dad and the other pallbearers followed shortly behind us, leading the casket to the hearse. His eyes were piercing red, staring intently forward; his lips were pushed together into a thin, trembling line. He moved forward like a march, determined, steady. The coffin slid gingerly in: a wooden box into a larger metal box. They shut the black, metal doors of the hearse, closing my mother inside. Dad stood as still as he could manage as it pulled away; my grandfather placed a shaky hand on his shoulder. My dad placed his hands in his pockets. I stumbled forward, sniffing snot back into my nose. I pulled at my dad's sleeves clutching onto the fabric around his wrists. In one steady motion, he slid his hands from his pockets and scooped me into his arms. Squeezing me tight into his chest, he blew a raspberry onto my cheek. And no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't help but smile.

The house felt empty without anyone there to haunt it. We eventually moved to the small apartment down on Main. I think Dad felt the same way I did. Mom was in every room of that house. Every squeak, every whine, every hum: she was there. We moved to get away, but I swear I see her every time a door squeaks just a little too loud.