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Category: Short Story

Beatrice's House

Beatrice's new house could only be called a Gothic castle. The estate listing had shied away from it. "Nineteenth-century mansion," it claimed. "Twelve bedrooms, two bath. Picture windows. Expansive ballroom. Quiet neighborhood in good school district. Comfortable for one; do not apply if you have been previously cursed, are unhappily married, or have previously displeased a spirit. Less haunted than it could be."

"Did you see it before you bought it?" asked Corrine, a friend who Beatrice perhaps would not have chosen to help her move if she had known anyone else with a truck.

"Yes," said Beatrice, serenely unloading a box of books.

"Do you see it now?" Corrine pressed. Beatrice looked up. The house sat atop a thin flight of stone stairs embedded in the hillside and was surrounded by a low brick wall. There were turrets and gargoyles, and piles of rotting leaves that had remained months into summer.

"Yes," Beatrice said happily.

As soon as all her boxes were unpacked, the microwave promptly broke. Beatrice called the manufacturer and was informed that the company had been converted into a paper napkin factory thirty-five years ago. She was then directed to an all-purpose electrician, who arrived with a patchy beard and a concerning lack of tools, peered at the microwave, and told her that it had been destroyed by violent slamming of the door.

"But I haven't slammed the door," said Beatrice, charitably not mentioning that the main plight of the microwave was most likely the fact that it was forty years old.

"And," the electrician continued in an accusatory tone, "It was installed much after the original building of the house." He removed the microwave and took it away with him, promising a replacement in a timely manner. Beatrice never saw him again and learned to pop popcorn on top of the stove.

The house came partially furnished, which had not been mentioned in the advertisement. Each bedroom had a steel bedframe and a canopy, though only one had a towering wardrobe and bookshelves built into the walls. Beatrice designated this as the master bedroom and moved in. It smelled sharply of peppermint, a smell that even her own blankets and books took on. At nine in the evening, every room in the house was permeated with the smell of cigar smoke. When Beatrice sat on the windowsill of the largest window, which depicted a fox-hunt in stained glass, she smelled damp, ancient earth. Once she fell asleep there and woke up with twigs in her hair and blackberry juice staining her mouth.

No one would visit Beatrice in her new house. Old friends fell away, and neighbors who intended to bring housewarming gifts made it halfway up the drive before suddenly remembering something else they had to do. Beatrice preferred to be alone, but she had the sort of face that invited the sharing of secrets and an unfortunate inability to say no. Her new house, which she had come to think of as its own entity, did her job for her. Its companionship was the sort that did not demand conversation, did not invite pleasantries, and did not expect anything but exactly what she was. At night, she heard footsteps on the stairs and doors experimentally opening and closing. A voice beside her head said, "Cold sort of night. It's this haphazard insulation. I told them, but did they listen?"

Beatrice, who knew that they never did listen, no matter who they were, went to sleep feeling comforted.

The next morning, in a misguided attempt to locate sugar for her coffee, Beatrice entered what she believed to be a pantry, descended several flights of stairs without registering a problem, and found herself in a large, maze-like tangle of halls that she firmly believed to be below sea level. The halls were lined with paintings that seemed to increase in intensity of ridiculousness as Beatrice walked.

First there was a somewhat mundane portrait of a short-haired woman and a long-haired man. The woman wore a print dress that buttoned down the side and had a wristwatch fastened around her ankle. The man, who resembled a scarecrow more than any far-reaching subspecies of human, wore an ill-fitting suit and a necktie knotted

around his forehead. Both wore wide, mocking grins.

Next was a portrait of a woman whose hair, eyes, and skin all seemed to be the same shade of pale gold, as if she had been dipped into a vat of paint. She wore tinsel twined through her hair which appeared to have been silver at some point and remained so near the ends. The tinsel that touched her hair, however, was gold, as was a patch of her dress where her hand rested.

As her desire for coffee increased, Beatrice walked more quickly through the halls, passing without a glance paintings of a woman with graceful, spiraling antlers, a man who played the piano by lifting the lid and touching the strings, and a young girl with smooth rocks pressed ornamentally into her collarbones.

"It's all well enough," said Beatrice to herself, "These artistic things. But this early in the morning, it's rather difficult to appreciate it. Not a very efficient way to design a house, either."

"That's what I said, too," said a voice from the walls. "You come down to see a picture of Aunt Millie, and next thing you know, it's eleven at night and you're looking at Stevie Ellerson's treason hearing."

"My feelings exactly," said Beatrice, turning in a likely direction, which became much more unlikely when it turned into a dead end. She went down another flight of stairs and entered a small room covered wall-to-wall in paintings of a pale girl with long red curls and a soft, round face. There were so many almost identical pictures that looking quickly from one to another gave the illusion of movement.

"Have you ever loved someone beyond all reason?" the walls asked plaintively. The girl on the walls beamed, showing deep dimples. Her shoulders were slightly sunburned and she seemed to radiate golden light, the sort that only exists when one looks upon unfamiliar beauty from an unsurpassable distance.

"No," said Beatrice honestly. She was sensible and intelligent and very seldom imagined that anyone in her acquaintance was a faultless deity.

"Don't you ever wish," said the walls, "That you could?"

"Sometimes," said Beatrice, slowly and with great shame.

"That's all right," said the walls. "No one can be sensible all the time." The girl on the walls ran her fingers through her hair, wrote her name in tiny block letters in the margins of notebook paper, sliced tomatoes, listened to mediocre music, pulled blankets up to her chin, made silly faces, flew on airplanes, danced with no regard to onlookers, slammed screen doors, and in these and other ways went about her life entirely adored for all the sensible and senseless things she did.

"She didn't have to be perfect," said the walls fondly. "Just true."

"But only one person can live in this house," said Beatrice. "How could you have seen all this?"

"No," said the walls. "It's comfortable for one. You don't have to be comfortable to be happy. Do you truly think that you are alone here?"

"I must be," said Beatrice. "I'm comfortable."

"Very sensible," said the walls. "The door on the right leads to the kitchen."

Beatrice went through the door and made coffee. She put it in her largest mug, foreseeing a great need for caffeine, and was handed a spoon to stir it with.

"Thank you," said Beatrice calmly. "Will you have some? It's a new pot."

"I will, if you don't mind," no one said. Beatrice got out another mug.