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The Haunting of Martina Luzuriaga

Martina felt the ghost before she saw it—a prickling sensation ran up her calves and forearms. The morning sunlight slanting into the foyer was refracted by some trick of the air into the shape of a person, and the dust motes caught in the beams of light danced around a solidity that wasn't quite there, defining the contours of a man. Once she'd spotted him, though, she couldn't un-see him—his form leaped out of nooks, corners, passageways. It worked best when she looked at him out of the corner of her eye. When she had stared long enough, the image her eyes took in would crystallize and the ghost would emerge as though everything around him had gone flat and he was the only three-dimensional thing, as though he were standing before a painted backdrop.

She regarded him calmly, waiting for him to do or say something. He wasn't a trick of her eyes—she'd blinked once and squinted to check—but whether her brain was playing with her, she couldn't tell. He said nothing, just stood there looking at her. She wearied of the tension and broke the silence.

"Have you come for me?"

"No," he—it—replied.

She surprised herself by reacting with impatience and disappointment.

"What, then? I've a morning's chores to do."

"Nothing. I'm just here."

"Can ghosts lie? Are you allowed to?"

"To lie, I'd have to have some sense of truth, which I don't."

"You're a queer one. Philosophy at this hour?"

"I suppose we don't lie. It's all the same to us."

"Well—stay out of my way. I've a full morning of chores I have to do."

"You won't even notice me."

"I doubt that."

She went about her chores, sensing him as he followed her around the house. Occasionally she would spot him when she stared too long at something. Sometimes she caught his movement out of the corner of her eye. He said nothing, made no sound, which was fine with her, and by noon she had dismissed him as one of the fancies of old people. She had lunch by herself, eavesdropping on her maids Elsa and Dada as they prattled over their meal in the kitchen. But when she finished and rose to give them instructions for the afternoon, she suddenly saw him, out of the corner of her eye, standing by the oven as though he were warming himself.

"Why are you still here?" she snapped. "Don't stay here."

"There's nothing I can do. I can't leave."

She remembered where she was and glanced nervously at the two girls, who stared at her, their spoons still hovering before their open mouths. She clucked her tongue and left. Now they would tell her brother that she was turning senile.

She was angry at the haunting, but her own good sense told her that he was right; nothing could be done by anyone.

He just stayed there, at the edge of her sight, very quietly, for the rest of the day. He never called attention to himself, and at first she would be startled at glimpsing him suddenly. However, as she had done to other disturbances in the past, she ignored him, knowing that he would eventually go away or become part of the house.

Her home had stood alone on Lizardo Road since after the War, when times were good, or at least better. Her father had built it when his eldest son moved away to the colegio, believing that after college the boy would return home, get married, and start a new generation of Luzuriagas under the same roof. What happened was that the children lived in the house while they got their bearings as far married life was concerned, and then acquired a home of their own somehow, still within the city, but at its outskirts, where the newer, posher subdivisions were. After the war, Lizardo Road fell into disrepute and declined in stature, mainly because the center of town shifted when the cement plaza was built. The vacant lots were soon occupied by low boxlike buildings that housed machine part stores and hardware supply shops.

Over the years, Martina's family paid little attention to these changes, since very little changed within the boundaries of their property. Her father and mother seemed not to notice how the neighborhood had gone to seed, and so Martina had grown up believing that all things in the world eventually settled, found their level, and stayed there, as her own life eventually did. Her father died when she was 29, and her mother followed soon after. She herself remained unmarried. Her brothers and sisters would visit her every so often with their families, but she didn't need any help from them—she lived a simple life, and the money that was left to her would last until long after she died. Her share of what she thought of as the "live" assets—the land, the machinery, the sugar trading firm—she put in the hands of her eldest brother, Rodrigo, to be kept in trust for her nieces and nephews. She kept the house in good condition, although there wasn't much she could do about the gradual air of disrepair that descended over it. When her brothers and sisters visited she felt that she expended extra effort making herself appear "all right," that she was fine on her own. She gave her nephews and nieces expensive gifts long after they expected to keep receiving gifts from her. (They didn't tell her, but they found her gifts old-fashioned—no one gave or received photo albums, towels, or socks anymore, for some reason.) She was quaint, charming, and they tolerated her for this.

It was her steely acceptance of the march of time, she thought, that allowed her to respond to the sudden appearance of a ghost in her house with calm and disdain. None of the most awful occurrences in her life had any real, lasting effect on her, and she was not the superstitious or religious sort. Still, his presence—more that he was a he than that he was present—could create very awkward situations.

She thought of this that evening as she got ready to bathe. She wondered if he was in her bedroom, or waiting in the bathroom, perhaps, watching her but not saying anything, not showing himself. She had completed her day without incident, although the prickly sensation persisted, but then her day had not required her to undress. It was only when her nightly ritual was threatened with disruption that she began to see the problems of having a male spirit in the

house.

She spent a full ten minutes inspecting every corner of her bedroom, looking behind her dresser; inside, above, and behind her armoire; inside the closets; in the corner behind the door; under the bed. She slipped furtively from her room and down the stairs to the bathroom, hoping not to be followed. In the bathroom, she took down the robes and nightgowns hanging from their hooks, covered the full-length mirror behind the door with a towel, drew back the shower curtain and draped it from the rod, kept the medicine cabinet door and the hamper lid open. Then she stopped and asked herself what she was so worried about.

It wasn't fear, certainly, although she had yet to grow accustomed to his sudden appearances in her peripheral vision. She was probably most apprehensive about the unfamiliarity of men in general—she had not lived at such close quarters with a man since her youngest brother finally married and moved away. The repeated warnings of the nuns at La Consolacion College were just faint echoes now. She surprised herself for the second time that day by admitting that whatever innate modesty she once had simply refused to awaken anymore. She released the shower curtain, restored the robes and nightgowns to their rightful places, shut the medicine cabinet and the hamper, and let the matter rest.

Modesty is only a form of vanity, she mused. What was it, after all, but a secret belief that one has something precious, of value, that must be kept hidden from view? Who would care about her shriveled body anyhow? Certainly not her. She undressed with deliberation and lifted the edge of the towel from the mirror, playing peek-a-boo with her image, exposing first one breast and then the other. Then she found herself doing something she had never done before—she removed the towel completely and faced her reflection.

The white tiles and yellowed grout and lime-encrusted chrome threw fluorescent light on her body, making her look like a thing of marble or a sea creature, pale and shiny, yet impossibly detailed—lines and grooves interwoven with blue, green, and purple veins. Bone pushed against her skin at angles, and elsewhere the flesh sagged, gathered itself into folds and flaps, not even bothering to suggest contour anymore. Her skin looked as tired as she felt. And it was appropriate.

I have no more vanity, she thought. Now I can look at myself in the mirror because there no longer is anything unbearably fine and beautiful that is called me, my body. How strange, though, that I am no longer ashamed. She hung the towel from its hook and stepped into the tub.

At dinner, the ghost stood next to the sideboard the way a proper servant should, outclassing the two slouching girls that passed for househelp these democratic days. After laying her place and arranging the serving dishes around it, they would retreat to their quarters beside the kitchen to watch the evening soap operas. Martina was secretly thankful for the ghost's company, but took pains to ignore him, afraid that she would see a knowing smirk on his face if she were to look up. She did have some modesty left, after all. To her knowledge, he didn't move at all during the meal and could have been no more than another piece of furniture.

She slid into bed in a rush, half-afraid that a cold hand would grab her ankle if she stood beside her bed too long, but lay awake in the dark listening to the house creak as it cooled and thought about the ghost.

She knew no one of that age who had died, and neither Elsa nor Dada had been called home recently for a funeral. Besides, only she could see him. The house had never had a history of hauntings—her parents and brothers had died properly at the hospital. There was only one place that he could have come from, and that was the fire two months ago.

In the 1970s a wider cement road was built behind the house, and the old Lizardo Street found itself nothing more than a dirt road. The Luzuriaga mansion was forced to suffer the indignity of having its back yard suddenly treated as its front. The rear façade of the house, which was not designed for being shown off, faced the street and welcomed guests who preferred to drive up by the cemented city road with windows that looked into bathrooms and bedrooms. Martina's father refused to adjust, and built a high wall around the back yard, leaving a narrow alleyway by which pedestrians could access the house from Gonzaga Street.

The building of the wall necessitated the shutting out of an unused scrap of the Luzuriaga property that used to be the wilder, overgrown part of the backyard. Martina used to play Enchanted Forest there with her brothers and sisters, although there only two starapple trees there, really. The dense shrubbery and tall grass made up for the lack. This scrap remained unused over the years; there had been talk of setting up a little store there, to give the maids and houseboys a little more to do, but everyone realized that there weren't enough residences in the area to make the store necessary or viable. Thus the scrap stayed there for several years, growing dense with weeds and vines that soon obscured the benches that had been built around the trunks of one of the trees.

Then one of the trees died and Martina's father declared it a danger and had it removed. This entailed clearing the area a bit, making it slightly less wild. Not long after, the family passed it on their way home from church one day and discovered that people were living there. A small lean-to had been constructed against the remaining tree, the one with the benches around it. The lean-to connected the tree with the side of the building adjoining the property, making for a very snug, if dark, living space. When they passed by in their car they couldn't see anyone, although Martina spotted the shack and said, "Papa—there are squatters." Her parents barely had enough time to turn their heads before the car glided past the lot and turned the corner to get to Lizardo Road.

Perhaps as many as six families, probably interrelated in various ways, moved into the little scrap of land over the years. Martina only saw them from afar—never got close enough to meet them or talk to them. She noticed at different times as many as three elderly people, all women. There were an assortment of men, roughly in their twenties or thirties, even more women, usually a little younger, and a small herd of children. They lived quietly, agreeably, giving no cause for trouble or annoyance, save the occasional party or celebration that ended well before dark anyway. No attempt was made to establish ties with the Luzuriagas or acknowledge their generosity. Martina's father noted the squatters' presence and let them be.

The lot stayed that way for years—a free settlement for farmers who had just moved to the city. The maids came in every now and then with news of births, deaths, and other big changes in the composition of the families, but otherwise that was it.

Then the fire. The maids flew into a panic at the first billow of black smoke

over the high wall. Martina saw that it came from the overgrown lot, and was momentarily afraid that the tree might catch fire and endanger her home. But the mansion was a good distance away. The flames would have had to cross the laundry area first. She dissuaded Elsa and Dada from moving furniture into the driveway and phoned the fire department. When the first sirens began to wail in the distance she went into the street to see that the fire was put out properly.

The smell of smoke clung to the drapes and rugs, and she had had to conduct an unseasonal general cleaning of the house. But no real damage had been done. The wall had been blackened, which was fine, because it would now make a poor surface for graffiti. The small lot was flattened except for a charred tree stump that eventually sprouted branches after some time. The metal roofing of the shack disappeared along with other usable pieces of wood, and no one built another settlement there again.

But someone had died—that she remembered. She had hung back from the confusion, watching from the street corner ready to dash back to the house if the fire proved unmanageable. She had seen some people, women mostly, clustered around their belongings piled in the road. They were clearly upset, pleading with firemen, but at the time she assumed that the grief was merely for their destroyed home.

It was only at dinner that she learned from the maids how one of the women's sons had burned to death. She thought that they meant a little boy, or a baby, for surely a young man would have been able to save himself? But there was the smoke-smell problem to worry about, and she heard nothing more about the families that used to live on her property, and allowed that matter to settle, as well.

This was how most events transpired in her life—they caused a momentary disturbance, raised a small cloud of dust, left a smell behind, and then the dust settled. She sometimes wondered why she had been chosen to outlive her parents and two of her brothers, even the original househelp, all of whom had died in their service. She herself was surprisingly sturdy, unafflicted with the hypertension, diabetes, or cancers that ravaged her family on both sides. She had grown accustomed to funerals, wakes, deathwatch vigils at the hospital. While her body had grown frail and more difficult to heal, there were no major or chronic problems that told her that her number would be called any time soon. Like a good Catholic, she trusted in God's plan for her and continued to go to mass, shop for food at the market, clean the house—all of the daily functions that pass for living for most people. She stopped going to the movies, because they just weren't what they used to be, but flipped on her television set every night after her chores and watched whatever caught her fancy for an hour or two before retiring to her bed. She made no plans for the future, undertook nothing that would occupy her for more than a week, and declined indulging in any luxuries that she could very well have afforded—trips abroad, ballroom dancing, mahjong—thinking What's the use? She detested gardening, was easily bored by her friends (most of whom had already died anyway), and hated the malls. Her only real hobby was cross-stitching, for which she tramped to the crafts store once a month to buy thread, cloth, and new patterns. A few of her larger pieces hung on her downstairs walls, tastefully framed, but the others she just wrapped in brown paper and stacked into a teakwood chest her father had bought on a trip to China. Most people made privy to her life, if one could call it that, were

moved to pity and wondered how anyone could stand such boredom. But Martina needed very little to be content. She hardly thought about asking herself if she was happy; just went about her life because it was something she had to do.

The ghost's appearance was a puzzle—nothing of the sort had ever happened before. As she lay in bed that night, she looked back on the patterns of her life and realized that this had to be a harbinger of some final settling for her. She didn't understand why it was he who had appeared and not her parents, her brothers, or even her grandparents, but she was old enough to know that God's mysterious ways were just that—mysterious. She realized that all her life, she had lived as a daughter or a sister, provided for by her parents or protected by her brothers, and because all things settled, she had never had to worry about the future or make plans. As sleep came to her, she felt the final inexorable settling loom larger before her and decided that for once she would be ready for it when it happened.

The next morning, Martina rose at five as usual, dressed using her nightgown as a changing room, and went to have breakfast. The ghost was nowhere in evidence. After breakfast she went to dust off the bric-a-brac in the display cabinet on the second floor landing. She went by her usual methodical, time-saving way—taking everything out of the cabinet, laying them on the table, dusting out the inside of the cabinet, then each piece before it went back in, then the top of the table.

Then a voice from behind her.

"You really clean everything."

She cried out and dropped a crystal peacock. It broke on the floor with a flat tinkle.

"Damn it. Now see what you've done."

"I'm sorry."

"You startled me. And made me swear."

"I'm sorry. I thought you would be used to me by this time."

"You're a ghost. You're there, you're not there. You speak, you don't speak. What do you want? Why don't you just take it and go?"

"I don't know what I want. Not even why I'm here. I just am."

"Do you have any idea how strange this is for me?"

"It's very strange for me, too."

"Just help me clean this up."

"I can't."

Martina rolled her eyeballs and went to fetch a broom and dustpan. The ghost was standing over the broken figurine, staring at the mess. She wondered how she would elbow him aside and decided to stamp her foot. He stepped away calmly and watched her as she swept up the pieces.

"You're from the fire, aren't you?" she asked. The ghost didn't seem surprised at this. "You are. Why have you come here?"

"I lived there all my life. Next to your home. I always wondered what it was like inside."

"Is that all? You just wanted to see the inside of my house?"

"I'm not sure. It's very different, being here."

She straightened up and waved her broom in his face. "Look—you must have unfinished business here, or elsewhere, whatever. You can tell me, and

maybe I can help you."

The ghost looked up then sideways with a puzzled frown. "There's nothing."

"There must be. Otherwise, why are you here? Why not appear to your family?"

"I don't know."

"Isn't there anything? What was it like, when—?"

"When what?"

"Well, you know—when you went."

"I don't know."

"How is it that you weren't able to get out, save yourself?"

"I was drunk. I didn't hear anything. I didn't feel anything."

"You were asleep, then?"

"Yes."

"How did you wake up?"

"I don't remember."

"You just showed up here?"

"Yes. It's as if I went to sleep in the shack and then woke up here. And now I'm just here."

She thought about this as she went to throw the shards of glass into a wastebasket. The ghost waited for her, imperturbable as ever.

"I was thinking about you last night." She began putting the figurines back into the cabinet without dusting them off. "I guessed that you were the one who died in that fire. I was wondering why you showed up here now; it's been two months or so since you died. And why you showed up here at all, of all places. I don't know you from Adam."

"That's true."

"The only reason I can think of is that you're a messenger."

"A messenger?"

"Come to tell me news. Or warn me about something. I'm going to die soon, and you're here to tell me to be prepared." With this she shut the cabinet and locked it triumphantly.

"Are you sick?"

"No, I'm in perfect health. But it makes sense, because for me to die would be very unexpected. If I were ill, there would be no need to warn me."

"But I have no message for you."

"It doesn't matter. Your very presence is the message."

"That doesn't seem right."

"No, it is, do you see?" She moved to grasp his shoulders, but remembered that she couldn't. "You're a sign. You haven't come for me, but you're a sign that my end is near. God is telling me to prepare."

"I really don't think that is the case."

"Then why? Why are you here? I'm right. I should be taking care of things that I've neglected. So that I'll be given a decent burial, in a proper mausoleum, not under a slab of marble in the ground."

She strode to her father's study across the hall and began opening and closing drawers. The ghost followed her there and watched her hunting.

"What are you looking for?" he asked.

"The memorial plan. Papa bought me a plot years ago, before he died, so that I would be buried beside him and Mama. I think even then he knew that I would

die alone, and that I would need to be provided for when that happened.”

“We all die alone.”

“Don’t try to confuse me. He was just looking out for me.”

She dug a document out of an ancient expanding envelope tied with a ribbon and held it up with a crow.

“Here it is.”

The ghost tried to smile, but failed.

Martina took out her green dress, one of the five that she wore on trips to the bank and the accountant’s. She hung it up by her bedroom window where the sun and air could get to it, and hunted down the address and telephone number of the memorial park’s business office.

The manager was used to retired clients showing up and asking all sorts of questions, but Martina caught him off-guard with the particularity of her inquiries. He explained what could and couldn’t be done, and how best to go about her wishes. She wanted her parents exhumed and re-interred in a mausoleum that would be built over the family plot, and she wanted extra space in the structure for herself and any other members of the family who would want to be buried there. The manager only had to explain the limitations of his company’s service once. Martina got the point and accepted his proffered list of suppliers and contractors, and he watched her clack out of his office in pumps that had been fashionable thirty years ago. That afternoon, Martina made two more stops—one to the first architect on his list, then to a marble supplier that the architect referred her to. It was almost time for the Angelus when she got home. As she expected, the ghost was waiting for her. She put down her things and poured herself a glass of cold water from the refrigerator, then checked to see that the maids were out in the yard before she acknowledged his presence.

“It’s done. The preparations are underway. The architect will come in a few weeks with some plans.”

“It’s good that your afternoon went well.”

“That was easy, wasn’t it?” She raised her glass to him. “You can go now. There’s no need for you to stay. Thank you very much for the reminder.”

“Do you trust him?”

“The architect? I have no choice. I don’t know how to build anything. I don’t think he would cheat an elderly woman like me.”

“Did he say how much it was going to cost?”

“He mentioned a price, but he said that it could go down a lot. He won’t know until the designs are done. I told him I wanted it as cheap as possible; gave him a target budget,” she said, very pleased with herself.

“You’d better ask for other bids, just to be sure. You can’t just go with whatever came first.”

“Have you worked in construction before?”

“I had a job working on a house once.”

“And that makes you an expert?”

“I’m just saying.”

“How is it that you’re so smart? Did you go to school?”

“Two years of high school. Then I started working. But you threw out an encyclopedia once. I stole it from the garbage, read it.”

“Yes, yes, I did, I remember. We were cleaning house years ago. But that was old, very old. Not up-to-date. Practically useless.”

"Didn't matter. Better than nothing."

"If I had known you were interested I would have given it to you directly instead of throwing it out. But who could have known?"

"No one."

"Exactly. Well, you can go now. Thank you very much for showing up and reminding me about—things. You can tell God that you've done your work and that he should let you into heaven now."

"Do you really think that's why I'm here?"

"I don't know why you're here. And neither do you. But I do know that I'm all right now, so you don't have to stay. Goodbye."

Martina turned and began making her way back to the kitchen. After a few steps she looked back to see if he was still there and the hall was empty. She sighed in relief, but knew in her heart that he was still around, just not showing himself.

She went on with her life as usual, keeping herself busy. She took to staring into empty spaces trying to spot him, scaring her maids and the laundry woman. He remained invisible to her but she couldn't believe that he had indeed gone for good. She could still feel him watching her, continued to feel the prickling on her limbs, but didn't see him again for a long time.

When the architect came to the house with the plans and the quotation for the mausoleum, the ghost showed up again. She had caught her breath upon seeing the figure at the bottom of a tall column of numbers, and when she looked up, she saw the ghost standing at the architect's shoulder. She cried out before she could stop herself.

"Surely it's not that bad," the architect began, setting down his glass of Tang.

Martina recovered, smiled. "Excuse me. I was just a bit taken aback. I thought you said you could bring the cost down."

"I tried to, as much as I could, but materials and labor have both gone up, and we do want to maintain a certain standard of quality for the structure."

"I'm sure you're right."

"It's only a little over the budget you specified."

Just then, the ghost spoke.

"Ask for some time to think it over."

"What?" said Martina.

"I said it's just a little over our budget," the architect replied.

"No, what I meant was, I think I need some time to go over my accounts and see if I can do this after all. I mean, I'm building a mausoleum, not a house."

"A mausoleum is a kind of house," the architect offered helpfully.

She smiled sweetly at him. "I may have overestimated my resources."

With that, she sent him away. The ghost leaned over the table and studied the rendering that the architect had left behind.

"You mustn't talk to me when I'm around other people," she grumbled at him when she returned. "I can't help but answer, and they're going to start thinking I'm crazy."

"I'm sorry. But he was overcharging you."

"Is that so?"

"You can build it yourself for less, if you know who to hire."

"I want to do this right. Better to have it built by professionals."

"You will hire professionals, but they'll charge you less. You can choose the

least expensive among them. There are many choices in the city.”

“What do you know? You’re a ghost.” But she pursed her lips and glanced at the quotation again. “He didn’t really design it,” she said, looking at the sketch. “Just did everything that I asked for.”

In the end, she decided to take the ghost’s advice. She paid off the architect for his trouble and went to see a retired civil engineer that the ghost had recommended. She met the engineer at his home and described to him what she wanted done. Although he was a bit too quick to reassure her that he could do it, Martina was ultimately convinced by her inspection of his functional, sturdy-looking home.

“Did you build this house?” she asked innocently.

The man understood her at once. “Let me give you a tour. Not a single architect has stepped on this property since I bought it.”

The engineer put her in touch with other people after she made it clear that she wished to manage the construction herself. Happily, the thought of patronizing her seemed not to have occurred to him. Pleased with the ghost’s referral, she consulted him on every person that she introduced to her payroll. Most of the time the ghost averred with the engineer’s recommendations, but he did give definitive rejections to a few of them and was quick to name alternatives. Through the ghost, Martina was introduced to a secret network of cheap merchants and skilled laborers, one that she had never wanted or needed to deal with. The experience of entering this unfamiliar world thrilled her, but she was careful not to let the ghost notice this.

The construction of the mausoleum began to occupy most of her waking hours, and she found herself spending more time outside the house, at the cemetery. Eventually she began to borrow Rodrigo’s extra car and driver so she could go from cemetery to supplier to memorial park office to home. When the structure began to go up she insisted on feeding the workers home-cooked lunches, which necessitated borrowing his cook at certain hours of the day. One day he dropped off the cook himself and sought out his sister. He found her poring over her Bible with PostIts in hand.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m looking for a verse to place on the walls. Brass, I think, or carved into a slab of marble, I haven’t decided yet.”

“Brass is nice.”

“But needs to be polished periodically. Why are you here?”

“I wanted to see how you are. You’ve been very busy lately.”

“It won’t be much longer—maybe ten days.”

“May I know why you are rushing the building of this structure? People think you’re going to die soon.”

“It doesn’t hurt to be ready. And Mama and Papa would have wanted this.”

“I could’ve taken care of it.”

“Ah, no, you’re very busy yourself.”

“Or at least hired someone to do it for you.”

“And be charged a fortune. Cheaper this way, and we can be sure of getting our money’s worth.”

He could have sworn that she smiled at someone standing behind him.

“There’ll be room for everyone in it, right?”

“Don’t you have a memorial plan for your family?”

"Well, yes, but you know, at least a marker."

"Yes, of course—I'm not moving Jimmy or Ted. But their names will be there. There's plenty of room."

"Have you decided on a verse?" And he pulled up a chair beside her and began reading over her shoulder.

Martina couldn't believe how quickly the construction proceeded. The days began to blur into each other pleasantly, each one presenting a different task, a different set of people to talk to—hardware storeowners, cement suppliers, painters, landscapers, stone carvers. In the evenings she would devour a hot dinner before washing off the day's grime with a long hot shower and then sink into bed for the night. She spent much less time on her house chores, but saw that they could stand some neglecting, although no more than a day or two.

Through the process the ghost stayed out of her way. After his last referral, to a construction supervisor who turned out to be a decent, dependable man, he appeared to her only occasionally, and even then they couldn't speak to each other, because Martina was either conferring with other people, or rushing off to see to some detail. When the structure was finally complete, every last fitting, fixture, and embellishment in place, and her parents safely ensconced within, duly blessed by a priest and prayed over by the family, she began negotiating with a mortuary for her funeral arrangements. She decided against cremation and chose a casket of dark mahogany, lined in ivory satin. After going over the details of the service and making a few additions, she handed over a check to her future undertaker.

She returned home in a quiet, reflective mood. The ghost was waiting for her in the pantry when she went to look for a snack before dinner.

"It's amazing the number of details that have to be taken care of when you die," she began, then stopped, embarrassed, remembering that she was speaking to someone who had died suddenly, and young. "I'm sorry—did they bury you?"

"I think so." He shrugged. "I hope so."

"So you can't see? Or you haven't tried to leave the house to see?"

"I seem to be trapped here."

"So you said." She frowned at him. "Was there no bright light, no voice, no feeling of floating or flying?"

"I don't know—I was asleep."

"Yes, yes. And you can't leave here—even if you wished for it? Prayed for it?"

"I don't seem to want anything very much. Anymore."

"I've believed in heaven since I was a young girl. Until you showed up I thought I still believed. Now I'm not sure."

"Why not?"

"Well, look at you." She reached for a can of peanuts on the shelf and poured some into her hand. "You clearly have nowhere to go. You're just here, on earth. If there is a heaven, why aren't you there yet?"

"I wasn't a saint."

"No, but there are places for sinners. Waiting areas."

"Maybe I'm in the waiting area now."

"In that case, where are my parents? Have you met my brothers? Do you see other people who have died?"

"No."

"What is it like to be dead?"

"Same as being alive. But it's very calm."

"That's what I was afraid of." She finished off the last of the peanuts in her hand dusted the salt off on her skirt. "Well, I'm glad you came. At least I was able to make a space for myself for when I end up like you. I don't want to hang around this house forever. And when I go, chances are this house will go, too."

"Your family won't care for it?"

"They have their own houses now, and it's just too old. Like me."

She walked into the dining room, popping open a can of soda. Her gaze traveled over the room—the sideboard, the framed Last Supper bas relief in marble, the old chandelier, the long table, the ten high-backed chairs. She sensed the ghost following her, but she paid no more attention to him. She laid a hand on her father's seat at the head of the table and took a swig.

As she brought the can down, she noticed the plywood ceiling sagging where the rain water had crept in, warping the wood and staining the surface.

"Oh," she said aloud. "That needs to be fixed." And she marched to the telephone to call the carpenter who'd built some very nice pews for the mausoleum.

Once she'd begun repairing the little defects in the house, all brought about by wear and tear over the years, she couldn't stop. She decided to repaint the rooms, first on the first floor, then the second. That entailed replacing old paneling, broken tiles, missing moldings. On the second floor, she restored the old master's bathroom, having decided that she could no longer stand going to the cramped guests' bathroom downstairs to bathe. Water pressure was a problem, so she had a water pump and tank installed over the laundry area in the back. In a fit of extravagance, she had new drapes sewn for all the rooms in the house.

Rodrigo and his family were pleasantly surprised when they visited one Sunday. They had lunch, stayed for dinner, and the lights burned in the downstairs rooms until ten that evening. Martina couldn't remember the last time they had stayed so late. As the children played hide-and-seek in the house, the adults took out the old photo albums and went back in time over coffee.

As she retired for the night, Martina thought about how her nieces and nephews had seemed so caged in, playing in the house all day. Her last thought before she fell asleep was of the yard. The back wall could be torn down and a new fence erected to mark the true boundary of the property. The space could be cleaned up and planted with all sorts of flowers, perhaps even another tree or two, and a swing set. That way there could be a play area, perhaps even a picnic grove, for Rodrigo's children, and Alfie's, and Emma's, and Tonio's.

When she woke up the next morning, the ghost was in her room, standing beside her dresser. She nodded and grunted at him on her way to her new bathroom. When she emerged, daylight filled the room, hurting her eyes. Through the glare she saw the ghost raise his hand, and as he lowered it she blinked, and then there was only a sunbeam where he had been.

Martina stood there for a few moments, trying to sense him, waiting for the prickling sensation, but felt nothing. She pulled on a robe over her nightgown and left the room. The smells of coffee and chorizo wafted up the stairway, along with the voices of Elsa and the carpenters flirting with each other. Martina pulled

the robe tighter around her body and went to join them in the kitchen.

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