

## Grey Ghosts Walk in our House

**I dreamed I went to a stranger's house. There were paintings by my mother on the wall. Some were youthful daubs, but others were more assured, eloquent close-ups of hands and faces. The last in the row were sophisticated abstracts of tailors' dummies, half hidden in mist, in threes, like Christ and the thieves crucified at Golgotha.**

Grey ghosts walk in our house.

Adelaide disappears around corners just ahead of me, her frizzy red hair knotted up. She barely reaches the height of my shoulders. I never see her face, but I know she wears spectacles on the end of her nose and that her green eyes are narrowed. I have seen photos of her.

Sleep is impossible. The air in the bedrooms under the roof is solid with heat and moisture. I cling to my narrow bed, fling off the covers, and the baby dances on my bladder. I meet my mother in the kitchen at 5 am. We have both fled the heat and mosquitoes. We drink tea and she talks about all she has to do today. I am bone tired. I don't think I've slept at all for four months.

We spend the middle of the day on the verandah. I lie on the ragged divan reading *Orlando*. My mother is painting. My grandmother, Perdita, died and my mother started painting again. I point out the correlation, but she just shrugs and laughs.

Perdita plays the piano. Notes trailing from the ends of her fingers and filling the house, tripping up the stairs, running along the passage, squeezing under my door. I go down, following the trail of music, and stand behind the living room door, watching her bent dark head, her hands caressing the keys, gently persuading the music out of the instrument. I would watch like that when I was a child, lured there in the same way. She didn't like being watched. If she saw me she stopped, shut the piano and told me sticky beaks had their noses chopped off.

I never see her face. But the hands are young. Strong and brown. And the hair is straight and glossy black. That shouldn't be. She was ninety-two when she died.

When she was ninety, we had a big party. I helped my mother with the food and my father with the drinks and dashed about with a camera recording the family event.

After a while my feet ached, so I sat down. I sat next to Perdita, who was blind. "How're you feeling,

Grandmother?" I asked. You did not call Perdita Gran or Nana, nor Perdita, actually.

"There are so many people," she said happily.

I was frightened of Perdita. She used to say of me, "That child belongs in borstal."

"We all love you, Grandmother. We want to make your day happy."

"Oh, it's been a lovely day." She had a lap full of unopened packages, so I helped her with the Cellotape and read the cards.

"Tell me, dear, how are you these days?" Her hands reached for mine and clutched them rather tightly. I supposed that, because she couldn't see, this was very important to her.

"I'm fine, Grandmother. I'm working very hard."

"I'm pleased. You still enjoy your job?"

"Oh, yes," I lied.

"Good. It's very important to do what you want in life."

"Yes, Grandmother."

"When I was a girl, you know," and the hands clutched harder, "I was a very fine pianist. I was going to go to London to study. I was nineteen and I had a scholarship and the passage on the boat booked and everything."

I hadn't known that. "How wonderful, Grandmother. Did you go?"

"No." She scoffed. "My aunts, dreadful old Victorians, didn't approve."

"Oh, how awful!"

"Yes. My father was quite willing, but my aunts worked on him."

"Oh, no," I said sympathetically.

"So, instead of sailing to the other side of the world, my aunts found your grandfather for me and I got married." She patted my hand with her claws.

"So that was all right then?"

"Yes," she said vaguely. "And that's why I insist that all my grandchildren do exactly what they want to do. My life was wasted. Wasted." And to my horror a tear slid down her old cheek.

"Don't think that, Grandmother," I said. "A career as a pianist might not have made you happy. You might have wound up a lonely old lady. Instead, look at all your family around you." I was quite pleased with myself for coming up with this construction.

She cheered up a little bit. "I suppose you're right."

My mother paints flowers. The flowers on the canvas look as real as the ones in the vase. She paints fruits and you could eat them off the canvas. She thinks I have ruined my life.

"Why don't you get married?"

"Because he wasn't the right man."

"But he was right enough for you to get pregnant."

"I'm not a kid, Mum."

"No, but you're as irresponsible as one."

She doesn't understand. She married so young.

I dreamed I went to a stranger's house ... Mother didn't paint when I was younger. Those paintings were never made.

The baby did a flip and I rolled over and Adelaide bustled out of the room, her thin shoulders a barrier against my obscenely pregnant presence.

Estelle and Mary are there sometimes, too. I see them sailing through the upper hallways, their chests pushed before them like frothing waves. Estelle and Mary shared many things in life, including a house and a 40-year feud. (That was after they ruined Perdita's life.)

The feud began one hot day when they had been in the city. They had a long walk to the bus stop and then a long wait for the bus. Mary, the younger, leaned, sighing with relief, against the Bus Stop sign.

"Mary! That's no way for a lady to behave."

No doubt Estelle's own feet were aching, her own corset-bound body sweating, her own head pounding. But ladies did not slouch.

"I don't care," Mary said.

And they never spoke to each other again.

Our house is big and very old, but Mother is thinking of selling. There's just her and me, her boomerang child.

Perdita told me once my mother was not good enough for my father. I told her she was a horrible old witch. I was ten.

Grandad's funeral was huge. Perdita's was quite small. It was because it was small that we noticed someone Mum knew from church, but who had no other connection. We made a special effort to speak

to her and after a few minutes Mother had to ask directly why she was there.

"She was my auntie," Mum's friend said.

"Oh?"

"Yes, her father was my father's cousin. Didn't you know?" She had a hugely wicked glint in her eye at this point. Mother's jaw had dropped. I felt like giggling, but I didn't.

Mother managed to say, "And what was your father's name?"

The right surname was offered. "You didn't know, did you?" The woman laughed very loudly. "Dear," she turned to me, "you're one-sixteenth Nga Puhī. I knew your grandmother. She was brought up ashamed."

"She lied to me!" Mother said, then clamped her mouth shut.

The woman from church seemed not to notice Mum's problem and addressed me again. "It was very common, you know, to try and cover up. Your great-great-grandmother's name was Katerina."

There is another ghost. I saw her outside my window on the balcony the other night as I drew back the curtains and tried to draw some of the minimal night chill into my lungs. She stood just at the edge of the light. I could only see her face. Her dark face and large round eyes and frizzy black hair twisted up. She wore a carved bone pendant over a grey Victorian dress and had a moko on her chin.

I know who she is.

"Perdita always denied she had Maori blood,"

Mother says. "Even though people did imply it."

"It doesn't really matter though, does it?"

"No."

They're all still there. But Katerina is also there, also part of my family, and not like them at all. I can see her in my face. Looking at myself, it's almost like looking at another person. Or, sometimes, it's like recognising myself for the first time.

And I'm at least half my mother. Who is not one of the grey ghosts. She paints fruit and you could eat it off the canvas and I wait for Katerina to be born. And it is too hot to sleep.