

“The Scouring”
by: Caitlin Neal-Jones

The house was all she had, and she was the homeowner. During the course of her life she had accomplished little to nothing. She had attended school until she realized that she had no aspirations beyond daily subsistence and left when she was 16. She never developed any real friendships. Her family lived in the farmhouse far outside of the town and kept to their own in an austere, unwelcoming way. At 18, she said “yes” to a boy from church who offered her a ring, but after several days of disapproving silence from her mother she reneged on her acceptance. Decades passed as she lived in her family’s farmhouse, sharing the quotidian chores with her parents. Later, she became her parents’ caretaker. And when they both died during a long, brutal winter, she became the homeowner. And the house was all she had.

Alone, she filled her days with a melancholic perusal of the contents of the house—cataloging memories, trying to capture shadows of feelings that had long since passed. Time made her weary but she rose after each rest with an intractable compulsion to resume the search. She assumed that whatever it was that she sought would resonate with her the moment she found it.

She peered underneath furniture, opened albums, and rummaged through the steamer trunks in the attic. She pulled frames off the walls and loosened cinder blocks in the unfinished cellar. Years passed and the homeowner grew weaker and needed longer and more frequent rests. But with no husband, no children, no vocation, she had time for the search. The search consumed all of her waking hours.

At some point the homeowner became aware of other presences in the house. At first there were only small, dismissible phenomena – voices carrying from distant rooms, lights turning on and off, stairs creaking. But soon the occurrences became frequent and intrusive. One night as she searched the attic she heard the sound of children running and playing in the rooms below. On another occasion shortly after, she entered the kitchen and stubbed her foot on a chair which made a startling thud as it toppled over. She realized with horror that the entire dining set had moved several feet from its original placement.

The homeowner recalled her grandmother once telling her how the living and the dead could live side-by-side, occupying the same space but not seeing each other, as if separated by a gossamer veil. This was the first time she contemplated the continuance of the soul outside its body and that there were options for a soul other than heaven and hell. The homeowner balked at the idea of sharing the house- her inheritance- with any interloper, alive or dead. The search must continue and anything that hindered the search must be stopped.

A woman claiming to have an extrasensory ability arrived. She blew into the house with the sound of chimes and the smell of exotic herbs. The woman pushed back the rug and sat cross-legged in a lopsided salt circle she drew in the middle of the parlor. The psychic lit candles and rang bells, reciting unnerving incantations as she swayed inside the salt circle. She laid out cards with bizarre occult images and invited the restless spirits to speak. The homeowner watched bemused from outside the salt circle and smirked at the pageantry. The psychic proclaimed that a

restless spirit was attached to the house, and that the spirit itself was haunted by regret, by loss, by emptiness. A few weeks after the charlatan tried her tricks, a priest arrived.

He filled the house with pungent blue smoke and invoked the names of deities while the homeowner hid in the corner. The priest prayed for eternal rest for the spirits of the departed, and the homeowner felt a pang of longing for her own rest.

The priest and the flimflam woman were unsuccessful, and the living and the dead continued their disquieting dance on either side of the veil. Eventually, the homeowner negotiated an unspoken truce with her cohabitants. Since she and they seemed to operate on opposite sides of the clock, the homeowner was able to hide and repose in a room of the house until the voices and movements from the other side settled and then she could resume her searching and rambling while the others rested. It seemed that the attic was generally safe from all intrusions and the homeowner would often retreat there.

It was a bleak day in late December when the homeowner rose for her search and felt drawn toward the attic. As she entered she was met with an astonishing sight. Two girls around 9 or 10 years of age stood clad in their white cotton nightgowns, glowing iridescent in the winter moonlight streaming through the attic window. The girls were giggling and chattering with each other, and examining objects in their hands. One of the heavy steamer trunk lids stood ajar and its contents - dresses and hats and jewelry- were strewn across the attic floor. The children were draping the antique necklaces around their necks and stacking rings onto their small fingers, delighted with their newfound treasures. The moonlight struck a facet in one of the rings.

The emerald ring. She found it. The emerald ring the boy had proposed with decades before- perhaps even a century. The homeowner had wanted to be buried in the ring, but there was no will, nor executors. When they had found her body rigid and decaying in her bed, she had watched them wrap and remove her corpse, leaving the treasured ring abandoned and severing her last physical tie to the house. But her spirit remained, and the search commenced.

The homeowner was overwhelmed with an anger and power that she had never felt before. Heat flowed through her- the heat that turns cheeks red, and tightens the chest, and brings tears to the eye. It was the heat of regret, and shame, and impotence of bodily demise. The homeowner channeled this anger into a corporeal form composed of dust and ether and moonlight. She floated in the air, a few feet above the wooden floor. The two living children stood frozen, mouths agape in silent shrieks. The homeowner reached out a cold, white hand and in one swift movement snatched the ring from the child's finger. As she hugged the ring to her chest, the children recovered from their frightened paralysis and ran screaming from the attic.

After that night, her search was over. The homeowner felt a soul-deep sense of relief. The confrontation had also exhausted her energy. She found a bed and settled into a long, deep rest. The next time the homeowner stirred, she sensed a change in the house. She wandered for an entire night and day, but she heard no noises besides the occasional mouse in the walls, and the starlings nesting above the attic. It seemed that she was once again utterly alone in the house.