

Story for performance #661
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Source: Hugh White, 'The road to Tehran', *The Age online*, 12/04/07.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [death](#), [husband/wife](#), [ghosts](#)
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What is the point of a ghost story that doesn't scare you out of your wits, that doesn't even raise the hairs on your neck or make you sleep with the lights on? What is the use of a ghost story that's as ordinary as shopping for groceries or listening to the radio in the car? When I actually saw it—the apparition I suppose you could say—all the time I was thinking, hang on, I don't believe in ghosts. Hey, even if you were to talk to me now, I would still say nah, there's no such thing. And yet.

I stirred the pot on the stove. The girls had gone with their father. I was alone in the house and I saw her. A young girl, maybe ten or eleven, in a nightdress, smiling at me and I, stupidly, smiled back at her. As if I knew her. Then she walked into, well it seems silly to say, but she walked into the fireplace and disappeared. I kept stirring the curry as if nothing had happened. Even now as I am telling you this story, I don't understand why I just stayed there, stirring.

I stir the pot on the stove. The girls have gone with their father to return a video and to pick up a friend, Millie, who is going to stay here tonight for a sleepover. I am making a chicken curry. Not too hot or the kids won't eat it. Just out of the corner of my eye, I see a cushion being thrown in to the kitchen from the room next door. Hey, I say, don't do that. Then a girl, young and thin and pale, walks in grinning, like she knows she's being naughty. She grins at me, and I smile back at her and then, well, she walks into the fireplace.

I go back to the recipe. I don't scream. I don't laugh. I don't go to the phone and ring anyone. Calm. Back to the pot. Continue on with the cooking. Later I tell Ted when he gets back home. He goes nuts. What'd she look like? What was she wearing? Could you see through her? Who was she? Where did she go? Is she going to haunt us?

It's like him to over-react. I replay the moment like it was a film I once saw. She looked like a girl in photos from my grandmother's era. She had old-fashioned hair, curly and brushed to the side. She wore a pale blue nightie or maybe it was a dress.

Yes, you could see through her but she still felt present, like a person, not like fog. She went into the empty fireplace, just merged into the bricks in the wall. As if she was walking into a corridor.

We don't tell the girls.

I look to the corner where the fireplace is. Now that I've told Ted about it, I feel a bit foolish. I want him to understand that it was no big deal. She was just like our two children. She was just a little girl. I wonder if Ted thinks that I'm going around the twist.

So later in the afternoon, after I've had some time to think about it all, I go back to the stove, to recreate the conditions when I first saw her hoping that it will bring her out again. I pretend that I'm not looking in the direction of the fireplace but really I'm waiting, wanting to see it all again. Nothing.

There's a whole lot of squealing and giggling going on in the house. Do you know how much noise two nine year olds and a seven year old can make? We hear them upstairs stomping around. They are playing chasey and cards and board games and shop and dress-ups. There is lots of excited chat and occasionally an argument where one of them declares that 'it isn't fair' but that is soon smoothed over. Gorgeous things. Full of spirit, full of life.

And then it hits me. I have to sit down. It's like I'm in a falling lift. There are my girls, full of life, here, here, where I can see them, hold them, kiss their beautiful faces. They are in front of me, they are present, alive. And by contrast, I've found the nightdress girl, as present as the others but forever missing out, locked out of life.

I don't know how to respond to you, as a part of our family or some kind of friend. Even if I don't see you again I feel you all around here. I don't know who you are, my little pale, hearth girl. Living just beyond the fireplace, somewhere in my house.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Kate Latimer.