

Past the Bottom Step

by Elissa Ebersold

At first, I could only hear the ghosts from down the hall.

Their voices were ambient faraway whispers, and most often they remained as such. At other times, they were infantile screams, cries, and laughter that echoed indistinctly through the corridors. I knew there were several, and I could hear their footsteps thumping down the stairs, rhythmic and decrescendoing, like the low rumble of a passing train.

Eventually, the voices moved about the house. They drifted aimlessly, calling only to each other in distinct childish timbres, but in indistinct conversations. As time went on, their voices matured to my ears, and their vagueness evolved into the giggles of two young girls and their parents. Their names were Olivia and Nicole. They chased each other about the house, calling out “Tag! You’re it!” in shrieks of delight. I could see them appear and disappear as transparent wisps, and flicker like candles through creaking doors that opened and closed without a human hand.

When their amorphous forms transformed into the shapes of the girls, I was able to tell them apart. Olivia was the youngest, with beautiful red hair braided into pigtails. Nicole was the elder, with straight brown hair that went down to her waist. The parents I hardly saw. Occasionally I heard the kids being scolded from what I suspected was the kitchen, but the girls lived their own lives in their bedrooms off the hall.

They never meant any harm, the girls. All they ever did was play with one another. Sometimes in the night could I hear their ruckus before my sleeping pills would take hold: the padding of their feet creaked the floor boards, and I could hear their stifled, playful laughs through the wall. If their ghostly sneaking persisted, there would be the muffled scolding from their parents, “Girls! Go to sleep!” and then the giggles would cease. They would retire to their rooms, one of which was mine, and they would sleep before I did. I could never touch them; they were intangible to me.

I wondered what had happened to this family. I only ever heard the girls roam the distance between the foot of the stairs and the hallway. Once they reached the bottom step, their forms would vanish as quickly as morning fog. I didn’t want to speculate about their untimely end--it was never nice to do so--

but I couldn't help myself. No one had told me of a fire or deaths in the house in recent years. There had been no break-ins. When my partner and I had bought the house, the real estate agent hadn't disclosed anything about haunts, murders, or deaths of any kind. Perhaps the girls had died elsewhere, and they had come back to haunt their childhood home. Perhaps it was a place of happiness and solace for them. Maybe it was the best they could do if they were to remain in limbo for eternity.

I thought of these girls often, how young they were, how tragic their story was, whatever their story was. It saddened me, and without fail served as a reminder to take my antidepressants. The questions eddied around my brain as I lay in wait of sleep to consume my consciousness, at least until I took my pills to help me do so. I wanted to know what had happened to these young souls. In their ghostly forms, they showed no evidence of wounds, broken bones, bullet holes, or burn marks. They never seemed frightened of their parents, so a death caused by their parents, be it accidental or intentional, didn't seem likely. My worry for the girls, and their presence eased my torturous loneliness as I waited for my lover to return from their long and seemingly infinite business trip. But all the same in a sort of oxymoron, thinking about them, hearing them, and watching them pass through me like shadows made the constant ache in my chest deeper. I knew so little about the harsh truth of their terminus. I wanted to ask them, but ghosts don't know they're dead.

There came a time when I drew up the courage to speak to the girls. It was a cold evening, or perhaps it was just their company. Whenever they were near to me in the past, I could sense the mercury line sliding down its tube, or at least I thought I could. It may have just been some kind of placebo effect or a wild imagination drawing inspiration from horror films I had seen. How exactly could a ghost steal warmth? That never made sense to me.

I sat and waited in the hall, letting the stillness surround me. I hoped they would reveal themselves on their own. I could hear the ambient clink of dishes, and the din of faraway conversation. They would be finishing their ghostly supper soon, and their translucent forms would appear at the bottom step. They would effortlessly glide, in either their deadness or their youthfulness, up the stairs into their rooms to play.

It didn't take long for them to appear. They first emerged as wisps, bounding gleefully upwards, taller, older, and more graceful than I had remembered. I could have sworn the youngest had been a toddler, or

at least preschool age. I took a nervous breath and called to them. They looked at each other, confused, but continued on their way. I called again, louder this time, focusing all my energy on communicating. My shout must have been effective because they jumped. The lights in the hallway sputtered as if surged with power. A light bulb close to me popped as it burnt out in the commotion, and then they looked right at me.

They were frightened by me, and they gazed at me with wide eyes, mouths slightly agape. I reached out to them, reassuringly.

“H-Hello,” Nicole stammered. Her sister huddled with her.

I sat down on the floor, the boards creaking below me, and I looked them in the eyes as warmly as I could. “How old were you?”

“I’m seven!” the younger said, sheepishly looking at me from behind a raised shoulder.

“And I’m twelve,” added Nicole, as Olivia loosened the grip on her sister.

I smiled, noticing the goose pimples on their bare arms.

“Did you go to school?” I inquired.

“I *do* go to school,” Olivia said, returning the smile looking a little less unnerved. “I’m in third grade.”

I chuckled. “Oh, of course you do,” I said shaking my head, feeling slightly foolish as I realized my mistake.

Olivia told me how much she loved grade three. Math was her favorite subject, but recess was her favorite class. Nicole was moving on to junior high at the end of the year. She liked learning about the presidents, and ballet. When asked about their parents, Olivia said their names were Momma and Mommy. Nicole, with a small smile said their names were, “Suzannah and Eva.” According to Olivia, Suzannah was “liar,” but I suspected she meant lawyer---an oral idiosyncrasy from a small speech impediment I detected. My theory was confirmed when she said one day that “Momma put a bad man in jail today!” Eva helped save people from dying at the hospital, but she wasn’t a doctor. According to Olivia, she was like the patient’s mommy too; she took care of them. A nurse, most likely, I concluded.

Every night as I lay in my empty bed, desperately longing for my absent partner’s warmth, I would say “Sweet dreams!” to the girls, and they would giggle. I took my pill to soothe my swirling thoughts of loneliness, and I would fall into a dreamless sleep, a likely side-effect of my medications. I hoped they had

dreams in the afterlife. The girls' lives were cut short due to tragedy, at the very least they should be afforded wild imaginations and vivid escapes.

Every day I called out to the girls, and before they would notice me the lights would pulse, and every day the girls would model their dress-up costumes for me (and look just a little bit older than the day prior in doing so), or tell me about the cute boys at school. The girls became my friends, my routine. I never did anything else or was excited for anything else, except to talk to the girls.

One cold rainy day, they did not appear for me, and their absence made me far more despondent than I'd like to admit. I waited for what seemed like forever for them to reappear. When night came, I curled up in bed and listened to the distant rolls of thunder and the rain gently pelting the window panes. The loneliness was unbearable without either the girls or my partner around for evening companionship. Without them to talk to, all I did was sleep. Simultaneously, I was so overwhelmed with that sadness in their absence, I found it difficult to rest and I needed the comfort of an extra pill, or three.

Days went by without a glimpse or a sound of Olivia or Nicole. But one afternoon, I was stirred from a deep sleep by the hollow voice of a woman calling my name. It echoed, but I finally found its source at the bottom of the stairs.

There, on the bottom step, stood a strange woman in her twenties with brown hair tied up in a bun. I sat down at the top step. Could the stranger be one of the parents? Or another ghostly resident? The ghost called to someone I couldn't see. I could never see the ghosts past the bottom step. Then she looked directly at me with a friendly smile. "Uh..." she hesitated. "Hi there."

"Hey," I replied cautiously, the lights quivering.

"Do you not recognize me?" the woman asked stepping up towards me.

"Why would I?" I inquired.

She looked away from me past the bottom step. "Told you we weren't crazy, Liv!"

A second woman materialized on the bottom stair, with long auburn hair tied back into a ponytail, and she too looked up at me in recollection.

I stared them in the eyes, and was struck suddenly by their eerie familiarity. A chill went through me and somewhere down the hall, I heard a light bulb suddenly shatter.

Ghosts don't know they're dead.