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The Noise Downstairs

by Gill Kane

When mother first told me about the noise downstairs I was alarmed. Not because I thought that she had squatters or ghostly visitations, but because I believed she might be losing her flimsy grip on reality.

“It’s your father,” she hissed. “He’s come back to haunt me”. Now my father had been an extremely difficult character in life and, if I thought it were even remotely possible, I could well believe that haunting would be just the thing he would do in death. But it wasn’t, it just wasn’t possible.

“I can hear him,” she said. “Walking about, in the cellar, moving things around.” “There’s nothing in the cellar to move”, I replied. “There’s the wine,” she said. “Well he did like his wine, I’ll give you that”. “But mum, this is just not feasible. It’s grief or shock. You’re probably dreaming or half asleep.” And I promptly forgot all about it.

When I visited at Easter, mother looked tired. “I’m not sleeping well”, she muttered, tight lipped. And that night I found out why. Around 3am I woke with a start. Confused it took me a while to work out where I was and what was going on. Mother stood in front of me. “Listen” she said. And in the dark night silence I could hear it. Footsteps, shuffling and banging. This is the point where in films I would go into the dark cellar with a broken torch. But I didn’t. I did what they should do and phoned the police. Of course the noise stopped before the nice young constables arrived but they checked the cellar and were very reassuring. No sign of any trespassers.

“How long has this been going on” I asked mother. “Since he died”, she responded. I didn’t like this, not one bit.

Now mother had a friend of a friend who knew about all things spiritual and she was called in to advise. Doris was reassuringly normal and her explanation was surprisingly plausible. "He can't pass on", she explained, "until he atones for his sins". "Well he's going to be here a long time then" I retorted. Doris took my hand. "He needs your forgiveness". Mother and I looked at each other. "I'm not sure that's possible". "Well you need to tell him that you forgive him. Be firm, tell him it's time to move on".

So we lit the candles, said the prayers, spoke kindly but firmly and ushered my dear departed father on his way. But he wasn't going anywhere. Night after night he continued banging and crashing. Doris was called back in. "I'm thinking of moving house", mother said. "Oh, no point," said Doris. "He'll just move with you".

So mother continues living in the marital home with father trapped in the cellar. She's adapted well. Earplugs, headphones and classic fm see her through the nights. In fact sometimes I catch a little glint in her eye and suspect she's rather enjoying this. Because until she forgives him, he's stuck there, and that's not going to happen anytime soon.