

Better to be Haunted
by Lynne Sargent

It is a twelve-year old whippet of a girl that finally stops Ginger's wailing and brings her back to her incorporeal self. The action by which she does so is a small one: the extension of a hand with a toffee in it. It is a silly gesture, since Ginger can't eat anything, let alone taste it, but still it sparks something within her, some memory of being human, and just like that, some spell is broken.

Ginger looks around, suddenly aware of the world and its newness, its strangeness. How long has she been a haunting? Stuck in this state of endless agony—screaming, moaning, throwing objects, rattling doors, and smashing mirrors?

She can't remember. She can't remember anything. Not anything about her life or death except that her name is Ginger and that maybe a very long time ago she lived in this house and had a little sister not unlike the girl who stands before her now: a girl with sharp eyes and round features, soft everywhere but her will.

The world is a haze, but when she looks at the girl she feels a bright spot of curiosity that cuts through the pain and trauma of the reality of her situation. It is not quite like becoming embodied again, but it is a feeling, and that is almost the same thing.

The girl begins rapid fire questioning—

“Why are you here?”

“How did you die?”

“Will you leave now?”

“Why are you so mean to Jimmy and his mum?”

Ginger notices another form hiding in the background in the window curtains behind the girl. He is wrapped in their gauzy length, trembling, and small. Ginger bursts into tears seeing him.

At this, the girl rushes to Ginger, trying to press the taffy into her hand but it falls through to the floor. Ginger falls too, as much as ghosts are able to fall, and the girl joins her sitting on the floor. After a few awkward moments where the girl tries to comfort her, Ginger is able to explain herself.

“I don’t know, I’m sorry. I don’t know anything. I don’t even know where I am.”

The intrepid little exorcist introduce herself. “I’m sorry,” she says. “My name is Aria. We think we maybe know who you are, but I wanted to be polite. It’s good to get to know someone before you ask them for things, and we’d like to ask you to leave. Wait just a minute.” She leaves, and the boy stays trembling in the curtains.

Ginger doesn’t know what to do, she has let out all the sorrow she can for the moment, so she just sits, trying to understand.

“Here,” Aria says, returning with a stash of newspaper clippings. She spreads them out on the floor in front of Ginger. There are newer stories of house sales and hauntings, and older ones of a messy family murder, a murder which included her, it seems.

It won’t stick though. The words swim before her eyes and will not enter her brain. As she tries to concentrate she feels the world go fuzzy. She thinks she hears

Aria speak again, but it is far away. Only when she looks away from the papers does reality snap back to where it belongs.

“What’s wrong?” Aria asks, a frown on her face.

Ginger notices that Jimmy has emerged from his hiding place, and sits behind Aria, his eyes cautious and observant. He whispers something in her ear. Perhaps he thinks he’s being quiet, but Ginger still hears him.

“She’s going to go back. She’s going to do it again, I can tell,” and she sees tears slip from those wide and watchful eyes, a blink wholly unnecessary to free them there is such a buildup of sorrow and terror. She thinks perhaps she understands that feeling.

Ginger takes a deep breath, or rather she puffs the insubstantial representation of her chest in and out in a manner that is supposed to be calming. “I’m sorry Jimmy,” she says. “I want to be okay. I think... maybe that you can’t tell me anything about who I am or what happened or I might lose myself, lose my awareness of the world again...” She takes a pause as Jimmy watches her suspiciously, but Aria hasn’t made any declarations. “Maybe I could keep this?” she gestures to the toffee in the hole of her crossed legs sitting on the floor. “Maybe you or Aria could bring me things sometimes to remind me I have this, and that this is what I need to be in the world,” she gestures at her heart, and smiles wryly. She has always loved children, though she doesn’t know why or which ones.

Aria looks sideways at Jimmy, her eyes slanting up, and he nods tentatively. “It’ll be okay,” Aria affirms. “You can keep Genevieve tonight to be sure,” she gestures to a tatty stuffed pig that rests on his bed, “and I’ll watch out the window for the signal before

bed in case there's an emergency." The sun fades and Aria makes her goodbyes. Jimmy trembles through the night but Ginger remains herself.

She remains herself through the next day, and the next, as long as she ignores the nagging newspapers in the corner. Time passes, and she becomes a part of their existence as they become a part of hers. The last of the hazy summer holidays pass in a blur. They recount their methodology and triumph to her captive audience and Jimmy unravels the reason for his terror. He certainly hasn't had his growth spurt yet, and perhaps he was born premature but Ginger can't help but feel perhaps his terror at her has stunted his growth, made him small. Aria sometimes chastises him for still trembling at times when Ginger drifts too suddenly, or makes a loud sound even if it is one of joy. He says, "It's easy for you to be brave Aria, you didn't have to try to sleep through her for two years."

They show her the scratches in the wall, the shattered glass in the basement, the artistry of her words "STAY AWAY" written in mold in the unused second-floor bathroom. They play her recordings of her wails, her screaming obscenities in a loop. When her words become coherent she can't listen for too long before she feels her grip on reality begin to slip again, anger and sorrow bubbling up from within her, her memory, her past taking over her present such that she as she is now might as well not exist.

She can choose to know, or to be, there is no middle ground. It is all so strange to her. Though she haunts it, she does not know this place, Jimmy's home. She doesn't even remember the basement, which has not been renovated or updated the way the rest of the house is. Yet, she can hold onto the knowledge when the children tell her

over and over that this is where she died, she just doesn't know how or why. The world itself is not so strange, since the general details of living seem to have sunk into her via osmosis. She doesn't know who the Prime Minister is until she overhears the news on television but the fact that the television has color isn't surprising to her despite the fact that it should be based on the year the children tell her she died. She is no stranger in a strange land, only a stranger to herself, having only intuitions without any of her experiences to back them up.

School arrives and the hours grow longer. The children are starting grade 8 and she sees the last vestiges of make-believe dribble away from them, but they still see her, and for that she is grateful. She watches them sometimes and almost thinks she can remember watching, playing— but that is when the dizziness, the loss starts.

One day in mid-October she can't stop it. She disappears again. She is watching the children spill out of the bus, watching two girls walk hand in hand one big and one small, and suddenly she *isn't* anymore. Aria brings her back, snaps her out of it some unknown length of time later by placing a small white pumpkin in the way of her jagged nail scraping words she cannot read into the wood of Jimmy's baseboard. When Aria's eyes meet hers, and her hand intersects with the pumpkin she quickly becomes incorporeal, but also herself again.

She bursts into tears, just like the first time. "I'm so sorry."

Aria looks meaningfully at Jimmy, who is clearly behind Ginger on her other side.

"You lost yourself. It's okay. It happened to me too. Last summer, the one before we exorcised you, my mum grounded me after she found out I swam in Lager Lake on a

dare. I didn't see anyone all day while she was at work for weeks and I thought I was disappearing. I didn't want to talk to her I was so mad and I thought I might lose my voice from never using it."

Ginger doesn't think its quite the same, but nonetheless she nods at this solemn, matter of fact child.

"You can't be alone, maybe because it makes you too much yourself and what you seem to be is a mean ghost. But I don't think you want to be that way, so we have to make you a new self, you need to have more to do than just wait for us to come home everyday." She screws her face up in concentration and stares deeply across Ginger's head at Jimmy. "I know Jimmy!." she finally exclaims. "We're going to take Ginger on a field trip."

Ginger hasn't been out of the house since... well, she can't remember. "I- I- don't- can I?"

"I dunno," Aria shrugs, too full of excitement at a solution to really consider the potential outcomes. "But we can try! Jimmy and I are going to the corn maze next week, so you deserve a field trip too."

Ginger follows them out, Jimmy silently leading. As they leave, he shouts to his mum that they're going to the park.

A "Very nice dear!" echoes from the recesses of the house. Ginger tries to avoid Jimmy's mum. It feels weird to observe her without her knowing, and she has never acknowledged Ginger's presence like the children have.

They walk down the street and it is invigorating. Aria points out the murals on their route and even Jimmy starts to perk up, recounting stories of his basketball scores and scraped elbows from tumbles on his bike. These children are a thousand small hauntings, these places writing themselves on their bodies, into their habits, the very steps their feet know how to take.

Ginger has no body to remember such things, except when she is all body, all remembering, and there is no room for her anymore. The home she shares with Jimmy holds her, but does not mould her anymore. It all flows over her like water. She can't choose the decorations, barely has anything to do except what Jimmy and Aria decide they want to play with her or show her for the day. The space is filled with all the wrong kinds of ghosts— questions she cannot know the answers to if she wants to exist at all.

The street lights start to come on and Jimmy says its time to go back so they do. As Jimmy falls asleep that night Ginger talks to him properly, not just him-and-Aria, not just a placation or an apology, but as a very strange kind of friend.

“Do you think I could go out without you guys?” she asks.

And he doesn't tell her he doesn't care. Doesn't say, “yes please and never come back.” He says, “What if you get... lost out there? Would you hurt anyone? How would we find you?”

“I'll tell you where I'm going. You could find me some maps. I don't think I'd get lost, or hurt anyone. It feels better, when I'm outside. More easy to be me and not who, or what I was before.”

“Okay then,” he says. She notices he sleeps quite peacefully, especially compared to his normal tossing and turning.

From now on Ginger wanders the blocks while the children are in school. It is easier to stay herself out of the house, that house, her house? Some days she feels like answers might trickle in from her outside wanderings: the new restaurant on the corner will look like it must smell like something she maybe once loved, or she'll be floating across the rusted bridge over the abandoned train tracks and feel an echo in her bones like she once knew what it felt like for trains to pass underneath while she was above. These small bits of place haunt her as she haunts Jimmy's home.

This is how she lives, one day at a time. She can show her discoveries to the children, day by day as they grow older, gain more freedom, get to stay out past dark. Like they grow, she does too, becoming again. She hides her hope, this new self she is getting to build in the links of the swing of her favourite park that hangs just a little off-kilter, in the perfect imperfections of the wave-themed picnic table at the patio around the corner all the young people linger at late into the evening, in the innumerable routes she has crafted between Jimmy's house and his elementary school, and later the high school that he and Aria attend together. The city, and all her secret places within it become her new skin.

Aria and Jimmy grow, they take a different bus to the local high school. They don't have quite the same time for her as they did before. Aria joins the debate team and Jimmy draws for the school magazine. Maybe there is an evening a week where Jimmy and Aria show her a new movie, a new board game, a new outfit (though never a new friend). Each small change is like a snowball gathering into an avalanche. She

watches as their worlds expand but hers can't really do the same. Selfishly, it helps when they turn sixteen and Jimmy gets his license and Aria doesn't. Aria had her first seizure at the grade 9 winter formal, but the ramifications of it don't really hit until everyone else starts driving. She never really liked dancing anyways and Jimmy was just as happy to stay home with her, and all the doctor's appointments just meant she got to play hookey every once and while. But then sixteen comes and Jimmy gets a license and a girlfriend and then suddenly Aria and Ginger have too much in common—the loss of control that means they have to contain themselves for others' safety, the limitation of space that comes with having fewer others where you are. Of course her friends take her out sometimes, but Jimmy and her have so much history, he has been the only one to not find her overbearing so long Aria has a hard time trusting new friends. Most of all, Aria and Jimmy share Ginger. How can Aria explain Ginger to someone new? Maybe someday, but not in high school. Ginger sees the avalanche approach, and feels fear set in—Ginger and Aria are losing Jimmy, and both Aria and Jimmy will be leaving for University soon. They don't talk to her about it, but she sees the pamphlets, the waiting at the mailbox for acceptance letters. Can Ginger survive as herself without them? Could she move on too? Has she already done so? Or is she still just trapped here by memories that she will never be able to access?

She feels an ache deep inside her still. The family that she has built with Jimmy and Aria, that friendship that they have invited her into will never quite be enough. Sometimes she thinks that only knowledge of her past would be, but deep down she knows better. She has lost something. She was lost. There is no recovery from that.

The last summer passes in a blur, even faster than their first. In the end, Jimmy leaves without saying goodbye. He is gone for the summer on a very prestigious exchange program, and ends up with some co-op opportunity, or so Aria says, and he never has a chance to come home. Ginger wants to not be hurt anymore, but she is.

Aria stops by in early September, just before Labor Day, under the guise of helping Jimmy's mother with the last of the boxes. The stagers who got the house ready for sale have cleaned up the mould, replaced each and every flickering light, and sanded over the messages in the baseboards— attributed to the unthinking mess of children. Ginger wonders sometimes if Jimmy still has nightmares, if, despite everything, he never really recovered from the terror she— or rather, something she used to be— inflicted upon him.

Aria finds her in the bathroom, weeping once more in the empty, echoing space. Ginger has gotten good at silent crying over the years, no longer wishing to be a haunting, keeping the worst of her nature to herself.

“Do you want to come with me?” the girl with soft features and hard eyes asks her, as though the offer was always going to be on the table. This girl is not Ginger's, she will not fit that empty space. But she did carve her own, smoothing it, hollowing it with sticky taffy and the endless rubbing of a continually outstretched hand.

Ginger nods. She is still afraid that there will never be answers, but it is a quiet sort of fear, a fear that has been subsumed by the far greater fear that the cost of such answers is not worth pursuing, and that she made that choice a long time ago.

Later, after she has drifted with Aria into her new apartment, the girls have many nights to talk. Each is like an older sister and a younger at the same time, switching roles as the situation demands. Ginger has not yet settled into this new space, this new city. She is trying to find herself again. She misses her old haunts, and is reminiscing.

Aria interjects into the silence between stories, "You know, my mum said when my grandpa died, that there's no closure from death, just deciding to move on. I think that's true even if it's a living death, like moving on to a new phase, or giving up on a dream. I remember when I wanted desperately to be an astronaut and cried harder than anything when I was diagnosed with my epilepsy, but now we'll see. There are always new choices, new paths, new people."

"I didn't know you wanted to be an astronaut," Ginger says softly.

"I never told anyone but my mum, because she said it was a very big, very hard dream, and I didn't want anyone to know I failed."

Ginger thinks maybe this girl who is not such a whippet of a thing anymore is right. Perhaps Ginger will recover her memories someday, but perhaps she won't. Maybe that's the difference between her being a haunting and letting the world haunt her. If she does the latter, she's real, even if she doesn't have all the answers.

She does have Aria, and her apartment. She'll have new mothers to watch in new parks, new cats to watch in new alleyways. They're close to a cinema now, so she can spend part of her days there watching new films. She can let her environment shape her while still making choices. She can choose who she wants to become, even insubstantial as she is, even lacking a past. The trauma she is sure lurks there is like a

wall, but Aria has led her in a different direction. Maybe someday they will walk around the whole wide world and come to the other side of that wall and find the answers there, but for today this, them on the couch sharing the stories that they have made and will continue to make, is enough.

There is no wailing, no flickering lights, no scratching at the baseboards. She hasn't slipped in years, and even if that possibility too, is lurking in the dark somewhere, she is becoming more herself every day with each step forward she takes, each new path and place that she makes hers, and that haunts her in return.