

Room for the imagination: What's down in the basement?

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You should know there's a ghost in the basement." My friend Frank levels me with his eyes, checking out my reaction. "She's a good spirit, but she occasionally scares the dickens out of my cat. You'd have to cater to her whims."

Frank owns a tiny bungalow in south Minneapolis, and I am considering the pros and cons of purchasing it from him. The last house I seriously considered buying was an old carriage house. It was perched on top of a steep incline so that it looked through the crowns of trees and out over downtown. I had fantasies of spending mornings writing in that urban tree house, until the inspector observed that the structure had no foundation. It was really a garage, stacked on piles of rocks. I decided it wouldn't do my book much good to be written in a house without a foundation.

But Frank's house is solid--one story on a flat, tree-lined city street. The furnace is a 1925 gravity gas monster that looks like it could power a rocketship. Everything about the house is straightforward: white walls, polished floorboards, windows that stick in the summer, a broad enameled kitchen sink with scrubbed rubber stopper.

The floor of the screened-in porch is painted burgundy, in thick coats. If you stand in the middle of the living room, you can see into every room of the house, including the bathroom. The tub stands on four clawed feet. It is a home without secrets.

Except for the basement. Claudia the cat, who is otherwise decrepit, comes screeching up the back stairs and spends the next two hours under Frank's bed. What would it be like, I wonder, to write a book in a house where a ghost lives in the basement? Frank became convinced of her existence when he fixed a lamp above the washer and dryer; the next morning he found it torn from the wall and flung across the room. "I don't think she likes light," he tells me. Otherwise, she lurks, a mild-mannered and comforting presence, in what used to be the coal room. Frank doesn't want to sell unless he's sure the next owner will treat her with courtesy. "She was here first," he says.

Basements intrigue me. Made of earth or stone or concrete, they are solid places, their dirty floors and awkwardly placed support beams holding up the rooms with more light and life. The artifacts of an old house are stored in the attic, but its history resides in the basement, where years of weight-bearing sink stories into the ground. Most basements ought not be braved without first putting on shoes. Today, when I pray in church, "Oh God, you are my rock and foundation," I find myself considering the basements my realtor has shown me, searching for an adequate image to inform my spiritual life. No crumbling carriage house walls for me this time. I want a place as firmly rooted in the earth as possible.

Yet for the most part basements are shifty places, prone to flooding, disparaging of light, home to cobwebs and unnatural, mechanical sighs. Frank's basement is solid enough, but there's this ghost to reckon with. In the dirt-floor basement of the Methodist church in which I was raised, tenpin alleys stretched the length of the kitchen and Sunday school rooms. I used to imagine old youth groups laughing down there, as though a perpetual lock-in rocked beneath our dull worship services. During potlucks, we kids would dare one another to descend the rotting wooden staircase, dipping our feet into that other dimension. Surely something unfathomable resides in the shadowy, undisturbed corners of a building's foundation. The basement of the house where I grew up was also our playroom, but at night, when my mother sent me downstairs for a spool of thread from her sewing machine, I ran as fast as I could to escape the broad feeling of emptiness that the room gave me.

When basements appear in dreams, Jungians presume their world of indiscernible shadows to be the subconscious. I sensed this as a child. That cool, damp room where my mother brought any houseplants that seemed destined to die sent shivers down my spine. And yet, in the daytime, I loved it. The rest of the house had to be kept neat, but in the basement my sister and I could leave jigsaw puzzles on the floor until we'd done every last one in the house. We built weeklong Lego projects.

We kept the dress-up box down there, and knelt to open it like a treasure chest, finding inside enough magnificence to compensate for poor lighting and drab walls: my mother's prom dress, eggshell blue with two ruffled layers beneath the skirt; my father's crazy ties, wider than the spread of my eight-year-old fingers; cocky Irish caps, a pillbox hat, a witch's cap left over from Halloween. There were pairs of high-heeled satin shoes, outrageous green and blue and red--incongruent with anything my sister and I knew about adult women's wear in the real world. Our mother wore

practical shoes, and expected of us practical and straightforward lives. When we slipped our small feet into those pumps, we became taller, wilder and more unstable. Down at the bottom of the toy box were gaudy scarves, empty eyeglass frames and costume jewelry. If we scrounged, we found safety pins to hold together the imaginary people we became.

The basement was a room without limits. When my sister and I donned our mother's pinned-up dresses the boundaries of reality--experience, parental rules, even natural laws--gave way. We became beautiful, and wise beyond our years. We could transfer thoughts by touching fingertips. With effort and a few words of magic, we could heal any wound. In the basement my sister and I gave ourselves over to that mysterious process by which children keep alive the realm of possibility. If I could act out the life of a castle troubadour, then my body contained the possibility of poetry and was one step closer to walking with those poems up the stairs, to where things were revealed.

The basement, then, was where I first knew that all things are possible with God. Of course, ever since I've relegated that knowledge to dingy, downstairs closets I don't visit very often. Faith the size of a mustard seed moving mountains? Spit and mud returning sight to blind eyes? Angels speaking in dreams? My imagination is too weak to encompass the honest possibility--the flesh-and-bones likelihood--that the stories are true. I'd rather avoid places of mystery, the way my liberal, Protestant upbringing taught me to do. I'm more comfortable living in the light part of the house where there are no ghosts, where what is on the surface is what's real.

And yet, if it doesn't engage the Unknown, the story I believe in is shallow. Perhaps angels speaking in dreams is just a metaphor, but as a writer I know metaphors work best when both their literal and figurative aspects are trustworthy. If I pooh-pooh the potential for divine visitation--that it happened, that it might still happen, to me--I damage the otherwise open invitation for God to enter my life. It's as if I say, "Be my foundation, God, but I like it sterile down there, brilliantly lit and with no secrets. None of this hocus-pocus." If I distrust the story of my faith, preferring a clean-cut, intellectualized translation, then all things are not possible with God.

Which is why I need to buy Frank's little bungalow. A house of faith must include room for the imagination--a place where matter and spirit commingle, a foundation solid enough to contain the elusive world of shades and shadows. Who knows? It's conceivable that anything could happen in a haunted basement. If there's space for mystery, then the house limits neither its inhabitants nor its God. It seems to me

that doing my laundry by flashlight is a small price to pay.