

*This was my entry into a ghost story competition.*

Can you share a house with a ghost? That was the question Janet and I sat in the living room trying to decide.

We had bought our house – a Victorian conversion – with money from our parents and a mortgage. From our point of view it was perfect: downstairs had been knocked through to make a large dining-cum-sitting room with a small kitchen separated off at the end. Upstairs was our bedroom and a smaller bedroom for Lucy, our five-year-old daughter. William the baby slept with us. There was a garden facing south, where the children could play in the sun. All in all we couldn't believe our luck when we moved in.

The first sign of anything wrong was when Lucy asked us who that old lady in the living room was. I stared at her, puzzled, then went and had a look. There was no-one there, and I told her not to make things up, but a few days later she asked me again. Later she said she had seen her sitting by the fire, getting up and walking across the living room and into the kitchen. Over the next week she repeated this story twice more. When we questioned her closely she described the old woman as grey-haired, and usually sitting by the fire wearing a purple shawl over a dark brown or black dress.

I don't mind five-year-olds inventing stories, but this seemed a bit bizarre. I still was torn between punishing her for inventing things and wondering if there was something wrong with her, when I came home one evening to find Janet standing on the doorstep holding the children.

"John, she's in there!" she said, trembling.

"Who?" I said, too surprised to think.

"The old woman."

"Don't talk rubbish!" I went in and looked round. Of course there was nothing. I lost my temper, grabbed Janet and shook her.

"What the blazes do you mean by scaring Lucy with this nonsense?"

"She was there, she was," cried Lucy, and both of them burst into tears.

I have had rows before with my wife, but never yet caused her to cry. I stopped and put my arms round them. Both of them were shaking.

"Now then, you two. Do you really think I'd let anything harm you? Tomorrow," I said, thinking wildly, "we'll get someone to come and sort this whole thing out."

After we had put Lucy to bed and calmed her down enough for her to go to sleep, I got Janet to describe exactly what she had seen. She and Lucy had gone into the living room to find the old lady sitting by the fire. As they watched, she had got up and walked diagonally across the room and into the kitchen. When they summoned the courage to follow her into the kitchen, the old lady had vanished. At that point they had lost their nerves. Janet grabbed William out of his cot, and they all fled outside. Janet forgot to take her mobile phone so she couldn't call me, and was too shy to go to a neighbour, who might think she was mad. I went round the room carefully to see if there was any trick of the light or reflection which could explain it; but it was a forlorn hope, and I soon abandoned it. Instead, I did some research on Janet's laptop. Next morning, after some phoning round, and against all my instincts, I found myself talking to someone called Eric Luckman from a Spiritualist organisation, who at least seemed to be reasonably sane.

"Yes, I think we can be of help," he said. "I'll give you Steven O'Dell's contact number. He's a very good psychic and should be able to tell you if there is a presence in your home."

So I phoned Steven O'Dell, and we arranged that he would come and visit us at 5.30pm the following Wednesday, five days from now. I would have preferred him to have come at once; instead I had to get Janet to promise that if she saw the lady again she would try to remain calm, or if she must, go upstairs with Lucy and phone me. So far they had only seen the lady in the living room. The time of the appointment would be ideal, as by then William would be asleep, and Lucy would be in her room doing her homework. As she was only five she did not get much, but we made it a firm rule that after

supper she did her homework before any play or TV. It would stand her in good stead later on. I work from eight to four, I should mention.

Promptly at 5.30 the doorbell rang.

“Mr Wilson? I’m Steven O’Dell.”

I was taken aback. I suppose I had expected some weird gypsy-type figure. An ordinary-looking man dressed in a jacket and tie took me by surprise.

“Now please don’t tell me anything or touch me,” he went on, “let me sense it”. He stood in the entrance hall for a moment.

“Yes, there is a presence here”. He moved slowly and quietly into the main room as if listening. He wound up by the fireplace, where he stood and spread out his hands.

“Yes,” he said, “she is very strong here. An old lady sitting here wearing a shawl and waving her hands – no, knitting of course!” He straightened up and walked diagonally across the room, just as Janet had described. My doubts began to fall apart.

“There used to be a wall here, and she went this way to go through the door.” He went into the kitchen and was brought up short by the unit.

“This is new. She walked straight through here.”

Then he asked to see upstairs. We told him not to go into Lucy’s room, and after poking about for a few minutes he went down again saying there was little trace of her up there. We went back to the living room where he sat down facing us.

“Well, Mr and Mrs Wilson,” he said calmly, “you do have a presence here, that of an old lady. She must have been a former tenant and lived here for a long time. However, I don’t think you have anything to worry about. I detected no sense of danger or menace; no negative vibes, as we say, at all.”

“Can’t you get rid of her?” asked Janet.

“Exorcism, you mean? I don’t think it would work. Exorcism only works on the devil and his minions. This is just a harmless old lady who should have passed on to the other side, but is still clinging to her familiar places.”

I decided to ignore that rubbish about the devil and “passing on”.

“So what do we do?” I asked.

“Well, the simple answer is you need do nothing. She means you no harm. I don’t think she is even aware of you being here. You can just ignore her and carry on.”

I glanced at Janet. It was clear she was not happy with this.

“We have a five-year-old daughter,” I said. “She’s seen her.”

“I’m sure that if you explain things to her she will understand. Young children accept things very easily. Or you can tell her to say a prayer for the ghost, that God accept her soul, or even just say “God bless you” to her every time she sees her to help her on her journey. That normally works for children; for adults as well, incidentally.”

After he had gone – refusing any payment, another point in his favour – and we had put Lucy to bed, we sat and talked about it. Janet started by saying she couldn’t live here, but I was quite adamant; I had never seen or sensed anything. My doubts had been mostly taken away by what I had just seen, but even allowing for something of a person being left behind after they had died, I was not going to be driven out of my home by the remains of an old lady who was just taking a bit of time “to pass to the other side”. Janet was still frightened, but slowly came round to the idea that a harmless old lady was, as the man had told her, still harmless even in death. What was more, the idea of saying “God bless you” to a ghost seemed to take the sting out of it for her. Now I came to think of it, once you get over all his blather about presences and the devil, Steven O’Dell had given us very good advice.

In the end Janet said that if Lucy could accept the situation, then she could. We decided to talk to her about it after homework tomorrow. Though I didn’t tell Janet, I was certain I could persuade Lucy. She is a very sweet child, and if we told her the old lady needed our help, then she was bound to want to stay and help her.

The next evening I had just arrived home when the phone rang.

“Mr Wilson? This is Eric Luckman of the Spiritualist organisation.”

“Oh, yes.”

“Do you want me to put you in touch with another psychic?”

“What? Why?”

“Oh, of course you won’t have heard. The reason Steven O’Dell missed his appointment with you last night is because he was killed in a car accident three days ago.”