

I loved the dark. You're never alone in the dark. Or if you are, you can't be sure. Before I was old enough to roam the house, they came to me in my room. Just before sleeping, I'd often watch the closet door open. I'd see the little oval knob turning, blinking in the moonlight. Then hands—I don't know whose—would sort through my baby clothes. I'd drift toward sleep to the faint metallic music of the hangers scraping along the rod.

When I was no more than a toddler, things—beings—would pass me in the hall. I must have thought that even in these modern times there were women who still hid their faces in deep bonnets. And men, booted and spurred.

Only one of my spirits spoke, but that was later.

Every house on the river from here to Baton Rouge had haunts. It was expected, and the tourists liked it. More and more houses were open to the public, who were charged good money to be shown through. At Nottoway plantation they even served the public something called "brunch."

"Brunch," Aunt Sudie said, clamping her granite jaw. "Swilling vodka drinks on Sunday morning when they ought to be in church."

"Live and let live," sighed Aunt Margaret. Being sisters, they hardly ever agreed.

Our house was not open to the public. It was being kept in trust for me, for it seemed that I'd inherited it.

"Catch *me* opening this house to the public so a bunch of rednecks can tramp through and ruin the parquet!" said Aunt Sudie.

Shadows

From the very beginning I knew the place was haunted. I wasn't frightened. Far from it. Ghosts were the company I came to count on.

An infant will fear, of course. The newest newborn fears falling and loud sounds. But my room was at the top of a long flight of stairs, so I was used to heights. As for loud sounds, ghosts are quiet as . . . the tomb.

Better yet, there were no other little girls about me to scream and shriek and tell hair-raising tales. I was a solitary child. I might have been lonely without my haunts.

"Though heaven knows we could use the money," Aunt Margaret sighed.

"Margaret," Aunt Sudie said unfairly, "you're money crazy. Money is your middle name."

I was so young, I thought it really was.

Aunt Sudie and Aunt Margaret Money were spinsters in the best Southern tradition, except they were from New York. In a rare moment of agreement, they'd decided to be Southern. They napped and sipped sun tea through the heat of the day and read the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*. They took up the habit of funeral-parlor fans and sat sniping at Yankees.

I was said to be New York-born too, but I was being brought up as a Southern child. Even as a baby I wore a tiny heart-shaped locket, an heirloom that couldn't have come down through the family. And I was allowed to run barefoot well into winter.

Though I never minded the Louisiana heat, the aunts suffered with it. In New York, Aunt Sudie had been in charge of something called a typing pool, which had a cool, refreshing sound. Aunt Margaret had skied once, on real snow. Though it had tired her, she never tired of recalling it.

They worked hard at being eccentrics, but how could I know that? I'd met stranger beings than they on the nighttime stairs.

One of their oddities was that they were content to appear older than they were. When I first remember her, Aunt Margaret must still have been in her thirties, though she was

fading fast. And Aunt Sudie was the sort who'd never really been young.

They let themselves go. Aunt Sudie, who gardened, wore her denim pants, rolled to the knee, even indoors. Aunt Margaret, who kept house in a vague way, wore housedresses that zipped up. They both went gray early and did nothing about it. They weren't real aunts. They'd been friends of my parents, who were said to be dead. By all accounts my father really was dead. But my mother, always spoken of sadly in past tense, occasionally wrote to the aunts. Her envelopes were powder blue, and the stamps were sometimes foreign.

With a child's wisdom, I thought a mother who had no time for me wasn't worth missing. And I wouldn't have fretted over the death of a parent. The creatures of my nights upstairs had erased the border between the living and the dead.

Though the neighbors never came near us, we weren't alone. There was a little house, a dependency, standing out in the cedar swamp behind us. The farmland had been sold off long since to the oil companies, and so this little cabin, steep-roofed in the Cajun way, stood just at the end of our world. Though I wasn't to go near it, I knew people lived in that house. A very old woman sometimes came out to sweep the bald yard and throw feed at the chickens who lived under the floor.

Never very maternal, the aunts rarely tucked me in. I spent many a night with chin propped on the windowsill, watching the flickering glow from the cabin as figures inside moved in the yellow lamplight. Sometimes I slept the night through at the

window, waking in that quiet moment of dawn after the dead slept and the living hadn't stirred.

I was five when my special spirit came to me the first time. By then I was ready for the change of going to school. I'd already explored all the world allotted to me. I'd climbed the forbidden levee and all the trees I could manage. I'd swung upside down from low branches while my skirt settled around my face. I'd taunted dead snakes in the river road with long sticks. I'd even grown a little weary of my ghosts, who were as restless as I.

Then one night, moonlit of course, there was a new shadow in the room. I was used to grown-up ghosts: gaunt women who wept wordlessly, gray military men who stared sadly at their empty sleeves. But this new shadow, dark against the moon-white wall, was hardly taller than I.

I looked for petticoats. Dead daughters were often beautifully dressed for burial. But I saw only the hint of bare feet. I looked for a deep bonnet, as my shadows never liked showing their faces. But moonlight played on pale flesh. The eyes were deep-set and dark. I was interested at once. It seemed to be a boy.

He was watching me, but then they all did. He moved along the wall. Had he entered from the door or the closet? I hadn't noticed.

I thought he would fade. They often did. I watched him drift. When he crossed before the closet door, he was lost in the darkness of walnut wood. But he moved on through a final glare of moonlight to the darkest corner. There he lingered,

looking at me. I drew up on my elbows, wondering if his eyes would glow. Eyes in that corner often did.

I looked until I saw him better. No staring revealed his eyes, but I made out the small circle of his mouth. Then I heard the ghost of a sound. It seemed to be his bare toes curling on the floorboards. It might just as well have been some small creature in the walls. We had plenty of them too.

I tried something new, something not done. "Who goes there?" I said, almost aloud.

I expected no answer and got none, though the room was full of his listening. I knew he heard, so I slept, satisfied.

He came again and again. Not every night, but often. Once I was just drifting off when the rag rug beside my bed came alive and moved. He was edging out from under my bed, turning his shadowed face up to see if I saw. The mop of his hair was paler than his face. I could have reached down and touched him, but I thought better of it.

Another time he stepped forthrightly out of the closet as soon as I was in bed. At last I expected him there. I even imagined he guarded me while I slept, though there was nothing to be guarded against.

I went to school, but it was a disappointment. The children were all too . . . real. I couldn't fathom the rules of their games. They were forever dividing into teams to defeat each other. But at least I learned to read.

I even read storybooks in bed, but soon gave that up. The bright light kept my ghosts away, and so the room was too

lonely. I left my lamp dark, and the boy returned. One night when he was a shadow in the corner, I sat up and said, "What was your name?"

The whole room caught its breath. Then I heard some sort of answer, unless it was the breeze in the trees.

"Seth," he seemed to say.

"Seth? Seth what? Calhoun? Randolph? Deschamps?" I named all the oldest families in the local graveyard.

"Just Seth," said he or the breeze.

On another night he seemed to settle. He sat in his corner cross-legged in a flowing, old-fashioned shirt. It looked hand-me-down and gravely dingy. His trousers rode up his white legs. Dressed no better for burial than this, he must have been a poor boy.

Too poor to be schooled, perhaps.

"Seth," I said, "do you know your letters? The alphabet?" He and the room thought about that.

"Teach me," I heard from somewhere.

Proud of my own knowledge, I plumped up my pillow and began, soft for fear I'd frighten him into fading. "A for apple."

I heard an echo.

"B for boy."

I heard it again.

Through nights, seasons, semesters, we worked at the alphabet and simple spelling. When I came to third grade and the multiplication tables, I passed them along to the shadow in the corner. If I was too sleepy for our lesson, I heard in my

dreams a distant voice prompting me: "Sevent eights are fifty six."

In fourth grade we did geography at school. At night I taught world capitals, sketching the shapes of countries in the night air while eyes watched from the corner. "Caracas, Venezuela," I'd say.

"LaPaz, Bolivia," the corner answered.

A child dreads changes, but they come. I was a while noticing that as I grew, so too did Seth. I got longer in the leg, lanky as a colt. By moonlight I saw Seth's hands resting on his knees. His hands were wider, the knees bigger. When he loomed into the room, he threw the shadow of a man. I hadn't known that ghosts grow, but I never looked for logic in the dark.

In the summer after sixth grade, I got a licking I didn't deserve. In a burst of housecleaning, Aunt Margaret took a feather duster to my room and found bits of burned tobacco in the corner.

She reported at once to Aunt Sudie. Lurking, I heard: "Quite apart from anything else," Aunt Margaret sighed, "she could burn the house down around our ears."

Aunt Sudie said less and went for the yardstick.

She walloped me, and I wept at the injustice of it. They sent me to my room, a meaningless place during the day. I sat huddled on the stairs, hearing them.

"She is getting to the difficult age," Aunt Margaret sighed. "Now our troubles begin."

"Girls!" Aunt Sudie said, immensely disgusted.

I sulked, but I was secretly pleased. The ghost, Seth, had reached the age when boys sneak smokes. But he hadn't smoked in my presence. He was too old-fashioned and courtly for that. He'd smoked only when I slept. Treated like a lady, I heard the first promise of womanhood.

Seventh grade was too much for me, and I gave in to it. At school I joined the other girls at the washroom mirror. We stared at ourselves, hoping our faces would clear and our busts appear. We dreamed of leading cheers and being loved. I began to notice living boys.

But I didn't like them much. They were loud and never alone. They moved in a pack and would not be taught, even by teachers. How could I say to some basketball-dribbling boy, "Caracas, Venezuela," and expect the proper reply?

Yet the living boys, the daylight boys, drove my Seth away. He went as quietly as he'd come. Or perhaps I stopped looking for him and so he wasn't there.

The light burned in my bedroom till all hours. I had a little radio now, beside my bed, blaring hard rock while I experimented with color on my fingernails. I read beauty tips in magazines suspended by my drying fingers. My nights were as bright as my days.

Then it was senior year, and I was all but grown. The aunts flooded the house with the catalogues of distant colleges, hoping I'd go far away so they could have my house to themselves.

I was willing to go. I'd have left that house, that life, without a backward thought, except Seth came back.

On that last night, I'd packed my college clothes and dropped into bed, but it was too sultry for sleep. I found myself at the window, gazing into the heavy night. Though I'd long ago ceased wondering about the cabin among the cedars, I saw it now. Faint yellow light fell in a square from its open door. I'd never seen that door open at night, or perhaps I'd forgotten.

When I turned back to bed, I knew I wasn't alone. Beside my piled suitcases was the shadow of a man. His outline was between me and the door. Looking for some refuge, I reached far back and found a name. "Seth?" I said, hoping it was he.

His mop of hair was pale in the black room. He worked his big hands together. In a voice deep but soft, he spoke. "I couldn't rest easy without saying good-bye."

I'd forgotten what my childhood had taught me, so I was frightened. I went cold, and my teeth chattered when I said, "You knew I was going away."

He nodded, perhaps smiled. "We're both going away, but to different places."

He looked down at himself, and I saw he'd outgrown the flowing shirt. He wore something dark with bright buttons blinking in the gloom. "I've joined the army," he said.

His uniform should be gray, I thought, Confederate gray. But it wasn't.

"If it hadn't been for you," he said, "I wouldn't have been schooled at all. I'd only have known the swamps and the bayous. But for you, there'd have been no one to learn from, or love."

He turned to go. I heard his boots on the floor, stealthy but real. "Much obliged," he said.

He was at the door now, ready to walk down through the silent house and back to the cedar swamp.

I knew everything then, almost.

"Seth?" I said, too loud.

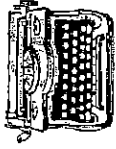
He stopped, too sudden for a ghost, and turned humanly back.

"Whose son are you, Aunt Sudie's or Aunt Margaret's?"

A light glowing down the hall caught the profile of the living man.

"It don't matter," he said, and smiling, he left me.

The Present



"This place where you live, this Indiana,"
he said to change the subject. "How big a city is it?"

—"The Kiss in the Carry-on Bag"

"Shadows" is a story in which the ghosts turned out to be only background figures, window dressing. They fall away at the end to reveal two characters, a living girl and boy on the threshold of adulthood, about to walk into the world.

That story speaks of the "quiet moment of dawn after the dead slept and the living hadn't stirred." We emerge now from four stories that feature night at the windows into the full