

*Laura Fletcher*

**Legion or Lonely**

The first time a vase moved from the table to the countertop while she slept, she thought nothing of it, and replaced it where it belonged the next morning. She in fact forgot the incident entirely until, some months later, she woke to find all the throw pillows on her couch wrong-side up. Her eyes narrowed, but she assumed she had knocked them around while reading there the previous evening, though it had not been a particularly vigorous, pillow-knocking reading session. Two days later, she opened the refrigerator to find a cereal box pressed up beside the milk. She straightened in front of the open door, scanning the small space of her kitchen as though the culprit might be hiding in a corner. Despite the cool air pouring out at her, she felt the small of her back grow hot. She removed the cereal, inspected it, and - finding chilled but unmolested - returned it to its proper place.

Two weeks later, when she absently reached for a fork from the drawer, she found she had tried to stab her eggs with a spoon. Startled, she opened the drawer again to find that all of her silverware had been rearranged, spoons where she expected forks, knives where she expected spoons, chopping knives in a different drawer entirely. The stacks were neat, orderly, confronting her with mute innocence. She stepped quickly backwards, the offending spoon still in hand.

She called her landlord, demanding a security system. In her flummoxed state, she exaggerated a bit, said the windows were loose and rattled, said anyone could get in. She quailed as she said it, as though it might be true. Things moving and rattling windows? Sounds like ghosts to me! the landlord laughed into her reddening ear. It was as though a cold shoulder brushed her arm; she started, increasing the force of her demands.

The system was installed a week later, with sensors on every window and the door. Each night as she went to bed, the fist that gripped her heart loosened slightly as she punched in its code and a robotic recording announced SYSTEM. ARMED. She had tested it thoroughly; so much as leaning on the windows would set it off. She slept soundly for a spell, until the morning she stepped into her kitchen to find a place setting - plate, glass, knife, fork, spoon - neatly arranged by the sink. She gave a strangled cry, collapsing against the doorway. She rushed to check the alarm. Armed, still. She called in sick to work and spent the morning throwing open cupboards and closets, peeking under chairs and couches, tapping every inch of the walls and floorboards to find anything hollow. She questioned, with increasing ferocity, her memories from the previous evening. Had she put a place setting by the sink? What would be a reasonable explanation for a place setting by the sink? Had she planned to eat standing up? Could she have forgotten something like that? Her search eventually proved as fruitless as her questions; the small apartment was solidly built, and secure.

She drank three glasses of wine that night, thinking it would help her fall asleep, but when the walls began to wave and she imagined hands reaching out of them, she followed up quickly with a cup of coffee. As she lay motionless, her round eyes locked on the bedroom ceiling, she heard

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creakings, footsteps even, and launched from her bed to throw open the bedroom door. There was nothing, just the kitchen and the living room, glowing slightly blue in the moonlight. This happened twice more before her exhausted body won out and she fell into a thick sleep.

The next morning, the decorative glass statue from the bookshelf stuck straight up from the back of the couch, nestled between the cushions like an offending finger. She called the police.

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They cased the perimeter, set a squad car to circle the building for a week, dusted for fingerprints. There were none besides her own anywhere to be found in the apartment, except one smudged print from a friend who had visited for dinner the previous week, found near the base of a glass. It was attributed it to poor dishwashing, and they suggested she see a doctor.

She did not. Instead, the same friend swirled through her door in a calliope of long skirts and bangles, demanding she see her psychic, that it was nearly an open and shut case of ghosts, and the psychic could tell her how to appease them. After much pleading and heated statements about energies and centers, she refused the psychic but acquiesced to having her tarot read. Her stomach crumpled as the first card flipped, revealing the Hanged Man. Her friend insisted it represented enlightenment, but she imagined only shimmering, silver forms stepping away from their bodies, seeking forks, seeking order.

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After alternating glasses in the cabinet had been turned upside down (which, she had to admit, did make enough space for the door to shut completely, which it never had) and all the sundries on her bathroom counter had been rearranged to be mirror images of themselves on the opposite side (which, she had to admit, did make her morning routine a bit more efficient), she went to the psychic.

Her friend was delighted, her many-ringed hands making faint clinking noises as she clapped them together with approval. This psychic is excellent, a true clairvoyant! her friend chirped. She will speak with the other side and find out what they want! It hit her like an icy gust that there might be more than one.

The psychic seemed more like a high-school play version of a psychic than the promised true clairvoyant, piled with gauzy scarves, sitting before a rather grimy orb. She wore violently red lipstick and had a small crystal hanging down her forehead, which gave the distracting impression of a glassy, misplaced eye, rather than transcendence. After a lot of waving and gazing and moaning, she demanded to know if it had moved anything from her childhood. It had not. Anything in her bedroom? Still no. Anything in her kitchen? Many times. The psychic's over-large eyes widened and she snapped her face back as though slapped. No, it cannot be. But it was. It was serious. Have they moved pots and pans? They had not, the shift to plural notwithstanding. The psychic's face relaxed slightly. It was not that serious. Burn this (rather expensive) incense and place bunches of dried rosemary (conveniently available for purchase) wherever

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objects have been moved. For how long? Until the haunting ceases.

She walked out with a used grocery bag of rosemary, a cheap plastic sleeve of incense, and the hangdog feeling of knowing she had overpaid. As she drove home, she felt a growing sense that she was trying to notice something, trying to put together pieces her senses were absorbing before her mind could articulate it. It was as though everyone she passed were wearing all white, or every sign – street, billboard, restaurant – were in the same font, a growing concretion of evidence that existed only out of the corner of her eye until she could name it, which she finally did as she opened the door to her empty apartment and froze as it snapped into place: she was being haunted. Yes, she was haunted. She shivered as she shut the door quietly behind her. Hello, she tentatively called. I'm home.

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She began to read about ghosts. She checked out books by the stackful, carrying them furtively, spines piled against her stomach, to the automatic scanner. She tried not to look at the titles as they appeared in blocky font on the screen. She burned the incense and placed the rosemary, which made the apartment smell at first like a lamb roast, and later like the stale inside of a foolshed. She ceased walking under ladders, was especially gentle with her compact mirror. When the 13th of the month fell on a Friday, she skipped work and sat on her couch, trying to move as little as possible, occasionally brushing the disintegrating rosemary bundle sticking up between the back cushions.

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It was to no avail. Her keys appeared dangling off the front of her TV. Her dining table rotated ninety degrees. Once, on a morning she had to leave particularly early, she awoke to her breakfast eggs already cooked, cooling in the pan. Thank you, she ventured, to no one in particular.

She began to refer to them – in her mind – as her ghosts, and sometimes as her ghost; she was never really sure if they were legion or lonely. There was frustratingly little consensus in all those books about anything to do with them, and specifically how to oust them. She considered moving, but one book said they haunt people, not places, and that seemed like a pretty big risk that could go unrewarded. She gave up incense and began burning cedar and small, smoky bunches of white sage. She rang bells in every corner of the house to dispel negative energy. As she fell asleep one evening, she dutifully visualized a growing, protective bubble surrounding herself, the apartment, the building. This was to let the spirit know she was safe and it was not welcome. The next morning, a glass of soapy bubbles sat brazenly on the kitchen table.

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She was losing weight, her eyes sinking back into their sockets. She nearly fainted when she found an unexpected, unmarked envelope on her desk at work, but it turned out to be a belated birthday card from a colleague. Enough, she decided. This must be enough.

That evening, she bought bunches and bunches of sage, tall, white candles, and, after some deliberation, a healing crystal. She arranged them across tables, propped them in corners, lined the counter with them.

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Just before midnight, she slowly began lighting the tapers, casting a soft, almost romantic glow across the apartment, obscured and thickened by the already smoldering sage. On the stroke of twelve, she sat cross-legged, shaping her arms into a sacred circle as the smoky air hazed around her. One book said they are like dogs, they can smell fear, which she hoped was not true. Her voice came out both louder and higher than she had intended it, more like a petulant whine than a command. You will leave my home. She paused. Please. She waited. She heard nothing but the occasionally crackling sage. She cracked an eye open: just her regular living room, growing hazier with smoke. She closed her eye and declared, with a bit less squeaking than before, This is my home and you will leave it. Have a nice trip. Goodbye.

She kept her eyes closed, trying to feel a cold hand wave farewell. She didn't. She only began to feel the heaviness of long nights catching up with her, the pleasant thickness of the smoky air. She leaned back against the wall, keeping her arms in the sacred circle, but resting it on her knees. Surely whatever was sacred about it would understand.

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Her dreams were sharply clear, but she moved through the crystal landscapes as through molasses. Her limbs were thick and unwieldy, she was journeying past waterfalls and volcanoes, into a shallow cave. She was gripping suddenly the wrists of a small child that had been trying to hit her, trying to push it away, but the malicious little thing pushed back, and she had to grip even tighter. The child threw its head back and began wailing, evenly, inconsolably, its mouth a wide, dark tunnel. She jerked away from it; the child's arms flew off and became pots whose handles she gripped, one in each hand. She was standing in front of her couch, her two largest pots in hand, the others having been arranged in ascending size order across the cushions. Even now? With all this sage and sacred circles and demands to move on, her ghosts were still here? She regarded the pots in her hands and the pots on the couch, slowly taking in that it had in fact been she who was just arranging them. But I'm not a ghost, and I've been asleep, her gummy mind protested, and that damn child is still wailing somewhere. Child? It was impossible she had a child. Her mind suddenly cleared. It was a smoke alarm. And with equal alarm she realized her right side had been growing hotter and hotter as she stared at the pots, turning to confront where the tall candles must have been jostled over as her sleeping self carried the pots past them, and were now turning her wooden table into an increasingly sinister bonfire, belching dark, acrid smoke and throwing manic shadows across the room. She flung down the pots and fled.

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She stood a bit apart from the other residents, who gathered across the street milling and murmuring with quiet horror. She wrapped her arms around her empty stomach, still smelling of sage and smoke, and gazed steadily up at the black billows pouring from her window, the violent orange glow indifferent to the hordes of firemen pushing back against it. She sagged against a dim lamppost, collapsing with relief, almost giddy it had been nothing but herself roving her dark apartment, as the slender forms of her ghosts slipped out and, thin as dreams, rose away with the smoke.