

The Uninvited Guests

We lived in that house for years and years, my brother and I. Ever since I can remember, I can see myself wandering in the large, high-ceilinged rooms, skipping and hoping as a child, whistling fashionable tunes as a young man, walking with steady steps on the polished wooden floors of the drawing room and the library as a grownup. And then ... Then ... I kept wandering through the same old rooms, blowing dust off the old furniture and the banisters of the caving staircase and the wood-burning stone oven where no fire was ever lit any more.

You may have realised by now that this was a very old house. Its only remaining inhabitants were my brother and I. Oh, and a family of extremely rude mice. But they left one morning because they couldn't bear our presence, as they had the nerve to tell us to our face! They couldn't live in the same house with the likes of us, if you please!

Timothy and I were really insulted at first. But later we appreciated the peace and quiet. We are very quiet people by *nature*, you might say.

But forgive me for not introducing myself yet. I am Emile. And this is Timothy, my brother. You may think our names are a bit old-fashioned, but I assure you they were the latest vogue when Timothy and I were babies.

Timothy had always been fond of mending and repairing. When he wasn't fixing something broken, he'd sit at the top of the staircase that led to the attic and think about what he would repair next. He could sit still like that for hours. He never bothered anyone, dear old Timothy, and neither did I. And this is how we were planning to go on - but for that fatal morning. ...

To tell the truth, mornings in our house were as gloomy as evenings. The shutters were kept closed, and even if they were hanging off their hinges and the louvres were broken, the light could still not get through the dusty windowpanes. And Mother's climbing wild rose had covered the whole of the house façade over the years and what little light came in was green and muted.

That fatal morning, daylight crept through the wild rose branches and found me still wandering about the house. I was still up, way past my usual bedtime. Timothy had already left his favourite place on top of the stairs. I should be getting some rest, too. I was about to climb upstairs, when I heard a squeaking sound.

Strange, I thought. *What could that noise be so early in the morning? Have the mice returned?* But then the squeaking and creaking increased, and a bright green light flooded the dusty diamond-shaped tiles in the hallway.

'Hey, mister, don't go any further inside, it's dangerous!'

The loud voice gave me a shock. I had become unused to hearing that kind of shouting.

'You're right,' said another voice. 'This place is a total ruin.'

Two men were standing in the dusty hall just inside the front door. I was immobilised at the bottom of the stairs. I was so astonished that my mind was completely empty.

'All right then, we begin the demolition tomorrow.'

'Yeah, that's fine.'

Furious, I glided towards those two.

Demolition? What do you mean demolition? Who is demolishing what and why?

I was about to open my mouth and speak my thoughts, when a loud sneeze stopped me - luckily.

'It's way too dusty in here,' said the men who had sneezed, stepping outside. The other man followed him.

'Yeah, we'd better go,' I heard him say as he shut the front door loudly behind him.

'Too dusty. Might be haunted, too!'

The other man guffawed - or sneezed again, I couldn't say. I was very shaken. Only then did I realise the grave danger I had just escaped. Of course I couldn't have spoken to the men, much less show myself. You see, ghosts cannot just appear to people midmorning, even if these people came into the ghosts' house uninvited with the intention of making said ghosts homeless!

[After their old house is demolished, Emile and Timothy move from place to place; they meet some ghosts from classical antiquity, and they finally end up living in an amphora (an ancient wine-cask), in a glass-enclosed archaeological site next to a school, a place they love, as it reminds them of their own childhood. But one day, their peace is broken again...]

The Intruder

The intruder's name was Zizi, if you must know. Even if she had ever planned to become a useful member of society, it would have been impossible with such a name. And such an appearance - such a haughty look, such thick, glossy, bushy fur! You see, Zizi was a Persian cat, brought to the school by the janitor.

There was way too much traffic at the school canteen that day. The children were flocking at the door in droves, so we imagined some new tasty treat was on offer. Then the bell rang and the children dispersed to their classroom.

I was just about to lie down in our amphora for a little rest before break, following Timothy's example. Then my eye caught something white moving in the playground. At first it reminded me of those fluffy dusters my mother's housemaid used to employ about the house. But then the 'duster' crossed the tiled floor and was now moving towards our amphora with slow, bored-looking movements. I could not fool myself any longer: the 'duster' had a head with a squishy face on it. Two malevolent, orange-coloured eyes dominated that face. The nose was snorting, setting the whiskers of the creature in perpetual motion. The eyes roamed here and there like secret agents on a reconnaissance mission.

If I had had any blood in my veins, it would have certainly frozen that instant, and I would have been a goner. But that's one of the perks of being a ghost: you run no such risk since you're gone already! The cat approached, eyes, nose, whiskers working in perfect sync, until she reached the point where the thick glass wall stopped her. I couldn't tell if she could see me through the tiny opening, but if she felt my presence, that would be the end of me! Cats are nothing like mice, who may be disturbed by our presence but leave us well alone. No, cats hate us. As if their nine lives are not

enough, they want our lives, too. They are so self-centred there is no way to communicate with them. Their only purpose is to hunt us out and destroy us completely. Not because they want to offer any services to humans, mind, since as it happens some humans fear us. Of course this is not their intention. The reason cats make all this fuss about us is that they just don't want us around. Not that any ghosts with even a tiny bit of sense would ever choose to be around a cat! Therefore they either give chase, or stop for hours and hours right outside our hiding place, without flicking an eyelid, never moving - not even for dinner - until we have no alternative but up and leave the place for good. And this will leave them and their nine lives masters or mistresses of the whole area within their radius of movement. Only then will they be satisfied.

This was the kind of trouble we found ourselves in that morning. A cat had just turned up at the school which had become our new home. I felt like bursting into tears. Ghosts do cry, too, you know, and in a kind of scary way, too. But I didn't dare breathe, much less cry, for fear this would betray me.

The cat Zizi stood in front of the glass wall for a bit, then turned away. I saw her resume her exploration of the courtyard in that repulsively nonchalant manner of hers and all I could think was: "We escaped! We escaped! She didn't even know we were there!" But I was still too frightened to even move, much less alert my brother, who was taking his morning nap, blissfully unaware.

'Timothy,' I finally whispered, but the only response I got was a loud snore.

'Timothy, stop that right now!'

I know from experience that the success of telling someone to stop snoring depends on the manner of telling; my manner must have been very convincing, as my brother not only stopped snoring at once, but jumped up as well, fully awake in an instant.

'Wha-what happened?'

I felt no sympathy for his I-just-woke-up expression as I moved away from the opening, making space for him.

'What, the bell - when did it ring-' he began to say but I cut him short:

'Just look.'

He looked.

'Well, the bell hasn't rung yet-' he began again, but his phrase was cut short instantly, just like the snoring before.

'Impossible!'

I had the luxury of discovering what my own expression of horror must have been like a short while ago, as it now appeared on his face: a mixture of surprise and panic.

'Impossible!' said Timothy again, and now he began to tremble. I know I hadn't had the time to tremble myself.

'A cat!'

I nodded. I knew that my brother couldn't see me as his eyes were fixed on the courtyard, but I felt we were in perfect communication. My horror was his horror, my surprise his own.

"What is a cat doing down here?" he whispered.

"That's not the question. The question is: what are we going to do?"

"Hey, don't snap at me!"

Timothy was right. If anybody had to bear the brunt of my displeasure at our bad luck, it should be the cat, not my brother.

"If she discovers us, we're done for," I said in an apologetic tone.

Timothy was silent. At that moment, the school bell began to ring. Break time. We tried to visually locate the enemy among the children milling in the playground, and when we finally located her she was lounging on the marble parapet above the canteen window. A number of children had gathered below, staring, coaxing her, "come kitty, kitty", but she remained immobile like a statue. She reminded me of those cats the ancient Egyptians used to paint on their pyramid walls. Cats were sacred in ancient Egypt, you know. That horrible creature reminded me of those majestic cats. It was obvious she did not want anything to do with humans. But a creature that despises endearments can only be an arrogant, wicked thing.

Then the bell rang again and lessons resumed. My brother and I were left alone in the playground, watching. The cat was always there on the ledge above the canteen. I

couldn't tell you what I'd like to happen next, given a choice: heavy rain, storm, sleet, anything that would turn her sleek fur into a dirty mop, or sunshine to keep her lounging on the ledge, off the playground, and therefore be less of a menace to us?

"She looks too lazy to be bothered with the likes of us," Timothy whispered.

"Maybe she won't be staying long," I said.

We were feeling braver already, and we almost told ourselves off for having panicked so easily. But this was not hard to explain, given all that had happened to us of late: We'd been thrown out of our beautiful old home with the wild rose bush climbing all over its façade, and even if people thought it was just an old ruin we still loved it. Then we had found some new friends to keep us company in our lonely nights and boring days, and we'd had to part from them too. And now that we were finally settling into our new little home, now that we were beginning to make a happy sort-of-life for ourselves near the dear children, a cat had to turn up and ruin it all for us! Such a great misfortune! It was unbearable!

The cat remained in the same place until school was out. When children and teachers were all gone, the caretaker took up his broom and began to sweep up the playground in his usual methodical manner. Timothy and I were still inside the amphora, eyes stuck on the opening, watching now him and now the cat still lounging on the ledge.

The sun set and shadows lay upon the cat's lounging place. She lingered for a little longer, and then jumped off the ledge onto the low wall next to the school fence and into the playground. She took a good look around, spotted the caretaker and padded towards him, letting off a long meow. The caretaker was now sweeping behind the large flowerpots - their plants still saplings - on the wall by the ancient amphorae. The cat went up to him and rubbed herself against his legs.

"Ah, there you are, my pretty girl! My beauty!"

Horried, we listened. His pretty girl! His beauty! That - that lazy and malicious creature! The caretaker threw down his broom and picked up the cat, cradling her in his arms.

"What does my princess want? Her nice dinner? Won't be long, just let me finish up here."

He patted her until the air was full of cat hairs (we ghosts have very keen eyesight and can spot even a hair in the wind), then set her down on the ground right in front of our amphora. The cat looked up at her boss. My brother and I stood perfectly still.

She was so close that we could see every little move of her flat squishy nose as it sniffed around trying to locate various presences. If we had been in doubt before, none remained now: she was not the friendly sort that would live and let live, unlike certain friendly ghosts. We wondered how much longer it would take her to locate us, when we heard the voice of the caretaker:

“Come on, Zizi, we’re leaving!”

That’s when we learned that lady’s name. Zizi. But the important thing was she was LEAVING!

My brother and I exchanged a look of sheer relief, which became steadier as Zizi walked away from the casks close at the heels of her boss. Only when she was well away did we let escape a deep sigh. Our panic had been for nothing. The caretaker had only brought his cat in the school for the day and now she was clearing off. Oh, what a day it had been. But fortunately it was now over!

Timothy and I withdrew at the bottom of our amphora trying to relax back to normality after our great distress. We stayed like that for a while, and it was completely dark by the time we were able to move again. Timothy first, and myself after him, we glided through the stone wall of the amphora and the thick glass that separated us from the world outside, and stood right in the middle of the school playground. After that terrible day in the threatening presence of the cat, we made up our minds to have the longest explore we’ve ever had, and then glide back inside our amphora and spend a peaceful and happy night at last.

