

## The Nature of Ghosts

Carolyn McSparren

I never believed in the spirits. I am a Capricorn, of the earth earthy. I have always felt that ghostly manifestations are supra-normal, not super-natural. In the sixteenth century, if I had flipped a switch and turned on an electric light (batteries included), I would have found myself tied to a dunking stool or going up in flames. And ghosts? Only leftover energy like the ghost on an old television set after it's turned off.

I do, however, think that there are parts of the human brain that most of us can't reach, but a very few of us can. Mostly those people haven't a clue how to control what they can reach or understand what they can see or do. There are half a dozen methods of bending spoons that have nothing to do with magic, but that doesn't mean the occasional person isn't capable of bending a spoon without tricks.

I have never considered myself one of those people. Being caught up in the supra-normal was not my fault, although it became my problem.

I figure so many hauntings happen in old houses, cemeteries, etc., because the electrical remainders have been concentrated and grow with the layers of time like grime on an undusted chest of drawers. But just as I ignore the dust in my house or on my car, none of it ever penetrated my consciousness.

I no longer believe that.

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I am of an age where any oddity is put down as incipient dementia. I cannot tell anyone this story for fear I'll wind up in a small bedroom in assisted living surrounded by the truly demented. So I will write down what happened and hope that someone will find and read it after I'm dead. At that point, my mental state will no longer be germane.

I taught English for forty years. I know how to do research. I decided my only out lay in discovering who my spirits were, why they were here, why they were picking on me, and send them off to wherever they actually should be. They were somebodies. The trick was to make certain they were no longer *my* somebodies.

None of this would have happened if I hadn't decided to add a new kitchen and keeping room to my old farmhouse.

I am not a gourmet cook, although I have prepared many Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners quite well in my old kitchen. It was, however, an abomination. Small, ill-equipped, badly designed, about as far from ergonomically sound as possible. I decided to go whole hog, bump out the back wall twenty feet or so and build myself a kitchen and keeping room with everything top of the line. And fit for me if I were suddenly to wind up in a wheelchair. Not there yet, but it could happen.

Anything to remain here. Let my daughter and my grandchildren deal with forty years of detritus after I'm dead and sell off the treasures that Alan and I collected over the years. Those things are the repository of memory for me, but not for them.

My present house is over a hundred years old, but a Johnny-come-lately among its pre-Civil War neighbors. Although Alan and I added onto and redid during the years we lived in it, we never got around to

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the kitchen. This was my first major project since my husband of fifty-three years died four years ago.

Now wouldn't you think if I were to develop a 'haint,' it would have been Alan? But I've never heard a peep nor seen a shadow of him.

Instead, the minute my construction type, Billy Reynolds, dug the first trench for the new addition outside my present kitchen, he disturbed something—or someone. It refused to go back to sleep.

"Hey, Mrs. Waldran, you need to come out here and see this," he said, peering down into the newly turned clay soil.

"What'd you find?"

"Lookey here, like as not they're from the foundation of the original house."

"I wasn't aware that there was one."

"Me neither, but then you and me both count as strangers in Fayette County."

He was correct. Alan and I moved out here from Memphis forty years ago to this acreage carved out of my next-door neighbor's pasture. Billy's father grew up in the county, but that's only two generations. It takes at least four to be considered a native.

Billy jumped into the trench, picked up a brick, brushed off the dirt and handed it up to me. An old rose-colored brick, much larger than our present day bricks and solid, without the holes for mortar.

"Handmade. Are there more?" I asked, peering into the trench.

"Yes, ma'am. Looks like could be a bunch more." He took it from me. "See this? Them's scorch marks. Must have been a fire. Probably busted most of 'em up, but could be enough to say, maybe, add you an old timey hearth and fireplace in your new room."

"Can you get them out?"

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He rubbed his stubbly gray hair. “Cost you some, have to dig ‘em out by hand. I can get me some old boys to come help.”

“How far does the old foundation go, do you think?”

“Back under your house at any rate. Looks like your slab was poured partway over the old crawlspace.”

“Don’t disturb the present slab, but get as many as you can out of the trench,” I said and went back to my knitting inside. In early October in West Tennessee it wasn’t really cold yet, but the wind was whipping. I don’t know what we let loose that day, but we sure as shooting opened up a can of more than worms.

That night I had my first ‘visitor.’ I have never been afraid on the farm, and not simply because we have the world best wireless alarm system, outside motion sensor lights and a gravel driveway that makes as much racket as a bushel of lady peas rolling in a barrel when someone drives in.

I was finishing my TV dinner on a tray in front of the television in the den when both my cats decanted themselves off the sofa beside me and disappeared with their tails up and as big as bottle brushes.

A moment later he was there standing right in front of me. I yelped, shoved the tray table out of the way, and reached for the Glock I keep beside me at night. I might have shot the television set—a nearly new fifty-four inch flat screen—if he hadn’t disappeared just as fast.

I assumed I’d fallen asleep over my Healthy Choice and waked up in the middle of a dream. Took a few minutes for my heart to settle down. I felt really stupid.

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I did walk the house with my Glock in hand to find nothing untoward, but the cats refused to come back into the den until the following morning. Nothing else happened for more than a week. The piles of bricks grew, and although many of them were scorched or cracked, an amazing number had survived intact.

One morning Billy came to the back door with brick in hand. “Mrs. Waldran, Mrs. Waldran—I can’t come in ‘cause of the mud on my boots, but would ya look at this here?”

I walked out onto the patio and took the brick from him.

“See, right there on the side?” He pointed. “Says right there in the brick, 1885. Musta been when this old house got built.”

I was as excited as he was. I had been meaning to go into Somerville to the library and the historical society, but hadn’t gotten around to it. Now I had a date from which to start looking for my house. Already I was calling it my house.

I bundled up, drove the thirty-odd miles into the county seat, and threw myself onto the good offices of my favorite librarian, Cheryll. Unfortunately, she’s in her mid twenties and an incomer like me.

“No, ma’am,” she said. “I don’t know anything right off the bat, but if there was a fire, we ought to find something in the *Fayette County Gazette*. Could have happened anytime after the house was built and before y’all bought the property.”

“More likely not after the war.” She looked at me blankly. “The Second World, not the Civil. Surely it would be within the memory of people living here after that.”

“Remembering and talking about’s two different things, ma’am. Let me set you up with the microfiche

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from 1885. Sorry, it's the old-fashioned kind where you have to crank the spool by hand."

My cataract surgery helped my eyes, but they still tire easily. By lunchtime I was up to nineteen hundred with no mention of my house, definitely no story about its burning down.

"Where would I find the old land titles and tax rolls?" I asked. She told me. So I moved to the courthouse after a barbecue sandwich for lunch. This time I found the original farm plot so fast I kicked myself for wasting time.

The place had originally comprised over five hundred acres of rolling crop and pasture land that ran back from the road. Taxes were paid by the owner, a Mr. Norton McRae, until his death in 1940. He apparently died intestate and with no heirs. The land went to the state of Tennessee and was sold at auction to the people who eventually sold us our part.

Okay, off to the genealogy sites back home on my own computer on my old roll top desk in the den.

It's amazing how easy it is to trace one's ancestors these days. I called up Norton McRae's taxes in 1886, the year after the house was apparently built, and there was a picture of him.

I looked up from the computer screen at that point and guess what, there he was.

I knocked over my chair and yelped. He continued to glare at me. I gulped past the log in my throat and managed to croak, "Mr. McRae, I presume?"

He started to fade, so I held up a hand. "Please Mr. McRae, I mean you no harm."

The point was, actually, did he mean me any. I couldn't see how.

"Leave him." His lips didn't move, but I heard his voice as clearly as though he'd spoken.

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“Leave whom?” But he was gone.

I considered calling my eldest daughter to tell her I might actually be ready for the padded cell. Then I got angry. “Mr. McRae, you are rude. This is my house. You didn’t even say please.”

That’s when I started laughing.

And when the other two showed up.

They were laughing too, and waltzing, whirling around me. They had shadowy faces, but she wore a ball gown that looked as if it might be from the early Edwardian period—I am very good with costumes—while he wore a tweed jacket and breeches tucked into tall riding boots.

Her dark blonde hair was beautifully coiffed. She was neat and clean. He was filthy and unkempt.

I had not liked Mr. McRae, but these two were the very definition of blithe and bonny. I sat at my desk and watched them waltz. “How can you be so cheerful?” I asked. “You’re dead.”

That sobered them up.

I heard the male’s voice. “Bring us together.”

“No!” McRae’s voice shook the house, although he didn’t reappear.

“Now, you listen, Norton,” I said. “You leave those two kids alone and get out of my house right this minute!”

“What have *I* done?”

I spun my desk chair around. My daughter Parker stood in the doorway with a strained look on her face.

“Oh, sorry. I was cussing the computer.”

“Momma, do you do that often?”

“Every chance I get. Now, what brings you to the country? Haven’t seen you in a month of Sundays.”

“You have made a terrible mess out back. What on earth possessed you?”

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“My homage to the kitchen God. Once before I die I want to cook in a real nice kitchen. It should be ready by Thanksgiving. Christmas at the latest. We’ll all be able to eat in the keeping room and I won’t be stuck off away from the party.”

“Must be costing a fortune. You’ll never get your investment back when we sell the house.”

“You mean *you* won’t. Want a cup of tea?”

“I can’t stay. Audrey wants to know can she come after school Wednesday of Thanksgiving and stay through Sunday night?”

“Why on earth would she want to do that?”

Audrey is twelve.

“We are all planning on going to Jim’s parents in Birmingham right after Thanksgiving dinner. She doesn’t want to go. I’d rather not put up with the sulks for three days. So can she come?”

I nodded. I knew that in a couple of years I’d lose her. Children always have to separate from the person who is most important to their young lives. Alan and I were always Audrey’s bastion. Like to have killed her when her grandfather died. Me too, but that’s another story. I might as well enjoy her while she wanted my company. “Tell her to give me a call and let me know what she wants to do.”

Having accomplished her mission, my daughter was out the door without so much as speaking to Billy, who waved to her.

Then it hit me. What on earth would I do if McRae and the dancers showed up while she was here? Would she see them? Would she flee from them and me in horror? Was I truly losing it?

Leftover energy or not, I had to get rid of them—lay them—before Audrey came to visit. And to do that, I needed more information. So back to the computer.

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Which levitated from my desk, spun on its cord and flung itself at my head. I dove under the desk. The computer fell into my heavily padded desk chair. I grabbed it on the bounce, slammed it shut, and held it down.

“Norton, you cut that out! I mean it!”

The house went dead still. Old houses are never still. They creak and snap, the trees blow around outside. I gasped as though I were trying to breathe in a vacuum.

“Mine...forever mine...” The words came out half moan, half snarl.

“This is *my* house and I refuse to have you toss expensive computers around. You darn near brained me. Git, or I swear I’ll take the broom to you.”

“Mine...” The word whispered as though from a long distance. The moment he was gone, I realized the room was freezing cold. But a nano-second later I felt warm air surround me.

“Not his, never his.” It was the first time I’d heard the voice of my female ghost, lovely and very southern, but with an edge of steel in it. A moment later they swirled around me again in their headlong waltz.

“Look, you two, stop that for a minute and tell me what’s going on here,” I said.

“Together,” he whispered. “Bring us together.”

“And how do I do that? That old doofus Norton obviously is against whatever it is you want to do, and he considers something...”

“Me!” said the female.

“Or someone,” I continued, “his.”

“He never owned me,” she said clearly.

“Do you two have names? Dates of birth? Something I can get a handle on?”

“Sally,” she said. “Sally McRae.”

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Then they were gone.

So she was some kind of kin to Norton. She was obviously young, so probably his daughter who wanted to marry somebody he didn't like. Niece or cousin maybe. Grandchild? Then there was the other possibility, the one I didn't want to think about. Her voice was very young. Norton's was middle-aged. Could she be his wife? The male ghost her lover?

If he had come to take her away and been caught by Norton, that would explain his attire. He was dressed to ride.

She wasn't. She was dressed in her prettiest ball gown, but maybe that's what she was buried in. Nothing said they died at the same time. As a matter of fact, their emphasis on wanting to be together militated against that.

If old Norton found out about him, whoever he was, he might have killed him. I know that's a big if, but it did make sense. If I were attached in some way to old Norton, I'd glom onto any decent stranger to get me away from him.

And the way they waltzed said love.

She was Sally McCrae. I could trace her, assuming Norton hadn't managed to disable my computer. Who was the *man*? A neighbor? A traveling salesman?

I opened the computer and turned it on. It booted, miracle or miracles, and seemed to be working properly. Good thing it hit my padded chair and not my head. Norton would have a second body to his credit. Or third? Maybe he killed Sally too. I felt certain he'd either killed the man or gotten rid of him somehow.

I found out how the next day.

"Oh, Lord, Mrs. Waldran! Call the sheriff!" Billy staggered into my den completely unmindful of the

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mud on his boots. He didn't have to tell me. I knew he'd found the man.

While we waited for the sheriff, I fixed Billy a cup of coffee, laced it with lots of sugar and milk, and thrust it into his hands. As he gulped it down, he looked at the mud on my floor. "Oh, Lordy, I'll clean up the mess."

"Don't worry about it. Drink your coffee." I grabbed my quilted vest and went out the door.

"Don't look, Mrs. Waldran!"

But I was already standing beside the trench looking down at the skull. The rest of him was still buried, but I could see a tiny bit of brown tweed where his neck would have been. The skull was brown too, not white the way they are on television. I expected the skull to be crushed by the weight of dirt on his skeleton, but it looked intact. Except for the round hole where his third eye would have been.

Oh, dear. I sat down hard on the edge of the trench. I'd never seen a bullet hole in a skull before, but I was willing to bet I was looking at one now.

The minute the sheriff pulled into my driveway, all hell broke loose. The skeleton in the crawlspace between the foundation walls had to be treated as a fresh death, of course, complete with detectives and crime scene people followed by the medical examiner. I drove to the road and shut the gate before the news people arrived. I don't know who in the sheriff's department is on their payroll, but they hear bad news as soon as it happens.

Sheriff Crawley is a bear of a man with the bulbous nose and raw red cheeks of a man whose fondness for bourbon has allied with his rosacea to make him look boiled. He is, however, a good man and a competent sheriff. He sent Billy out to be interviewed

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in his squad car by one of his detectives, and talked to me in the den.

“From the preliminary report, the ME guesses it could be close to a hundred years old.”

“Can’t you carbon date bones?” I asked. I watch the same CSI shows everybody does.

“Takes forever and costs a fortune. I’m already on a tight budget. We’ll dig him out, take him to the funeral home in Somerville, clean him up, and put a story in the paper asking if anybody knows who he is. He’ll be buried in the unknown and indigent section of county cemetery otherwise.”

“He will not!” I didn’t even know we had a county cemetery. “You’re going to hang on to him for a little while, aren’t you? Try to find out who he is, trace any family he may have left?”

Sheriff Crawley ran a hand down his face. “Well, for a few days anyway. Can’t afford to keep him too long.”

“I’ll pay for his keep. I want to know who he is.”

About that time a hysterical Parker called me, screaming that all the news stations were saying they’d found a murder victim in my house.

“Nobody says he’s a murder victim,” I said, although he must have been. “And he’s a hundred years old. And he’s not in the house. He’s where the crawlspace for the old house would have been. Lord knows how they managed to dig the hole to bury him in. Can’t have been much clearance between the foundation and the floor above.”

“You can’t stay in that house another minute! I’ll be out to get you in an hour.”

“No you won’t. If you come it’ll be a wasted trip. Not likely a hundred year old skeleton is any danger to me.”

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“I’ll have somebody drive by and check on you every whipstitch tonight, Mrs. Waldran,” the sheriff said. “You keep the front gate latched. Anybody climbs over and wants to talk to you, dial nine-one-one.”

The whole kit and caboodle left at dark. I stuck the Glock in the back of my jeans and swore I was going to get a dog. A big mean dog. I finally took the landline off the hook and put the security system on. I did watch the six o’clock news. They had pictures of my house from the road, but that’s all. They did, however, give my name. Great.

“Now look what you’ve done, you old coot!” I snapped at the empty room. “I know you killed him. I wish you were still alive so they could hang you.”

I felt like an idiot speaking to an empty house. Maybe finding the skeleton had gotten rid of him, but I didn’t think so.

I settled down at my computer to trace Norton McRae’s female kin. Took some digging—women being of lesser import than man and not owning as much property—but I did eventually find Sally. She was the granddaughter of Norbert’s aunt Estella, and as such was his first cousin once removed.

She was thirty years younger than Norbert. And his second wife. Double cousins, then. She died young in childbirth along with her baby. Norton’s baby? Or her lover’s? Did Norton kill both of them too? And where was she buried? Obviously the lovers wanted to be buried together.

So I needed to find where she was buried, find out who the man was, and bury his remains alongside Sally. If that meant disinterring Norton and moving him as far away as I could, that’s what I’d do, even if it meant hiring Billy to do some grave robbing for me.

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If Parker heard me talking like that, she'd go for a mental conservatorship in a heartbeat. Still, I had to do it. Norton couldn't be punished at this late date except by getting that poor girl's remains away from him.

I had never believed whatever constituted ghosts could touch the living. Then Norton tossed a computer at my head. He wouldn't like what I was planning.

So, while Billy and his crew dug out the area between the old footings where the skeleton was found without finding so much as an additional mouse bone, I went hunting for Sally's grave.

That meant discovering all the old graveyards in Fayette County, both still in use and long abandoned.

Parker griped because the only way she could get a hold of me was cell phone. I didn't tell her I generally ignored her calls. I don't answer my cell when I'm driving, and I was doing a lot of driving.

The ME certified the skeleton was old, and whoever put the bullet that they found in the skull cavity was no doubt long gone to a higher authority than the State of Tennessee. No identity in the bits and pieces of clothes and the shreds of his boots that remained.

Once the new footings were poured and the concrete pad laid down, I moved everything out of my old kitchen into the guest room, which looked like the sort of food bank you wouldn't want your children to eat out of.

Then the new construction started.

Billy put up heavy plastic drapes to keep the wind out of the old space, but they popped and snapped and still let in the cold air. I bought a small dorm refrigerator so I wouldn't have to live on fast food all the time, and kept the doors closed so the cats

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couldn't get out—not that they would. The outdoors terrifies them.

No ghosts.

I made reservations to have Thanksgiving dinner for me and my family at a restaurant in Somerville because no way would my kitchen be ready by then. Audrey would be coming home with me for three days. Two weeks left to discover where Sally was buried.

Defeated, I went back to Cheryll at the library with my graveyard problem.

She agreed to help find abandoned churches. We located a couple, but none with lists of the buried, so I had to go hunt the actual yards—mostly overgrown. Too late for snakes, thank God. Pygmy rattlers love overgrown graveyards.

The outside walls went up around the new addition. Cabinets from the old kitchen went to the dump. New cabinets were delivered. The boxes took up most of my den. New wiring, gas lines, windows, walls, new wood floors. It was starting to look like a room. A darn big one, with plenty of space for the keeping room with its fireplace. I planned to turn the old den into a library. Billy could tackle the floor to ceiling book cases in there after the kitchen.

I'd decided the ghosts had departed. The whole town now knew that I was searching for a name for the skeleton and looking—so they thought—for where the rest of his people were buried. The sheriff didn't have missing persons reports before 1930, and his clothes looked more like nineteen hundred. So did Sally's, although I didn't mention that to the sheriff.

"I'm stumped, Mrs. Waldran," Cheryl said over her homemade vegetable soup at the local café, which is the luncheon hangout for most of the town. "We've checked every church and cemetery I can find."

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An elderly white-haired lady at the next table leaned across and asked me, "Have you checked the graveyard at your house?"

"I beg your pardon?"

She turned her chair around. She looked like a little dumpling person until I realized that her forearms were more muscular than mine. A farm woman used to hard work, although the size of her diamond solitaire said her husband was probably rich.

"Before the war..." This time I knew she meant the Civil. "People who owned slaves buried them at the home place. After the war, with so many dying of the yellow fever, plenty of farmers buried their families in their own plots too."

I felt my pulse quicken. "But the original house on my land wasn't built until 1885."

"Huh. Wouldn't stop them. Lotta country folks planted their dead close by. Mine certainly did. Doesn't your house have a graveyard? Maybe a mausoleum?"

"I have no idea. How on earth would I find out?"

She grinned at me and turned her chair back around to her own table, where a woman who must have been her daughter listened to us. "Walk your land, honey. If you have one, it'll be close by."

I could hardly wait to get home, but on the way I realized that the task was huge. A hundred year old abandoned graveyard? Even the gravestones would be buried under leaves and dirt.

The next morning dawned blustery and rainy. No way was I stalking around outside and taking the chance on slipping and breaking my hip.

The day after that the sheriff called. "Mrs. Waldran, I know you're paying the undertaker, but he wanted

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me to call you. You got to make a decision on what to do with your skeleton.”

“Give me a week, sheriff.”

“Three days.”

“Oh, all right. I’ll let you know.”

Mud or no mud, I had to find that graveyard or satisfy myself that it didn’t exist. I felt certain it did. Norton probably forced Sally to marry him. I couldn’t see her doing it without duress. She was barely sixteen when she married and only twenty when she and her baby died. Norton’s baby? Or the unknown man’s? Had she wanted to marry him and been unable to? Judging by his riding gear, I wondered if he’d come to fetch her from Norton, been surprised and killed.

Would Norton tell her he was dead and buried? I didn’t think so. She’d watch and hope for a man who was buried underneath her house. Bastard. And I don’t mean the baby.

And when she died, he’d want to keep her close to him so he could continue to gloat.

I printed off a plot of my land, set up a grid, and hoped that the lady in the café was right. It would be fairly close to the old house and therefore part of the land we owned. I put on my muckiest clothes, took my heaviest cane, and started.

I consider myself in good shape for a woman my age, but two hours and I was flat worn out. I had me some lunch, then sitting right on my sofa I went to sleep. And here came ole Norton hoofing it into my dream with his little piggy eyes and his mutton-chop whiskers. He held a big old hog-leg pistol pointed straight at me. I knew I was Sally’s lover, and I was about to get my head blown off.

“Let her go. She never loved you.” A male voice. Me?

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“Her body is mine whenever I choose to use it. I will have your child to use as I like as well, and I’ll beget my own afterwards. Why would I care about her love?”

Of course the *I* in my dream went for him. Stupid! Played into Norton’s vicious hands. I saw the bullet leave the gun and woke up in a sweat.

A pale early November dawn was breaking when I wrapped myself up and went hiking. “Sally McRae, if you want me to bring your man to you, you are going to have to help me. Where the Sam Hill are you?”

Since Alan died and we no longer keep horses, I’ve kept the pastures bush hogged, but haven’t touched most of the underbrush. Between the love vine and those horrible locust trees with their three-inch thorns and the wild privet, plus the saplings and leaf mold, a goodly portion of the land has reverted to jungle. I walked all the pastures with no result. Then I had to start on the copses—where the worst of the vegetation and the snakes lived. I whacked away at the underbrush with the crook on the top of my cane until I wore out.

There had to be some indication of where the graveyard had been. I brought up aerial photos of the land from Google and stared at them for hours. They had been taken originally in the spring when the leaves were new.

At some point that graveyard must have been tended. I went over the pictures with my big magnifying glass looking for some pattern. I didn’t find one. What I did find was azaleas. Oh, I knew we had azaleas growing wild, but it had never hit me that they were an unlikely plant to volunteer. At some point someone had planted them. Then I saw scraggy roses. Not wild roses, but real red roses. Again, not a usual volunteer. The next morning I was excited,

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although the wind was blowing a mile a minute and it was forty degrees.

The new cabinets were going in that morning, so Billy had a full crew working. He barely heard me when I told him I was going for a walk. I had my medic alert around my neck and my phone in my pocket in case I needed help.

The previous night looking at the aerial photos I had thought finding the place from the ground would be simple. Not so in the fall without the colors of the roses and azaleas to guide me through the thick stands of trees. I wasn't altogether certain I could even recognize the foliage without the blossoms.

One would think that after living in a place thirty years and raising horses there for nearly that long I would be completely familiar with the land, but I assure you, that's not true. One copse looks very much like another. I only knew the paths the horses had worn. I'd already walked those.

So I had to get down and dirty—literally—in the underbrush. Using the hook of my cane, I clawed my way into the copse that I was most certain wouldn't toss me down a sinkhole.

Not a sinkhole, but a four-foot stretch of rusted iron fence lying on the ground half covered with leaves. I caught my foot between the posts and twisted my ankle. While I tried to dislodge it, something hit me right between my shoulder blades. Hard. I catapulted over the fence and six feet into the underbrush, dragging the fence section with me.

It fell over, pinning me under it. One of the spikes that topped each pole grazed my cheek. Hurt like hell! Warm blood trickled down my cheek. I would definitely need a tetanus booster.

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I spit out a mouthful of dead, wet leaves, grabbed for my cane and used it to haul myself to my knees. And howled.

My ankle was trapped at a dangerous angle. I didn't think I'd broken it yet, but wouldn't take much to fracture the bone. If I didn't get myself out, it very well could turn a sprain into a break.

Wouldn't Parker love that? I had to get back to the house without anyone's noticing I was limping.

That's when it hit me. I'd been pushed. Norton really could *hurt* me.

I started yelling, but I knew no one could hear me up at the house with chain saws and hammering. I reached for my cell phone, but my pocket was empty. It must have fallen out. I'd never find it in the dead leaves.

My medic alert button cheerfully notified me it had no service.

My tears were more frustration than pain, but I have never felt so alone nor scared in my life. I kept waiting for Norton to come at me with one of those spikey fence posts. Billy would find my impaled body once they realized I was still gone and came hunting.

Now, when I get scared, I get mad, and I was very, very scared.

"Norton, you bastard, you leave me the hell alone or you'll spend the rest of eternity wishing you had!" I screeched.

That's when I smelled the roses. Roses don't bloom after frost.

And as I looked down, the old fence section twisted sideways ever so slowly. A moment later, I was free. Then my hand touched my cell phone. And when I picked it up from the leaves, I felt the oblong stone it rested on. I brushed aside the leaves and the dirt.

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I could just read it. No 'beloved wife and mother' stuff for old Norton. It said "Sally McRae and issue" plus the dates of her birth and death. He hadn't even bothered to name the child, and he'd buried them together like a mamma cat and a dead kitten. Well, they wouldn't be alone much longer if I had any say in the matter.

I struggled to my feet. The ankle wasn't bad. I could make it to the house if I hobbled slowly and used my cane. I could soak it and wrap it. Nobody would ever know how close I'd come to getting truly hurt.

In the next few days, Billy left one crew to finish my addition while he brought some more men to clean up the graveyard. Once you knew where to look, it was obvious. We found all the sections of the iron fence and the gate that had enclosed the little plot, repaired, painted, and set them back up. Only a few graves. Norton's first wife was there, and his mother and father. And, of course, Sally and her baby.

Norton's was the last headstone we located. He outlived her by many years. Sweating bullets about the man he'd killed, I hoped.

This time the Somerville papers gave me a huge story. We still had no idea who brown suit was, but I made arrangements to have him buried the Friday after Thanksgiving so Parker wouldn't be around, but Audrey would. She thought it was very romantic.

My own rector offered to do the service, even without the deceased's name.

The afternoon before the funeral, I went out to look at our handiwork. As I stood beside Sally's freshly scrubbed headstone, I said, "Norton, I'll make you a deal. You leave Sally and her man alone to sleep through eternity side by side and don't bother us or

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them again. If you do that, I'll leave *you* alone. If, however, you try a single bit of haunting, I swear I'll dig you up, buy you a plot up in Jackson and plant you a hundred miles from Sally. Do I make myself clear?"

"Gram, who're you talking to?"

I jumped a foot. "Nobody important, Audrey honey. Come on, we got to bake cupcakes in my brand new oven for after the funeral tomorrow."

I wished I had a name for our new guest. No fair he should have 'unknown' on his headstone.

After the funeral a bunch of neighbors, reporters and people I knew from the county came up to the house for refreshments. Among those I'd never met was a very old lady wearing an elegant dress of gray Alaskine that must have been twenty years old. And black kid gloves.

She took me aside and introduced herself. "My name is Teresa Mitchell. I've seen you, but never met you. I came because I think I know who the deceased was."

I left Audrey to hostess and took Mrs. Mitchell into my little sewing room, since the addition was not quite finished and the party was going on in the den.

She sat on the sofa, pulled a large brown envelope from her copious handbag and handed it to me. "I think his name is Earl Vincent and he was my great, great uncle. He disappeared in 1906."

I started to rip open the envelope, but she laid a hand on my wrist. "Let me tell you first. Earl was chief engineer on the Memphis to Charleston railroad—quite a prestigious job for such a young man. He got off the train in Collierville one evening and rented a horse at the local livery stable. Neither was ever seen or heard from again. The family hired private detectives even, but no one found anything.

## The Nature of Ghosts

Do you have any idea how he ended up in the crawlspace of your old house?”

I told her everything I surmised without, of course, telling about the ghosts.

“He could have met Mrs. McRae on a trip to Memphis,” she said. “Well-to-do ladies did most of their shopping in town. He was handsome enough to turn any woman’s head.” She pointed at the envelope. I opened it and pulled out the restored five by seven photo. If you ignored his slicked down hair, he was drop dead gorgeous. The other items were cuttings from the newspapers about his disappearance and a hand-written report from a private detective saying he’d reached a dead end.

“My great-grandmother always said he must have been shot by an irate husband. He frequented all the dances he could get to and danced with any woman who would partner him.” She shook her head. “Sad.”

“He disappeared on April twentieth,” I said. “The back part of the old house burned down on the twenty-third. McRae took Sally, moved to town and never rebuilt the part that had been destroyed. That wasn’t done until the forties. Norton must have torched it to cover up what he’d done. She died in childbirth four months later.”

We went back to the reception. She left the envelope with me. I had the photo framed. It hangs on the wall of my new kitchen.

Norton has kept his end of the bargain. We’ve had no more hauntings. We now maintain the little cemetery in pristine condition—the local garden club has made it a priority.

But every once in a while when the spring breeze is light and out of the east, I hear the faint sounds of a waltz.

I wonder what happened to the horse.

Carolyn McSparren

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LaGrange, Tennessee

LeGrange is a country town in Fayette County, Tennessee, one county east of Memphis. Spared most of the destruction of the Civil War, the town's farming interests was largely destroyed by the boll weevil during the depression. Thank goodness most of the ante-bellum houses were restored in the second half of the twentieth century. Today LaGrange and the farms that surround it are burgeoning with young families.