

Ghost Baby

Amanda MacIntyre hummed softly to herself as she sat on the steps and dusted the bannister of her new home. I love this old house, she thought. She slid her bottom down one more step to reach the newel post with her dust cloth. It's so elegant.

It was one of the older houses in Charlottetown, a two story Victorian built on Rochford Square, that by chance had not been turned into apartments in its declining years. With a little effort Amanda had returned gleam to the dark woodwork, and shine to the hardwood floors. I'm so glad Aunt Martha left it to me. She glanced at her watch. Oh, look at the time, I'd better hurry and change, she thought. Trudy'll be here in a minute and I don't want her to catch me looking like the maid on her first visit. She hurried up the stairs again.

The door bell rang presently, and Amanda could see Gertrude's copper curls glowing through the frosted glass of the front door. "Trudy, I'm so glad you could come! It's been ages. Here, let me help you with that." She swung the door wide and held out her arms to take some of Gertrude's packages.

"Thanks, Amanda, my arms are nearly broken. It was my own fault though, I shouldn't have tried to walk uptown to do my shopping. I always come back with more than I went for. C'mon Roderick, don't be shy. This is my friend Amanda, you may call her Mrs. MacIntyre." She ushered in a small boy by the left arm, his copper curls a mirror of her own. "Say hello, Mrs. MacIntyre."

Roderick pulled his soggy right forefinger out of his mouth and offered it to Amanda. "Hello, Mrs. Tyre," he said.

"Well, how do you do?" Amanda took the soggy hand in her own. "I didn't know you had such a grown-up young man, Trudy. How old are you, Roderick?"

"I'm almost t'ree," said Roderick, sticking three damp fingers in the air. "And I'm big for my age."

"Very articulate as well I see," she said to Gertrude. "You've got your hands full with him, I'll bet."

"Indeed yes, he's very b-r-i-g-h-t," spelled Gertrude, "there's nothing much gets past him, and he's got ears like a fox."

"I can hear lots of things," said Roderick.

"I see what you mean." Amanda laughed. "We're hoping to start our family soon, so I guess it won't be too many years before we'll be spelling things too. C'mon in, we'll have lunch in the kitchen, then I'll show you the rest of the house."

She led the way to the back of the house into a large, sunny kitchen. An old-fashioned wood stove sat side by side with a modern electric range. Sunlight bounced off the shiny trim on the stoves and was enhanced by the yellow-painted walls, so that the whole room seemed to glow with an internal light. Fire engine red trim on the chair rail contrasted cheerily with the yellow, and a lush English ivy framed the window over the sink.

“What a wonderfully welcoming room,” said Gertrude.

“Thank you,” said Amanda, “I’ve always loved this room, but Aunt Martha kept it painted white and I always felt that it needed more colour. When she left me the house, and I was free to do as I wished here, I decided to brighten it a little. You don’t think it’s too bright, do you?”

“Oh, no. It’s just right, and I love that wood stove.”

“We thought about taking it out, but you know these Prince Edward Island winters, and how often we have power failures. So we had the chimney cleaned and lined instead, and put in the electric stove to use in the summertime.”

“That’s a good idea, it might do for our house too. The cable to the mainland goes out often enough in storms and we always end up going out and staying with our friend Jim in Cherry Valley until they can fix it. He has a generator so he at least has lights. He also has a lovely wood stove in the kitchen as well as a furnace. He had company for two days twice last winter, and it’s hard to get out there when it’s storming. We have to make up our minds and go early before it starts drifting.”

“Well, now, lunch is ready. I’ll just make the tea. I made us a nice salad and we’ll have some potted meat that I made the other day. Oh, it’s so good to be home again!”

“How long were you and Alec in Toronto?” Gertrude sat Roderick on a chair on top of the thick dictionary that Amanda had offered her from the bookshelf behind the stove.

“We got married right after I finished training, and we went up then. Our honeymoon was our trip to Ontario.”

Gertrude laughed. “So you’re just now returning from your honeymoon!”

“You could say that,” agreed Amanda.

“What’s a honeymoon?” Roderick took a momentary interest in the conversation.

“It’s a trip that people take right after they get married. It helps them get better acquainted.”

“Oh.” He digested this in silence for a few seconds. “What’s ‘quainted?’”

“Acquainted,” repeated Gertrude. “It means to get to know someone better.”

“Like you and Mrs. ‘Tyre?’”

“That’s it exactly,” said Gertrude. “Mrs. MacIntyre and I haven’t seen each other since nurses’ training so we’re getting acquainted all over again.”

“Will he eat salad?” asked Amanda.

“A little, I think,” replied Gertrude. “A peanut butter sandwich is more to his taste, though.”

“Jam too?” Amanda rummaged in the cupboard for the peanut butter.

“A very small amount, he’s not fussy about things that are intensely sweet. Unlike his mother.”

“Me too,” said Amanda. “I always have to be watching my waist line. Alec tells me I’m too skinny, but I know if I let it go, there’ll be no stopping it ‘til I’m as big as a house.” She cut the sandwich into fingers and set it in front of Roderick. “My mother was that way, just enormous.”

“So what brought you and Alec back to the Island?”

“Several things.” Amanda arranged a marinated mushroom and carrot salad on lettuce leaves, then decorated the edges with thin-sliced rosy tomatoes. “We’d been thinking about it for a long time, but we could never afford to come. Alec had a good job with Social Services in Toronto. Well, actually, he ran the Willowdale office. He liked it pretty well, but then they cut the budget and moved a bunch of people and it wasn’t the same anymore. They had as much work as ever and fewer people to do it. He got pretty frustrated.” She paused for breath. “I was at the dentist’s one day last fall, and I was leafing through one of those advertising-type magazines for tourism in the Maritimes, and there was a page of positions available. I glanced down the list to see what they had, and there was an opening for a Director of Social Services in Charlottetown. I was so excited I ripped the page out before I thought that it wasn’t my magazine.” She laughed. “I don’t think they liked it, but it was too late then.” She set the plates of salad down at each place and poured the tea. “I couldn’t wait for Alec to get home, so I went to his office to see him. It was a circus! My mouth was still frozen from the filling I’d had, and I could hardly talk anyway, I was that excited. I finally just shoved the page under his nose and pointed. The rascal just said, ‘We’ll see,’ and sent me home. I was disappointed, but I knew he was interested because he kept the page. He applied that night and they interviewed a few weeks later, and in the meantime Aunt Martha died and left me this house. I was her only niece, her only near relative for that matter, the rest are just third cousins down in Boston. It just seemed to fall into place. It was like it was meant to be. Have some cream.” She passed the creamer shaped like a cow to Gertrude. “Anyway, Alec got the job, and we moved down in January. We only rented in Toronto so all we had to do was pack up and leave. I’ve been scraping and cleaning and painting ever since I got here. I love it!”

“I want some cow.” Roderick reached for the pitcher, and got his elbow in his own small salad.

“Wait, honey, that’s not milk.” Gertrude grabbed his arm.

“What is it?” asked Roderick. “It looks like mik.” He sat back on his dictionary as Gertrude scrubbed at his elbow with her napkin.

“It’s cream, and it’s very rich. A little goes a long way.”

“What’s cream?”

“It’s the fat part of milk. It’s what they make ice cream out of.”

“Oh,” said Roderick. “Can I have some mik, please?”

“May I have some milk, please?” corrected Gertrude. “Yes, you may. Actually, I prefer milk in my tea too. Cream always seems rather thick.”

“I don’t usually use cream either but it seemed like a treat for a special occasion.”

“Oh, do you want some too, Mommy?” He turned to Amanda. “We’d like some mik, please, Mrs. ‘Tyre.”

Gertrude rolled her eyes. "You see what I mean."

Amanda laughed. "I do see. You can't beat them sometimes." She got a new bag of milk out of the fridge and put it in its yellow plastic pitcher. She snipped the corner off the bag and poured it into a larger cow pitcher that matched the creamer. "There," she said, setting it down in front of Roderick, "A cow just for you."

"Oh-h," said Roderick in delight as he reached with both hands for the pitcher.

"Now, pour it carefully." Gertrude kept discreet hold of the cow's leg. "He's just learning to pour," she said to Amanda, shaking her head. "He thinks he can pour anything now."

Amanda poured more tea. "Are you ready for some dessert?" she asked. "I made us some Apple Brown Betty this morning. It's still warm, and it's delicious with that fresh cream." She took away the luncheon plates and stacked them in the sink. "The only thing about this kitchen is, that as large as it is, there's no place where we can conveniently put a dishwasher." She served generous portions of pudding into bowls and set them on the table. "Help yourself to cream."

Gertrude applied some cream and took a bite. "Mm, delicious, eh!"

Amanda looked pleased. "It was Aunt Martha's recipe. I fell heir to all her things, recipes included. Of course it took some deciphering to make it come out right. Her handwriting was always such a scrawl, and those old recipes with their pinches and dollops have to be seen to be believed. When you're finished we'll take a tour."

A few minutes later Amanda was showing off her new home. The ground floor had a large living room to the right of the front door, to the left was a dining room of the same dimensions that connected to the kitchen through the pantry. A closet behind the broad staircase to the upstairs had been converted into a washroom with a toilet many years ago, when Aunt Martha had moved in. The upstairs contained four large bedrooms, and a spacious, newly remodelled bathroom.

"This used to be the maid's room in the days when people could still afford to keep a maid." Amanda opened the door to a smaller room off the landing. "And look here, in this closet are the stairs to the attic. C'mon up, I've even cleaned up here." She started up the stairs pulling the string to the attic light as she went. The small windows at either end kept out most of the sunlight and gave the room an almost eerie feeling.

"We thought we'd fix up that room for a nursery, then when the child got bigger he could use the attic for a play room on rainy days. It has a lovely wood floor in it already. It needs new insulation, but that won't be hard to do, and with a little gyproc on the ceiling, and a few cupboards and some child-sized furniture it'll be just about perfect."

A cold chill went down Gertrude's back. "It'll be perfect," said Gertrude. Roderick began to squirm in her arms. "Can we go now, Mommy," he complained, "don't like it up here."

"In a minute, dear," said Gertrude, shifting him to her other arm. He reached out his sturdy boy arms to the far end of the attic.

“Pretty lady, pretty lady,” he said, wriggling himself free of Gertrude’s grasp, and running down the length of the attic. He stopped abruptly just before the end and looked around himself in a puzzled fashion. “Pretty lady gone.”

Gertrude frowned and hurried after him. “C’mon darling, there’s no pretty lady here.” She turned him around and hastened him back to the stairs.

“Pretty lady sad,” said Roderick, looking back over his shoulder to search the shadows at the far end of the attic.

“There’s no one there, Roddy,” said Gertrude. “It’s time to go downstairs now. Come along.” She grasped him firmly by the hand and started down the stairs. A somewhat paler Amanda followed them, turning off the lights and shutting the doors as she went.

The kitchen welcomed them back with its cozy brightness. “I’ll make a fresh pot of tea,” said Amanda. She filled the kettle and plugged it in. “Roderick seems sleepy, does he need a nap?”

“It is just about nap time for him,” said Gertrude. “He can lay on the lounge there for awhile. He may drop off, and I can keep an eye on him there.” They both avoided mentioning the pretty lady for the moment.

The kettle boiled and Amanda put down the tea, then set it on the warm burner to steep. It was difficult to think of what to say, so for the moment she said nothing. Gertrude settled Roderick on the lounge for his nap. The silence between the two women lengthened. The clock on the mantle shelf ticked on. Roderick slept. At last Amanda asked: “What do you suppose he saw?”

“Shadows probably,” said Gertrude. “He has a very active imagination.”

“Did you see anything?”

“No, but then I wasn’t looking.” She sat silently for a minute staring at her small son. “Did you see anything?”

Amanda breathed deeply. “No, but I wasn’t looking either.”

“Have you ever seen anything here?”

“No, not if you’re thinking of ghosts. I don’t believe in them, so I never look for them.” She poured them each a cup of tea, and refilled the creamer with milk. “Help yourself to the ‘cream.’” She passed Gertrude the cow. “Your mother had the second sight, didn’t she?”

“Oh, she liked to say she did,” said Gertrude. “I think, in her case, that it was about ninety per cent imagination.”

“The old people believed in her, didn’t they? I know the kids did.”

Gertrude sighed. “There are a lot of gullible people in the world, especially among the very young and the very old. Mother had a gift of sorts, but it wasn’t quite what she thought it was. She told pretty accurate fortunes on an individual basis, otherwise she couldn’t predict what she’d have for supper. She worked very hard at creating an atmosphere. She said it enhanced her powers.”

“Well, she did a good job of creating, then,” said Amanda. “All the kids were convinced she was a witch.”

“I know.” Gertrude’s lips tightened. “I spent a very lonely childhood because of it.”

Amanda’s bright blue gaze rested expectantly on Gertrude’s set face, but no more comment was forthcoming. The clock on the mantle shelf whirred and groaned into life, tinnily striking four.

“My goodness, look at the time!” Gertrude jumped to her feet. “We must get going. I still have to walk home and I haven’t done a thing about supper yet.” She began gathering up their belongings. “Time to wake up, Roddy, we have to go home now.” She bent over the drowsy child, who gazed at her with dreams still in his blue eyes. “Did you have a good nap, dear?” She sat him on her lap, and began putting on his shoes.

“I dreamed that the pretty lady was rocking me,” said Roderick. “She was crying.” He slid to the floor and stood leaning sleepily against Gertrude’s legs for a moment. Gertrude helped him into his jacket. “It was only a dream, Roddy. Don’t think any more about it. Thank Mrs. MacIntyre for your nice lunch.”

“Thank you for my nice lunch, Mrs. ‘Tyre.”

“You’re quite welcome, Roderick,” said Amanda, “you’ll have to come again.” She showed them to the door. “I’m sorry about the pretty lady, Gertrude. I really think that it must have been shadows, I honestly don’t know what else it could have been.” She frowned, then laughed. “If there really is a pretty lady up there, maybe she’ll babysit for me when I have little ones. She seems to like children well enough.” She held Gertrude’s packages while she arranged Roderick in the stroller. “You will come again, won’t you?”

“It’s my turn next time,” said Gertrude. “We’ll do it again soon. I’ll give you a call, eh?”