

The space from one wall to the next. The width of the floorboards. The thickness of the trim and the amount of electrical outlets. Even bigger, more obvious things like the number of steps in the central staircase or the amount of corners in each room. Everything changes in here.

It had only been a few days since anyone lived in the Gray house. Not “Gray” because of its colour, or because of the original family’s name—that was simply what the street was called. But then, the street itself was probably named after a family in its own right, so make of “Gray” what you will; that’s simply what it was called. And, mind you, the Gray house wasn’t the only house on Gray street either, not at all. In fact, it was pretty much a street like any other. Over the years it hosted Victorian manors as well as small apartment buildings that sprouted in the 1970s (neither of which overly notable, and neither standing taller than three storeys). Some houses on Gray were well-kept, and some were pretty dilapidated. Most of them were rented, and about half of them divided up into rooms or flats or other arrangements of spaces for month-to-month transients. But Gray was a street as old as the town itself, and its oldest buildings have stood for over a hundred years. The Gray house? It was one of them.

One last thing of note about this street is that it’s relatively normal (as non-notable as that is). Commonplace. Quiet. Yes, it’s got one stop sign too many, and yes, its families come and go; but it has never been the site of something extraordinary. Nor has the house itself been a place of drama or turmoil. No deaths, no births, and no ghosts (nor ghost stories, to tell you the truth) have ever echoed within its halls. It’s the last pre-ambulatory fact to memorize, but it’s an important one: the Gray house is not – nor has it ever been – haunted.

It has had its share of tenants over its 121-year-old life. Originally built in 1898, it is a fantastic sight to see, while never a fantastical site per sé. 3300 square feet (of spaces that can best be described as “generously sized”), six bedrooms (depending on what you consider a bedroom), and three storeys tall (unless you count the basement—then it’s four). Its original owners built it on the rock foundation of a house that was claimed by a town-wide fire, and it’s been a couple generations since anyone’s known what that previous house looked like. But that’s beside the point, even if it’s actually exactly the point. This house changed.

At some point, probably in the 1940s, every door (including the living room, parlour, and dining room), had a deadbolt on it—a lonely matriarch would make ends meet by renting each and every room while her husband was at war in Europe.

One of the radiators had caused the floor to sink, slowly over the course of 15 to 20 years, and it found its low point over 50 or 60 years ago.

And, like any other, the Gray house has had an endless parade of wallpaper, bathroom updates, and new refrigerators.

Every house, if it's lucky to live long enough, changes. You'd expect that. These are the types of changes that houses tell each other about when they converse among their neighbouring buildings on still winter nights and hot summer days.

But, like a person who looks in the mirror and is shocked by the gradual sudden change inside and out, there are some types of change that a house doesn't tell its neighbours about. The Gray house's changes were so gradual and sudden that no other entity – house or human – had ever caught on to it. None ever would, if it kept its movements secret to itself. And the Gray house did exactly that.

See, none of its owners had ever met each other. Well, not really. Sometimes the house passed ownership by estate auction, through the bank in town (which was only about four minutes' walk away), and sometimes the owners crossed paths while signing papers or handing over keys. Only once, in the entirety of the Gray house's lifespan, were two owners in the same place at the same time. But the new owner was so dazzled over his new home, and the old owner was so exhausted from cleaning it out; neither of them would have noticed if the house hadn't been able to stifle as shift in its layout, even as a shift in ownership was taking place. Beyond that single occasion, only realtors, housekeepers, or "furnace guys" had been in the place more than once over the years. And none of them would have noticed any tweaks in its walls. The Gray house had over a century's experience in concealing its moods.

So. Who would ever know? The second owners were long dead by the time the Gray house's 12-foot ceilings became 10-feet. The war widow was in an old folks' home when the floorboards on the second storey rotated 45 degrees. And the Myers were the last ones who would ever see the top-floor landing only six feet wide. The house made changes in its boredom and in its playfulness. In its dotting nature and its short temper. Corners moved on dark nights, windows got taller when people were at work, and the attic hatch was constantly nomadic.

But the Gray house only made a change when no one was looking, and only when no one would notice. It wasn't malevolent not mischievous. It was capricious. At the same time, it wasn't in control of what it did to itself – sometimes it influenced a change by deep loneliness or jealousy, and sometimes it thought up a change while breathing a sigh, the same way you might decide to quit your job while pouring a bowl of cereal. In control? Not really. Deliberate? Most definitely.

All this to say, well, any previous resident to walk those halls once again would find their well-trodden memories a little off-kilter. One might have been able to navigate to the wine cellar in a power outage, but with a few years spent elsewhere, extra stairs and stubborn doorknobs would make sure that it didn't feel quite like home anymore.

Wasn't that window taller when owner #2 was a kid? Weren't those radiator pipes against the opposite wall? Didn't the front door open to the left, not the right? "I guess I just remember it differently"; the house was very, very used to hearing that particular phrase. Somehow, you'd swear the floor was darker. The rooms were bigger. The sunbeam's angle was more direct.

And that was how the Gray house got away with it all. Human memory; imperfect and all too short. Based on impermanent reference points and flawed logic. Nothing ever stayed the same inside this house. And that was all the Gray house knew—perhaps nothing ever changed anywhere else, and the world beyond its front curb was exactly the same as ever it was. That was not for a house to know; and anyway, it was not a house's concern. Brick, stone, timber and tile were its domain. Its tools. Its handcuffs. And that fact, that desperate limitation, would confuse the Gray house into fury and depression if it ever truly, honestly, unflinchingly grasped what a curse it was.

But on it went, year after year and decade after decade, shuffling its innards, one feature at a time. Did other homes learn within their life that their toy box of an interior was all they'll ever have to play with? Did some of them simply give up and resign themselves to passivity, allowing their passing human owners to be the ones making alterations inside and out? That would make sense—most houses, especially younger homes of, say, 50 years old or less, certainly didn't have that undefinable "charm" of an older one. Maybe it was the fact that the Gray house had more features to play with, keeping it engaged in its edits since it was built. Or maybe this particular house was imbued with something more, a boundless curiosity, and that was what made it stand out.

Change it did, and tire it did not.

Even now, although I've only lived in the Gray house a few months, I swear there are features that weren't this way when I moved in. There weren't as many peaks to the roof. There was one window less in the basement. The second floor landing's wall wasn't curved, the built-in pantry had five shelves (not four), and the house numbers were far bigger.

I am the current owner of the Gray house, and it is not as young, nor sane, as it used to be. I can feel it losing its grip on its self-formed reality. It shifts all around me. I can see it in the darkened corners when they're their darkest. The house falls asleep from time to time and I have to find my way through its bizarre dreams.

I just painted that wall white, yet here I sit at 3 am, staring at mint-green plaster—in the morning it'll be white again whether I touch a paintbrush or not.

Never before was there a fourth-storey staircase that wouldn't let itself be climbed, but there it is now. It'll be gone by dawn.

I know the kitchen didn't have a sink in each corner. Tomorrow it won't.

It's innocent enough. Playful and quirky and odd. "Capricious", right? The space from one wall to the next, the width of the floorboards, the thickness of the trim and the amount of electrical outlets and all that.

I don't mind the shifting doorways. The undulating crown moulding. Or the creaking of the radiators as they wander the rooms.

What keeps me up is the fear that, one night, the Gray house will dream an open pit where my bed is now. Or move the oil tank too close to the burning woodstove. It's changed my relaxed nature for anxiety in the same way that it changes the features of its own walls.

I can't rest.

And I'm powerless.

Everything changes in here.