

MALKA DASKAL

ANTIMATTER

FOR SALE BY OWNER! This two-storey, five-bedroom, three-and-a-half-bathroom stately Victorian is on the market for the first time in over three decades, and it boasts exceptional period detailing throughout. Enter through the original leaded glass door to a foyer with a vaulted ceiling and a five-tiered, champagne crystal chandelier suspended above a spiral staircase with a hand-carved walnut balustrade. This iconic beauty is sure to evoke a sense of romance from a bygone era, making it the perfect fit for a buyer whose suffering from the onslaught of modern tragedies begets a yearning for simpler times. After living in this house for over twenty years, my wife, Jill, and I have decided to downsize to something more appropriate now that it is just the two of us and the three stories of this home only serve to physically amplify the already substantial emotional distance between us.

In the interest of full disclosure, I was not being entirely accurate when I said it was just the two of us. Inspections can turn up all kinds of hidden unexpectancies, caveat emptor and all that, so I would like any serious prospective buyers to know that the house is currently occupied by myself, Jill, and the ghosts of our three children.

Jill would refute this claim. Her faith affords her full conviction in our children's peaceful transition to a place of heavenly rest. But before you are inclined to accept her rosy beliefs, you should be aware that the presence of our ghost children would be difficult for her to detect as she is largely occupied with facilitating grief and recovery meetings for the melancholic members of the Church of New Heights. And when she is home, her attentions are often elsewhere. It therefore falls on me to attend to the children's needs, prosaic as they may be. Beverly prefers a cup of tea before bed, and Samuel, always quick to anger, fumes if I forget to take in the mail. Sweet Fiona can't sleep without the hallway bathroom light on, and all three of them sulk and hide away if they feel they are not receiving their due attention. Being the father to three ghost children is considerably easier than

being the father to three live children, but as with all child-rearing phases it is not without its own host of particular challenges.

For Sale: Stately Victorian with historical charm, many original features, and three brooding ghosts whose presence can be alternately consoling and arduous, as I sit here trying to draft this listing. The exterior boasts a wrap-around front porch handsomely accented by vintage corbels and decorative scalloping. The front drawing room features impressive bay windows and a wood-burning fireplace. This is the room where we would gather as a family when the children were young, cautioning them away from the sharp-edged hearth and the one loose nail head that rises from the birch floorboard like a little lord assessing his kingdom. There was one winter when the furnace quit, and Jill and I huddled with the kids before the fire—an experience we could relish, knowing a new furnace would be delivered the next day and our foray into lives of privation was fleeting. Fiona was still bright-eyed and silken haired, three-year-old Samuel was insisting on communicating only through barks despite having a vocabulary that far exceeded his peers, and Beverly was an infant so docile Jill took her to the pediatrician and demanded an MRI. It was a time when *maintaining health and safety* still masqueraded as an attainable goal, and no one was surprised when the furnace arrived on time and in perfect working order.

The house is conveniently located half a mile from the university where I teach Introduction to Quantum Physics—a subject that initially appealed to me due to its well-demarcated rules delivered in discrete, minute, and predictable packages but that now, in light of certain unanticipated life experiences, appeals by virtue of its acknowledgment of our vast ignorance regarding the universe's contents. The dark energy that exists in the universe, whose source, configuration, and laws remain an impenetrable mystery, should confound and frighten. But what bright possibilities lie in the unknown, and why should we expect the substance of the universe to conform to the limitations of our senses or our experimental designs?

It is not that I think my children are some sort of manifestation of dark energy, although I don't rule that out entirely. It is just that I allow for the possibility that they exist, apart from me, in their own unique form, and I need not know how or why. Jill says this line of reasoning is "utter bullshit," but Dr. Ellis, the therapist she not so casually recommended I start seeing, says that the mysteries of our world are what give life meaning and that

truths are easy to feel but harder to define, which I believe means he's on my side. Because the truth I feel is that a man does not start seeing things that aren't there in his late sixties without any warning, such as prior visual hallucinations or erratic behaviour. So if a man says that he sees his little girl, wan as a winter's sun, playing with her dolls in the corner of the living room or his son sitting at the kitchen table writing scrupulously in his legal pads, head bent in concentration, savagely crossing out lines in a process of brutal revision, one should at least consider the veracity of such statements before dismissing the man as "only having one oar in the water."

Jill counters my claims with specious arguments, claiming they cannot be real since I am the only one who sees them, I only see them within the confines of the house, and I only started seeing them after Beverly's death. It is not for me to question her logic, but I'd hypothesize that I see them because their deaths weigh heaviest on my conscience, the house is where we belonged as a family, and only generous-hearted Beverly has the necessary magnetism to gather her siblings from their graves. I once saw Beverly sweet talk the angry Polish grocer into giving a homeless man an entire roast chicken. Daniel, Beverly's fiancée, won't agree with me outright, but I can tell from the way he hangs around the house and keeps by my side like a puppy waiting for his chance at a meal that he is hoping to get a glimpse of her. Daniel, by his own description, is an open-minded artist, and he is so agreeable by nature that his endorsement only counts for so much. Sometimes he asks me to communicate something to Beverly. This week, for example, it was the sale of their art installation for a price so obscenely high that Daniel is, as they say, "set for life." I've made it clear that neither Beverly nor her siblings seem to have the capacity of speech, but I try to relay his messages faithfully.

If Jill happens to overhear Daniel's request, she rolls her eyes and says, "don't encourage him," or "isn't it time for you to be going home?" But then she will prepare him a plate of dinner and insist he stay. With his eager-to-please energy, oversized blundering body, and big blocky head, Daniel is a lot like a large-breed puppy—a Tibetan mastiff or a St. Bernard. We both like having Daniel around because he's good company and his sadness so closely resembles our own. His presence also alleviates some of the tension that blankets the house. He and Beverly had been together since art school and were, according to the banner on their website, "artistic collaborators manifesting large-scale change via large-scale art."

Victorian Home for sale ornamented with elaborate ceiling medallions. What you need to know about ghosts is that they aren't frightening unless you're frightened of them. Dr. Ellis says it's natural to "fear that which we don't understand," which I suppose is true, but I wish Jill wouldn't dislike them so much. Dr. Ellis suggests that Jill is likely frustrated by what she perceives as her inability to help me in my grief and adds that it is natural to "hate that which we fear." At this point I ask him if there are any additional chewed-up and regurgitated aphorisms he'd like to share before our time is up. Dr. Ellis flips his notebook closed, rubs the space between his eyes, and says that maybe next week we should shift our focus to exploring the source of my, not Jill's, anger.

Dr. Ellis means well, but I don't think I need a professional to locate the source of my anger. If the death of all three of your children isn't enough to merit some rage, I don't know what is. And if I cannot be angry at the insensible, bewildering laws governing the universe, surely I can find blame with a father who cannot manage to keep even one of his children on this side of the veil.

We all gather in the kitchen to celebrate the sale of Daniel and Beverly's artwork—a massive structure composed of intertwining aluminum tubes, each only about two inches in diameter, clad in a reflective film and manipulated into thousands of Euclidian shapes that form a sort of open-weave net. The whole construction is mounted to a double-height ceiling where it stretches like a rainforest canopy as it refracts the light in a dizzying circle of rainbowed metallics. The piece has been purchased by a museum in Stockholm, and I will be sad to see it go. On the day that it was completed, Beverly took me to her studio and told me to lie on the floor directly under the mammoth assemblage. I felt ridiculous to be a grown man lying on a poured concrete floor, but she asked me to keep an open mind, so I did as she asked. When she opened the heavy drapes of the windows, the light caught the many surfaces and the colours were explosive—so bright I had to close my eyes and let them adapt. When I opened them again, the colours were still there but different, and for the thirty minutes that I spent with my back on the cold concrete floor the colours were never inert but always shifting, dazzling, mutating, rolling, like a live creature swimming through shadow and light. It was as close as I've come to a spiritual experience—to know I could create someone who could create something so divinely beautiful.

Jill has prepared cupcakes with plastic rainbow toppers as a thought-

ful nod to the artwork's aesthetic. I eat my cupcake simply to be polite, and hearty-appetited Daniel almost swallows his whole. The children eat nothing, of course, but seem content to watch.

Daniel wants to know about Beverly. "Is she here now?"

I nod and indicate with a lift of my chin that she's sitting on a stool by the kitchen island.

"Do you think she is happy with the sale? We talked about the possibility of having it displayed in a public space, like a town centre or something, but we never had a chance to figure it out exactly, and when this offer came . . ."

Daniel has a habit of not finishing his sentences. When Beverly was around, she would often complete them for him. Now he's like a fabric that is perpetually unravelling.

Beverly looks as she always does: thoughtful, content, interested, but slightly aloof. She has long auburn hair she wears loose and wild, and her fingers are stained with flecks of paint in every colour.

"I think you made a good choice." I give Daniel the remaining half of my cupcake, which he eats without chewing.

"Are you working on anything new?" Jill asks in a tone determinedly calibrated to change topics.

Daniel shrugs. "I've got lots of ideas, but it's hard to pin them down. I'd like to go back to working with more organic materials—wood graphite, clay—but I'm not sure, and the studio is so empty . . ."

"Take your time," I say. "There's no need to rush into anything."

"There was one thing that came up that's rather interesting." Daniel uses his fingers to martial the cupcake crumbs on his plate into an orderly formation. "The museum in Stockholm that purchased *Conjure* would like me to spend a year there as a visiting artist, teaching and creating."

"How exciting," Jill claps her hands together. "When would you go?"

The pile of crumbs keeps mounting precariously. "Well, no. I told them no."

"Why?"

Daniel looks in the direction of the island bar stool. Beverly looks on placidly. "There are too many reasons to stay here."

Jill reaches across the table, grabs Daniel's hands, and looks him in the eye. Jill is a petite woman, but in this moment her mass is so condensed that Daniel is pulled in by her gravitational force. "Listen to me, Daniel. There

are no reasons to stay here.” Daniel nods in agreement, but it’s clear that his heart has made other plans. Jill drops his hands in disgust and rises white-hot mad. She turns and jabs a finger in my direction. “This is your fault.” Then she stalks out of the kitchen, and the kids watch her departure impassively.

Haunted Victorian for sale. 3700 sq. ft. lovingly cared for and in excellent condition. Unique opportunity. You must see it to believe it.

Dr. Ellis has invited Jill to attend our next therapy session. His office resembles the interior of a country house drawing room as imagined by an Anglophile. The wallpaper is black with a pattern of gold fleur-de-lis above the walnut chair rail and festooned with gilded-framed oil paintings of hunters with fussy mustaches and their wise-eyed working dogs.

Dr. Ellis is asking after Jill and the work she is doing to help people through loss and transitions. Although she complains about the demanding schedule, I know this work brings her real pleasure. Dr. Ellis has previously intimated that I always appear uncomfortable when discussing Jill’s work and that I use “minimalizing language,” which suggests an undercurrent of resentment. His comments sting sharply enough, and I have to allow for the possibility that they might be true. If I begrudge Jill finding solace from her grief, then at least I am ashamed enough to lie about it to myself.

“What about you, Oren?” Dr. Ellis turns to me. “How is your work going?”

“No complaints,” I say.

Jill rolls her eyes aggressively.

“Do you have something you’d like to add, Jill?” Dr. Ellis asks.

“He’s so full of shit. He has been missing classes all month. This week he only went once. He doesn’t want to leave the house. In the morning he’s sitting in the kitchen, and when I come home in the afternoon he’s in the exact same spot.”

“Is this true?”

“Truth is hard to define,” I say. Dr. Ellis stares me down. “Yes,” I admit. “Jill’s assessment, on the whole, is accurate.”

My admission shakes something loose in Jill, and her voice echoes like a hammer. “I can’t take much more of this. He’s got to make a choice. I won’t live like this anymore. It’s not a way to live.”

True to her word, Jill does not sleep at home that night. The children

and I watch her pack up a small suitcase and escort her to the door. “Let me know when you’re ready to come to your senses,” she says, not with malice but with a wistfulness that hurts worse. She gives me a soft kiss on the cheek, and I can smell the lavender scent of her shampoo. We wave from just inside the doorframe as she drives away and then return to the kitchen. I’m not hungry, but I take the plate of food Jill has left in the refrigerator and eat the chicken and rice cold. Samuel and Fiona drift out of the kitchen, but Beverly stays to keep me company. After cleaning up, I sit out on the front porch and watch the last lustre of daylight usher rose-coloured clouds across the sky. I can feel Beverly’s forlorn stare from the other side of the kitchen window, but I don’t go back in the house until the sky is dark and the clouds have all been safely tucked-in somewhere past the horizon.

House with history for sale. Motivated sellers.

It is an odd thing to have one’s children rearrange themselves in order. Fiona, my oldest, appears as she was in the summer before her illness stole her vitality and her medicines stole her beauty. She was a child then, and she is a child now—the youngest of my three ghost children.

Samuel was the only one whose body I had to identify. The coroner’s report charitably ruled it an accident but pedant, disciplined Samuel would never make that kind of mistake. In law school he studied harder, read more, performed better than all the others. When he had his first break it was easy to chalk it up to extreme stress. When he had his second four months later, it became clear that the wiring was faulty and the fuses could be mended but never irrevocably fixed. Samuel liked things perfect. He could never tolerate broken things.

And then there is Beverly. Parents aren’t supposed to have favourites, but Beverly was just so all-the-time joyful, and there was a core of strength at the centre of her joy. When Samuel died, it was Beverly who made the arrangements, fielded our neighbours’ and friends’ solicitations, and kept Jill from falling into an abyss so deep she wouldn’t have been able to climb back out. Jill’s pastor said that Beverly’s death was a tragedy and that we will never understand God’s plan in sending a drunk driver out on a frigid Tuesday night at exactly the moment Beverly was crossing the corner. But I think Beverly must be filled with tremendous light to see all there is to see—the hidden secrets and darkest energies—laid out before her in a map of clearest wisdom.

So please buy this house. Live here in this place of desperate longings and temporary reprieves, where the people you love have a boundless capacity to hurt but also—the great misfortune of our shared grief—an inexplicable, inexorable desire to heal.