



The house

They came up between the floorboards at first, a little like smoke, or perhaps mist because nobody seemed to suspect fire. Tendrils crept into the various rooms, up the stairs and down into the root cellar.

They made things strange. Not uncomfortable, exactly, or not that anyone could articulate. There was an atmosphere of oddness, of unrightness. A glass that had been polished and put away would reappear on the table, smeared, with a yellowish sediment in the bottom. A bed that had been neatly made would be tumbled and creased, the pillow tossed on the floor. A towel in the bathroom would be wringing wet when nobody had used the basin or shower since the previous day. Everything could be ascribed to poor memory, to human error. But everything added up. Nobody was harmed, but nobody was happy and eventually they left. They sold it, of course, but the next residents, and the ones after that had the same experiences. Ridding the house of humans took a few years but they could afford to wait.

Next, they turned their attention to the small things. The bugs that lived in the cracks, once there were no humans to clean the place, found their cracks filled with unpleasant textures and smells. The mice under the kitchen sink had a nest damp from drips even though the taps were no longer working. The birds that built homes in the roof space had a feeling that predators were constantly overhead. They all left, not at once, but one by one, reluctantly but in the end with relief.

Then the moss on the roof failed to thrive. The lichen that tried to establish itself on the front step found the atmosphere polluted despite the lack of anything within miles that could affect it. The creeper on the back wall rotted.

At last they had the house to themselves. It was a beautiful house, built from aged silvery grey wood with large airy window frames. It was the perfect home and it had taken a while to get it exactly the way they wanted and it had taken a lot of work but at last it was finished, and they

settled down. Anyone passing, though very few ever passed, might have heard, soft on the evening air, a sigh of contentment.



Manipulation

Alice checked the power levels. Despite Michael's film download things were fine. She was glad they'd moved south when things started deteriorating but even central Portugal couldn't guarantee sufficient solar power and mountains bristling with wind turbines could also block the sun.

The flicker must be the ISP's. After the US lost the wars and the oil ran out there were few options. Some solar-powered servers were in the newly independent American Bible Belt, the rest mostly in Saudi or Iraq. Aborigines, working with anti-internet fanatics, closed the Northern Territories to development. Africa was out of the question. Religious leaders controlled what most people could see. Michael chose an Iraqi ISP, reasoning that Saddam, not the most religious man, would be less likely to interfere with content.

But there were still power struggles, terrorists, bombs; half a world away but they could prevent Alice seeing what she so needed to see.

The screen cleared and steadied; she gasped as the young man seemed to walk towards her.

"Michael! He's here," she called.

“Hi Gran! Hi Gramps!” His infectious grin made her wish she could hug him.

They worried when Jake chose to spend his gap year travelling; when he settled in New Zealand they worried more.

“It’s a smaller world nowadays,” he said.

They hadn’t even been able to meet Jennifer in person. But now Aiden could visit them once a month, Hussein and Bin Laden willing.

Alice spared a glance at the blue skies beyond her grandson and tried to remember how con trails had once traced lace paths across the world.

They frittered away the precious hour comparing fruit crops and the price of sheep. Too soon, Aiden waved and blew a kiss.

Michael switched to their homepage.

“They’re accusing people of tampering with 3D chat services,” he said, “using a kind of photoshopping technique.” Alice dredged her memory for the term.

“You mean…”

He shrugged. “They’re comparing it with postcards from concentration camps,” he said, “but surely we would know if things were that bad?”



Ghost sounds

A few years ago we went on a long trip that took us from Harwich in UK to Hamburg in Germany and then along the Baltic coast into Poland until we reached the eastern border. We alternated between camping and staying in small hotels or B&Bs. At the border we turned inland and decided to visit the Wolf's Lair, Hitler's military headquarters on the 'eastern front' where he planned a lot of his campaigns. At the time, I knew very little about it, being more familiar with Berchtesgaden in Bavaria and the V1 and V2 launch complexes in northern France.

We found ourselves booking to stay on the campsite inside the complex. This meant we got the campsite 'free' as part of our ticket and could explore the site before the main tourist influx in the

morning, both of which benefits appealed. However, once we had registered, the gates were locked and we were stuck with the bar etc. they provided. We could have walked out of the site but the car was effectively imprisoned overnight. The nearest village was quite a distance and of course we had no idea whether it would be worth the walk. It wasn't a particularly good campsite (inadequate hot water) but we settled down after eating at the bar. Poor food but we didn't starve. I still knew nothing about the place other than the fact that it existed.

During the night I awoke several times, aroused by noise. I am virtually certain I was actually awake and not dreaming, though I have no such certainties about the actual source of the noise. There were two types of noise. One was very loud barking by a group of dogs – large breeds judging by the pitch of the sound. The other was the noise of trains, arriving, slowing, stopping, and then leaving. Neither sound was accompanied by anything else – no 'visuals' and nothing to suggest any kind of story. Nor did I hear any kind of conversation.

In the morning, I complained about the dogs and we realised that there were none on the site and that the nearest farm was too far away for me to have heard their dogs so clearly under any kind of weather conditions. As we walked around the site I saw rail tracks and thought fleetingly that they might explain the trains. But they were overgrown with grass and ended at the border of the complex. There were no railways in use anywhere near the site.

I read about the site and how it was used later, both on the way round through the explanations at each of the ruins, and in booklets we bought and were given. Yes, there were guard dogs, and yes, there were trains. I suppose I might have thought of both in advance but neither were things I would necessarily have associated with headquarters of this kind. Most of my reading had suggested Hitler's staff travelled by car and that guards would have been soldiers. It was only when we learnt how massive the headquarters was that I realised that the dogs and trains made sense. And that only happened when we toured the complex after a broken night's sleep.

A nice finishing touch to the experience was seeing and hearing a (very live) raven sitting on a tree opposite the ruins of Hitler's bunker. He seemed to be expressing an avian opinion of the entire thing.
