

Grandmother's Parlour

My grandmother's parlour was too good to use.... unless you were dead! The door was always closed and no one was allowed to go in there. Grandma said it was too good for every day and only to be used for special occasions, but it seemed to us children that the only occasions special enough were funerals.

As children we were aware just how special funerals were. All the family came to the house and went about with solemn faces and hushed voices. Early in the morning we kids were sent outside while the coffin was manoeuvred through the door into the parlour where the dear departed was to be presented for viewing. Only adults were allowed to go inside to pay their respects and they didn't stay long. They came out with tight still faces, sometimes wet with tears. Afterwards in the dining room and spilling out onto the veranda and the garden, people congregated, talking and eating grandmother's best fruit cake.

When the parlour wasn't in use for special occasions, the door was always kept shut and woe betide any child caught having a peek. We did though, and looked with fascination at the too tidy room with its heavy furniture and curtains drawn to shut out the sun. It had a strange smell, a combination of damp and dried flowers and I didn't like it. My brother impressed me greatly by going into the room one day when grandmother wasn't looking and bringing out a dried withered carnation from some long forgotten special occasion. I looked at it enthralled but I wouldn't touch it and he threw it away rather than put it back.

I never went into grandma's parlour. I was afraid that some lingering spirit from one of the 'dear departed' might still be lurking there; to do what I didn't know, but I was sure it wouldn't be pleasant and I was never brave enough to go in and find out. Even as an adult that feeling remained and although I visited my grandmother often, she never suggested we go into that room and I never asked. So it came as something of a shock to discover after she died that she had left me her house and everything in it, including the parlour.

My grandmother had not been the last occupant of the parlour because although her funeral was undoubtedly a special occasion, customs had changed and viewing the dear departed was no longer a necessary part of the ceremony. I was glad about that because I planned to live in her house and I didn't want my last memory of her to be in the room which I had always been so careful to avoid.

Before moving into the house I sorted out things I wanted to keep and those which I wanted gone. I stood at the door of the parlour and looked inside. Nothing had changed and there was no reason to go in because there was nothing I wanted to keep. The removalists came and took everything away and I was glad. I looked at the empty room which was surprisingly large and without the curtains the sun shone in, probably for the first time in 50 years! I decided to redecorate and I thought that with fresh paint, new curtains and new carpet I could completely eradicate all the memories of what it had been used for in the past. When it was done the room was transformed but although it was quite the most attractive room in the house I found myself unable to banish the 'ghosts' if that's what they were, from my memory.

I realised that I was being completely irrational, so I furnished the room with pleasing furniture and light attractive fabrics. I bought bright lamps and vases which I filled with flowers and everyone who went in there commented on what a lovely room it was. During the day the sun streamed in the windows and at night time I lit the fire and watched the flames making shadows on the walls.

Nothing made any difference. I could not rid myself of the sensation I felt whenever I was in the room that I was being observed and while I managed to banish such thoughts when it was daytime and the room was filled with sunshine, at night time it was different and I caught myself on several occasions turning quickly because I believed that somewhere in my peripheral vision, something or someone was there watching me. I found myself thinking of excuses not to use the room. "It's a lot of work and expense lighting a fire every day and the other rooms are warmer" The dining room became the family room and when friends came to visit, that was where we spent our time. I excused myself, "I'm busy cooking or baking; the children's toys are here and it's easier to keep an eye on them"

Gradually I stopped using the room; the fire wasn't lit and the vases sat empty. When I realised the sunlight was bleaching the fabric of the chairs, I closed the curtains and I didn't vacuum the carpet or polish the furniture. Eventually I closed the door and left it closed and stopped going in at all. As time went on I stopped thinking about the room and it was almost as though it had ceased to exist.

Months went by and I invited people to stay and during the weekend one of my friends opened the door and went into grandmother's parlour. She asked me why I didn't use such a lovely room and I couldn't bring myself to tell her the reason. I made up some excuse and

said I preferred the family room overlooking the garden. Later that evening I overheard her talking to her husband; “Isn’t she funny” I heard her whisper. “She thinks it’s too good to use”