

PROMPT #2: You open a book and a note with a letterhead falls out. At the top it says: If you are reading this, ...

Welcome Home

by **Virginia McEvoy**

It started with a house. It sat on the corner of our street; stained glass lamps were strung from all of the trees in the yard, mystically lighting the entryway. The house had an empty wrap-around porch with gorgeous architectural details. The inside was always dark with the exception of a single lamp in the upstairs window that was always lit. As a child, I would always press my face against the car window as we drove past everyday trying to take in the details of this curious abode. The owner was said to be an elderly woman, but no one had ever actually seen her. I recall one day while walking home from school, I caught sight of the woman's shadow next to the lit lamp. I stared back in amazement, but she quickly moved away from the light. I never caught another glimpse.

Twenty years later, I found myself standing outside of that very same house as the new owner. The realtor had informed me that the previous owner, the elderly woman, had passed away in a retirement home, and her family was unable to keep the property. I perused my new home, fulfilling my childhood curiosities with every step inside. The details were immaculate, almost as though someone had poured their heart into every inch of the building. Movers were buzzing around me, piling boxes into each room for me to unload over the next few weeks.

As I toured the upper floor, I found myself at the door of the room in which I saw the old woman's shadow so many years ago. I cracked the door open, and on the floor, emitting the same dull light, was the lamp that was always lit. I felt my stomach flip at this sight – why would the family leave that behind – much less with the light still on? I quickly unplugged the lamp and stared at it on the floor; a deep, unsettling darkness overcame me. I asked a mover to remove the lamp for me as I felt uncomfortable even touching it. From the window, I watched the mover take the lamp outside and throw it into a dumpster.

To take my mind off of the lamp, I went downstairs to my favorite part of the house: the classical library. The library was massive, with tile floors and bookshelves that touched the

ceiling. As a newly graduated lawyer, I was thrilled to use this space as my new study. The movers had already settled my desk and chair into the space, so I rested my feet and took in the beauty of my library. As I leaned back into my chair, I noticed a book was left still sitting upright on one of the shelves.

Much like the lamp, I figured the previous owner's family must have forgotten the book behind. I walked over to the shelf to investigate; the book was a copy of "The Complete Tales and Poems by Edgar Allen Poe." I picked it up and sat back at my desk to begin reading; there was obvious wear on the book, it seemed as though it had been sifted through millions of times. I flipped through the pages when I came across an envelope that at first I assumed had been used as a bookmark. It was placed at the start of one of my favorite Poe short stories: *The Fall of the House of Usher*.

Inside the envelope, however, was a letter written on fine stationery. The letterhead was unfamiliar to me: Sandler Family Bakery, established in 1803. The bakery's listed address was in the center of downtown, however I recalled that portion of the town to now be designated to apartments and parking garages. The note itself was handwritten in a shaky cursive. It read:

"If you are reading is, congratulations. You must be e new resident of my home. Al ough you are now e legal owner of is house, just remember at it is sti , and always wi be, mine. Welcome home."

I crumbled up the letter and threw it into my desk drawer. The previous owner was no longer alive, and she most certainly wrote that out of desperation to get under my skin. She must have also asked the family to leave the lamp behind as well. This was my house now, though, and I was not going to let these wild tactics frighten me. I left the library and distracted myself by helping the movers for the rest of the afternoon.

My first night sleeping in the house was restless to say the least. Everytime I finally seemed to doze off, I was awoken by the sound of raspy music that was reminiscent of early twentieth century jazz. The music was faint and distant, to the point it was impossible to decipher its source from my bedroom. I would creep out of bed to investigate whenever the music would wake me, but it would stop by the time I reached the library doors downstairs. This continued on for weeks, the same vague song echoing through my halls and disrupting my sleep on a nightly basis. I would get out of bed every night, search the house, and the music would consistently stop once I was outside of my library doors.

I told myself it must be a neighbor playing pranks, or that maybe I was just imagining the music. One night, however, I awoke to the gravelly music and decided I had lost enough

sleep to continue such torment. I conducted my usual investigation – checking every closet, bathroom, and empty bedroom, only to find nothing. The music continued echoing throughout the house as I made my way down the stairs to the library doors. This time, the music continued playing.

I took a deep breath and slowly creaked the door open. The music was very obviously louder within my study, but as I peered inside, only my desk and the book I had found on move-in day inhabited the space. I swung the door open, stepped inside, and as I walked further into the room, the hoarse music began to get so loud that I could hardly think. I continued searching, hopelessly trying to find the source. My heart sank when I approached the bookshelf in which I found the Poe anthology sitting on. The music was coming from behind the bookshelf.

I heaved the enormous shelf away from the wall to reveal a hole in the stone foundation that was big enough to peer my eyes through. A dull light was spraying out of the hole. The music continued blasting – it was very obviously originating behind the wall.

I crept up towards the hole and peeped my eyes through to reveal another room. I audibly gasped; the room was dimly lit by the lamp I had asked to be thrown out – the same lamp that I had stared at throughout my childhood. The same lamp that was always on in the upstairs window of this house. It was placed on a small wooden table next to a massive gramophone. The gramophone had a spinning record on it playing the eerie music that had been haunting me since I moved in.

Next to the lamp on the table was a cake. The cake was messy and poorly decorated with lit candles on it; terror electrically raced down my spine as I read the icing message written in a familiar, shakey cursive on top of the cake:

“Welcome home.”