

Chapter One: Before you were a Ghost

The last unscathed evening fell on June's final Thursday. The air must not have been so humid as to make us uncomfortable as we sprawled on the crimson couch that occupied the length of a carpet my husband Jim bought when our firstborn fit comfortably in his palm and forearm. A toothed triangle had gone missing from the carpet's corner, where a ficus plant taller and sturdier than I had towered in the home our first three babies had known. It had succumbed to overwatering, its selvedge unsalvageable after water stewed in wool before seeping into perfectly intersecting new floorboards. In this house, the phantom ficus hovered over deep brandy pine boards hewn and hammered into place by hand no later than 1805, before the family home Jim had always searched for harbored any ghosts at all.

Only a single sea change was then in sight: at summer's end, for the first time, our closely spaced sons and daughters would all be at different schools, one several hours away. Family nights were growing rare as our older children began venturing out on their own.

Jim started up a movie, *Raising Arizona*.

The night before, I had slept as well as I ever had, and as well as I ever may again.

That night I did not look out the west-facing windows on my right, beyond my handsome husband's shoulder, to see whether dusk had turned to fire before settling in deep rose and violet. I rarely used to look beyond the people in my presence.

I did not glance at a sun that would have been perfectly aligned in silhouette as it dropped beneath the church spire directly across the street. Our yellow house's previous owner, a physician like my husband, had been the keeper of the church's bell, winding its clock until human hands no longer were needed to mark time.

I did not take Rufus and Brady out that evening. Jim had run with our rescue beagles after work and they had settled down to sleep, curled into each other, yin and yang.

I did not take a single photograph that day, or write a word unrelated to work. I may have shopped for groceries. I mailed two birthday packages. The probability I cooked is not far above zero.

I did not know my healthy husband had for six weeks felt a ping of lingering, localized abdominal pain his instincts suggested might not be attributed to muscle strain from outdoor tasks and adventures which filled his nonworking hours. In summer this included carrying Rufus, whose initial enthusiasm to take off on their runs often exceeded his mastery of the hills.

I did not know Jim had an ultrasound that morning at the hospital where he worked.

He did not know, when the movie began and its kinetic, twangy score and spirit unwound into the late-darkening New Hampshire night, what the scan revealed.