



# Walking Home

By Clare-Lucy

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The train stops short of the station. At least I think it's short.

Can I still call it home if I don't know where the train station is?

A new song starts playing in my headphones. Falling in time to the beat, my brown boots follow the crowd along the spotless, grey platform, toward an exit I've never taken.

Entering a glass atrium, I'm faced with neon shop signs, glossy floors and the latest in timetable and ticketing technology. The bubble of unknown modernity forces me to stop and re-orientate myself. People rush by. Like autumn leaves in the wind, they scatter in a multitude of colour and rattling suitcases. Some walk up the hill, some down, others get in taxis and the remainder embrace their people.

Can I still call it home if no one's waiting for me?

Outside I realise, I'm two streets over from the old station. It's still there, but boarded up and cordoned off, like a quarantine zone. Feeling an unexpected sorrow, I remember the last time I was there.

*Two ghosts stand on that worn, mottled platform. The girl-ghost says goodbye with a hug as the boy-ghost hopes she chooses to stay. The wind whistles round them, from all directions, unsure of which way it should be blowing. Messing up the girl's long brown hair, it hides her face and prevents her seeing or hearing the longed-for request to stay.*

*Getting on the train, the ghost-girl thinks she'll return, one day. But she never does. She can't. Not to that moment, to that choice.*

Now she can't even return physically to the same place.

Orientated, my feet start walking up hill passed the latest-thing-in-all-glass-architecture, that casts a spell of opulence on the formerly derelict site. But the further I walk the more notices I see: Vacant Offices, Apartments for Sale, Storage Units Available. The buildings may be attractive but they're just empty shells. At least this means they're not haunted by any ghosts.

Can I still call it home if I don't recognise the buildings?

But then I see it. Squeezed between, and overshadowed by, two towering monoliths of steel and glass, is the familiar face of the City Library. Built in yellow Yorkshire stone with the features of a grand manor house, it was once a key community centre. Now it's another quarantine zone, with signs slapped slantways onto the rough plywood covering the windows: Exciting Development Opportunity.

Imagining books flying off shelves bombing any developer who dares consider changing the City Library, I laugh at the thought of the spectral librarians' shushing any builders, creating tornados to blow away the diggers and wrecking balls. That would make a great musical.

Despite my best effort, I can't ignore the insubstantial wraiths of the boy and the girl walking toward the front door.

*Untouched by time or redevelopment, they stand outside the library. The windows are visible and clean. The open doors are like the arms of a friend welcoming them in. It's their first date.*

*"Have you forgotten to return some overdue books?" she asks, as he leads the way into the foyer.*

*"No," he replies, holding the second door open for her like a Victorian gentleman.*

*"So, what're we doing here?" she whispers, now in the inner sanctum.*

*"Reading. What else do you do in a library?" he says, smiling back.*

*His smile takes her breath away, but it would take more than a lack of air to stop this girl talking.*

*“But...” she says, then stops because the boy gently places a warm finger over her lips to shush her. For a moment, the boy and girl just stand there in the library, frozen in time and space. Electricity tickles her lips and he drops his finger, like he’s had a static shock.*

*Clearing his throat, he says, “I want you to find your favourite book and I’ll do the same. I’ll meet you at the main desk in two minutes.”*

*“Okaaaay, but why?”*

*“You’ll see,” he says, flashing his smile at her. She’d seen him flash that same smile at others and stop them in their tracks but at full-wattage it pins her to the spot until he turns away.*

*Breathing deeply, like she’s just run a race, the girl-ghost goes to find a story and quickly gets lost in several different worlds. After twenty minutes the boy-ghost finds her surrounded by piles of books in the corner of the library.*

*“I thought this was our first date,” he says, chuckling.*

*Accepting his offered hand, she says, “Oh sorry...yes I admit it, I’ve had other loves before you...I didn’t mean...I meant.” She splutters to a stop. Keeping her eyes downward and glowing from embarrassment, the girl busies herself tidying away the books. The boy thinks he’s never seen anything more beautiful.*

*Crouching down too, he helps her tidy up.*

*When she only has two books left in her hands, they stand up again. But she still won’t look at him. Reaching, he takes hold of her empty hand and squeezes it with reassurance.*

*“Which is your favourite?” he asks.*

*Distracted by the callused warmth of his hand in hers, she takes a moment to place the fantasy adventure back on the shelf and then lets him pull her along. The librarian signs their books out with a stern frown over her glasses.*

*The two carefree ghosts fade in the breeze as they leave the library. Still hand in hand they head to the park for a warm afternoon of reading.*

It had been sunny that day, unlike now where the clouds cast a pall over my procession home.

I keep thinking of this place as home, but it's been half a decade since I lived here. I suppose the place you grow up will always feel like home to your inner child. But, I'm not sure *that* home exists anymore. The physical geography has changed so drastically that home is only a rose-tinted memory I share with my siblings. But if you have siblings, you'll know, that sharing anything with them, always ends in arguments. The past I remember is unlikely to be the one anyone else remembers.

But then I'm confronted by another familiar face. Standing across the road is the Church Theatre.

Where it all started.

A magical place, where the laws of physics are suspended; a place to be anyone and go anywhere. Time and space are irrelevant in a theatre; a scene can be lived and relived, better every day. Where decisions are never final, never the last one. The problem is I came to think life was like that too. The sun breaks through the grey clouds, like a spot light.

*Two ghosts appear on set. One dances across a brightly lit stage. While the other moves like a shadow at the back.*

*This is the first time she sees him. He's rigging up some scenery; strong, lithe and commanding, with a smooth deep voice, like a cello. But she's not the only one to notice him. The high ratio of*

women to men in the theatre group means she has competition. Accepting he'll never notice her, she ignores him and focuses on the technical rehearsal.

It's her tenth year with the amateur dramatics group and she's finally been given the leading role; the gun-slinging-wild-west-cow-girl Calamity Jane. But still he'll never notice her because she's been type cast into the tomboy role. With her freckles and broad-shoulders she's not the normal attractive leading lady.

But this is her year.

Each night she dances and sings her way through the evening. Rushing around, she changes costumes in the wings. Except for one scene.

During her only breather, when the other named couple have their moment dancing together, she stands in the wings, waiting for her next cue. The ghost-boy stands next to her. She assumes he's waiting to move some scenery. But it's not until the third night's rehearsal that she realises he's just waiting too.

Turning her head slightly to see what he's looking at. He turns his head too. She offers a small smile, to see if this good-looking guy is actually standing next to her on purpose. To her amazement he gives her a dazzling smile in reply.

Her cheek muscles respond automatically broadening her smile. But when she feels her face warming, she looks away and realises her heart is racing like it does just before she steps out on stage. Looking through the wings to the stage, she hopes to hear her cue.

"Hi" says the deep smooth voice, like a note on the cello.

"Hey," she says, her voice sounding like a squeaky oboe in comparison.

"What book were you reading?"

*“What? When?”*

*“I saw you reading during the break. I was just wondering what book you were reading?”*

*“Oh, some teenage fantasy book. Why?”*

*“That’s not very helpful, maybe I’d like to read it.”*

*“Probably not, it’s about a girl who desperately wants to be a warrior. She disguises herself as a boy.”*

*“Sounds unrealistic,”*

*“Of course, that’s what fantasy stories are about,” she says, defensively looking back at the stage, “and she’s got magic to help.”*

*He doesn’t say anything else, so she assumes she’s annoyed him. But she can’t quite let go of the opportunity.*

*“So what book are you reading?”*

*“You’re on,” he says.*

*“What?”*

*“It’s your cue.”*

*Despite keeping her eyes fixed on the stage she hasn’t taken anything in. But her training rescues her and in a single-breathe she steps out of the shadows and transforms into her character.*

*The following day, without even asking, he sits down next to her during the break and opens his book - a murder mystery.*

*“I thought this was a theatre group not a book club,” says the indistinct wraith of another girl. But the ghosts are too engrossed in their books and each other to notice or care.*

*On another night she finds him at the back corner of the stage, folding pieces of paper, as if bored. Sitting next to him she gets out her book. These silent communions carry on all week.*

*Then on opening night, the girl finds a bunch of origami flowers on her dressing room table. Picking one up she sees that they are not dull grey as she had first thought but white paper with words written on, words from books.*

Gripping the piece of paper in my pocket, I continue up hill. Reaching the summit, I see The Avenue. Still lined with trees it sits quiet and still in the sunlight.

The march of new development seems to have stopped at this street and there at the end of the road is the School. Not a centre of learning but a centre of drinking. An irregular but aesthetically pleasing red brick detached building. The front half rendered in white, faces straight on to the busy road, a link between the residential houses and the night clubs.

I drank my first drink in there. Played pool, sang karaoke and won a lot of quizzes. It was the meeting place for many friends over the years. Even from this distance, I feel the walls vibrate with our gossip and buzz with our laughter.

We made so many plans, had so many choices ahead of us. Never once thinking that every wish that was granted, every choice we made, would change us forever. That one day, we'd no longer be sitting there talking and laughing together.

*Arriving at the aftershow party to a round of applause, the ghost girl curtseys with a laugh. Her leading man buys her a drink and then goes in search of his husband. The director congratulates her and the musical director gives her a hug. She lingers by the bar, savouring the triumph of her performance. Knowing it's unlikely to happen again, but still hoping that one day she'll replicate this feeling of dancing on moonlight.*



*The band strikes up and she looks round to see who's playing, and he's there on drums. Catching her eye, he winks at her. Smiling she moves closer and joins a crowd of admirers. They're singing along in harmony, but the ghost-girl just nods her head in time with the drummer.*

*Later he buys her a drink and shows her how to play. She convinces him to sing a song with her.*

Their voices echo across the years and smiling I turn to walk on, but I can't. Another memory holds me in place.

Its lodged firmly in my brain, branded into my heart, as if it were yesterday. This memory doesn't whisper, it screams at me; a banshee insisting on being heard.

*A year later, long after the first date at the library and the day in the sun, success shines down on both the boy ghost and the girl ghost. He's been offered a place at the London School of Music and she's been accepted into Cambridge University, but she's also been offered a part in a show touring America. Going means her big break, her moment, everything she's worked for.*

*Going means leaving him.*

*"It's up to you. I can't make your choices for you," says his flat cello voice.*

*"It's a great opportunity," she says.*

*"Then you should go."*

*"But you're here,"*

*"No, I'm not your excuse to stay. This is your choice."*

*"But..." before she can say anything else, he walks out of the pub. She hopes he'll make some great declaration, that he can't possibly live without her, or that even if she went, he'd wait for*

*her return or that he'd go with her. Instead he walks away, even before she gets on the train.*

The wind picks up, an excuse for the tears that sting my eyes. Walking on, I grip the paper in my pocket and distract myself with other memories. Wondering about friends who used to live nearby, I pass the Square. One friend lived there. I only knew her for a year, a short time in comparison to the years I've lived since. But she taught me to hug, so a friend none the less.

It's odd how some friends are only seasonal, they come into our lives, and share theirs with us, teaching us something. Then they fade like seasons, one into the next, and it's always too late when you wake up and realise summer has gone and autumn is here. It's not that I don't care, or that I wouldn't want to see her again but I don't need to. Her ghost is with me, like all the others, walking me home.

May there are only a few people who're meant to always be there. No matter what the distance, or the time away, you think about them every day and want to be near them, just to tell them about the drive to work, or the annoying thing the shop assistant said, or the nice lady on the bus. The person who knows you, understands you and still loves you. The person who wants to listen even if you're just sat reading a book side by side in a dark theatre or on a sunny park bench.

Crossing the start of another street, another tunnel into the past, I remember another friend. We used to sit on his parents' front step after school and talk for hours or we'd sing along to the latest song he'd learnt to play. But one day I got angry with him for telling me the truth. The friendship didn't fade, it just stopped, because of me.

That one regret awakens others, they rise from the paving stones, the friends I let down, the times I lied and shouted and got angry. Before long I'm escorted by a procession of angry ghosts. Sometimes I wonder if I ever did anything right. Did I ever make the right choice?

Picking up, the wind blows rubbish around the bottom of the park steps and I catch sight of the ghost of a little girl on her first stage. Ignoring the angry ghosts, I listen to her story about a tiger and an elephant in search of an umbrella. It's not just the ghosts of friends that walk me home, but my own ghosts are here too.

Ears ringing with a symphony of twenty-five years of memories, I follow the girl-ghost home and despite the time and the distance it's as if each of my friends is walking by my side again, walking me home. Like there's a part of me that doesn't age, doesn't change, it simply is, and everyone is remembered. Is that my soul? Is that home?

Trying to accept my companions, I walk on to the red cylindrical box, which marks the last turn on my journey. Gripping the letter in my pocket, I follow the footsteps of the ghost skipping home.

It's not so much a letter but the page of a book. My favourite book. The one I chose from the library on our first date. The words, I know by heart.

*"I am half agony, half hope. Tell me not that I am too late, that such precious feelings are gone forever?"*

Walking up the hill, I acknowledge the decreasing house numbers, like a countdown to a rocket launch. Only I worry that this mission will implode in my face.

Nearing my destination, my steps slow and that lightness, that hope, I felt at the beginning of my walk is now weighed down with too many memories.

Maybe my ghosts are no longer real, only shadows, echoes of long forgotten moments that haunt me and only me, because who else would remember what I remember?

There is the wall, where we once sat.

The gate, we once kissed over.

The drive, we once parked on.

The front door is the same worn, old, brown one, that I slammed in his face when he told me he wouldn't be there on my 18th birthday.

But that is where the similarities end.

Entering my parent's house, I'm faced with the unknown. The mottled, wood-chip, wallpaper has been replaced by smooth magnolia paint, the floral carpets are now wood. The bright red phone that hung above the shoe rack has disappeared. Taking my coat off, I try to hang it on a non-existence peg. It slides down the wall in a heap, just what I'd like to do, but I resist the urge. Instead I take a deep breath and enter the noisy room.

I'm used to entering rooms full of people and I'm used to my parent's house being busy, but the combination of new yellow curtains, the removal of the book cases and the rearrangement of photographs on the wall combined with the half-familiar people, throws me off balance. Like when the car you're in suddenly veers left and you're not expecting it.

Feeling nauseous, I tell myself I'm a professional and I can handle anything I take another deep breath, spread a smile across my face and go in search of my parents.

Hugging them awkwardly I realise, the pair I once looked up to I now look down on and the brother I once looked down on I must look up at. How can I feel like a giant and an imp in the same moment?

Wandering around, making small talk and smiling to people I no longer know, I wonder if I ever really knew them. They were always Dad's friend Rob and Mum's friends Nigel and Freda. Of course, they all know everything about me, Mum winning the award for best gossip-vine. This makes me feel worse, like I'm on stage, but I haven't been given a part or even a script.

Can it still be home if I don't belong in this scene?

Maybe I really did leave that day and only guilt is drawing me back here. Maybe my ghosts were haunting my steps to tell me to leave again. That I was not wanted here. That I was disturbing their rest.

Out the kitchen window two of my ghosts, the boy and the girl, sit on transparent swings, right in the middle of a sapling mum has planted in the exact spot the frame once stood. Even then the ghosts were too big for the yellow plastic seats. The rope squeaking in protest, whenever they moved.

Now I'm really worried, maybe the boy-ghost is here in the flesh, but I just didn't recognise him. But if he isn't maybe I misunderstood the letter. Even if he arrived now, would I recognise him, would he be familiar to me or unknown, will I feel the same about him? Will he feel the same about me?

I hear the ghosts' conversation echo across the garden and through the years.

*"It's your favourite book because he lets a bunch of people get away with murder?" asks the girl-ghost her face creased in a frown.*

*"No, it's my favourite because it reminds me no system we create in this world is perfect, every situation is unique."*

*"But even if the law was imperfect, shouldn't they have suffered the consequences of breaking it?"*

*"They'd already suffered enough."*

*"I'm still not convinced. How can someone, whose key principle is to uphold the law, break it so easily."*

*"Maybe he saw something more important than his principles," says the boy. "So why Persuasion?"*

*"Under my sarcastically cynical facade, I'm a hopeless romantic," says the girl-ghost, twisting her swing round and round, not*

*looking at the boy as she explains. "If a love is real it lasts forever, even when someone makes a mistake, even if they part ways, for years. They both still love each other. There's always hope."*

*"So, you agree with forgiveness?"*

*"My heroine doesn't murder anyone."*

*"No, she just breaks the heart of the man she supposedly loves."*

*"She still doesn't murder anyone."*

*"Romeo and Juliet killed themselves rather than be apart."*

*"That's because they're both idiots."*

*"So, you'd never love someone so much you'd murder yourself rather than be without them."*

*"No, I'm too much of a pragmatist."*

*"I think you're an optimist, eternally hopeful."*

*"You make me sound naive," says the girl. "What about you?"*

*"I wouldn't kill myself, too selfish."*

*"You mean self-less. You wouldn't want to deprive the world of you," says the girl, with a laugh. "I mean a world without you in it, would be very...empty."*

It had been a joke, but the empty feeling in my stomach rolls over. I've carried this creature around for the last five years. Even though my life is full, I have a career and friends, even some dates. Maybe being here makes my life seems empty. Standing in my childhood kitchen, where for so many years I thought I felt at home, I felt I belonged but no longer do, I feel empty.

Overwhelmed, I edge to the front door for some fresh air. The sun is blazing now but the wind blasts me with a cool breeze. Touching the old worn brown door, I decide I better go home.

Hearing feet scrunching down the drive, I turn toward the noise.

The first thing I register are the new, unfamiliar but stylish clothes, and the tight jaw-line, emphasised by fashionable stubble. There are also a few extra lines, at the corners of his face but then I meet familiar eyes. They are just the same, even as they open wide in surprise.

“You came back,” he says, his cello voice, still deep and smooth plucks a quick tempo on my heart strings. “I went to the station...I was a bit late...You weren’t there.”

Struggling to put a sentence in order, to vocalise some meaning, I pull the letter from my pocket and splutter four words, “You asked me to.”

His lips stretch across his face, revealing straight white teeth and producing a dazzling smile, all the brighter with the extra lines and stubble.

Now I’m home.