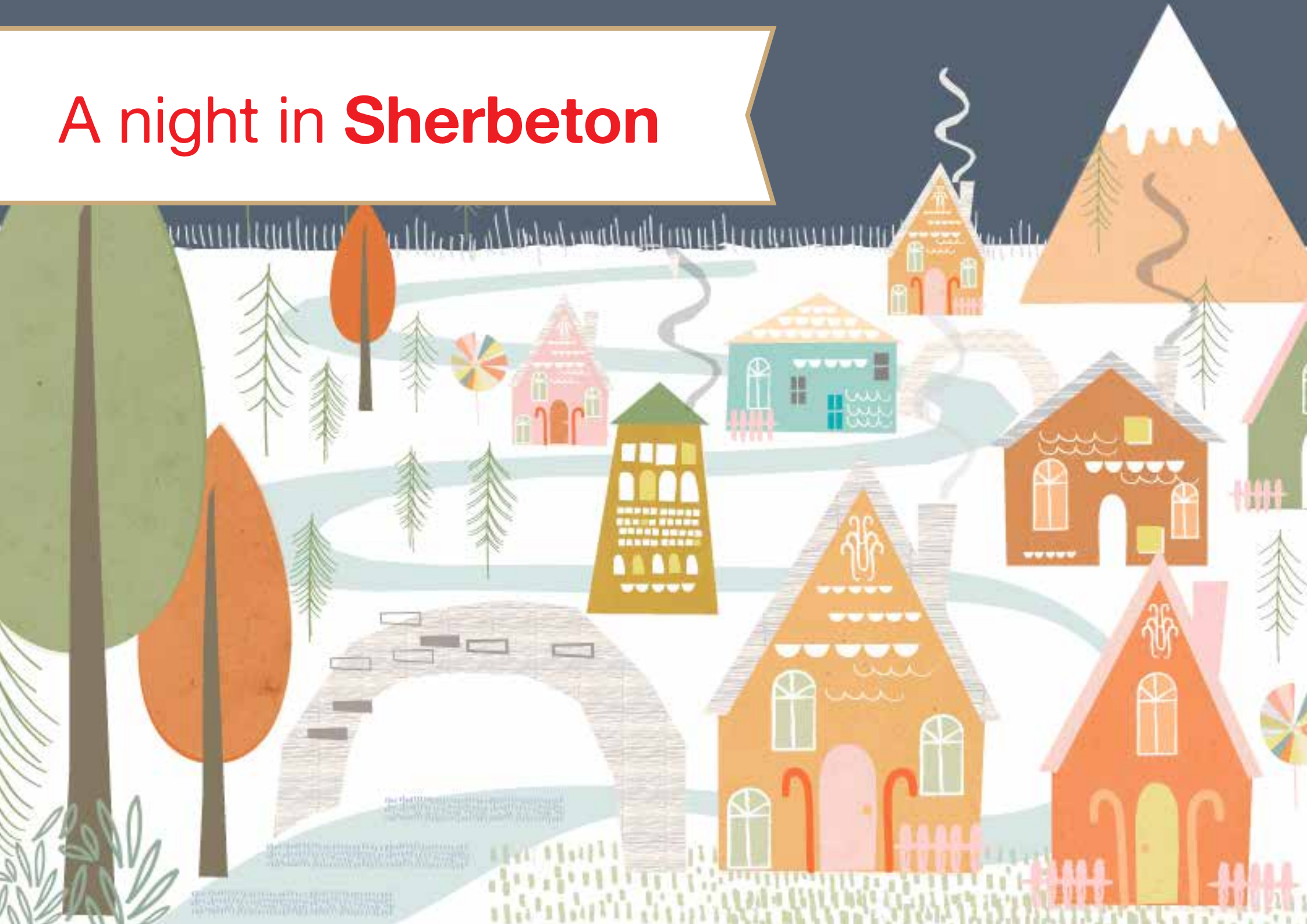


# A night in Sherbeton





Illustrations by [papermoonillustration.com](http://papermoonillustration.com)

It's Boxing Day night, one of the quietest of the year, when the turkey is wrapped away inside every fridge and the lights on the trees are dozing.

If you're bored, or not ready for sleep, why don't you come with me to a small town called Sherbeton? It's not an easy place to reach: we have to trek between mountains with slopes of iron, and bottle-green forests that seem to never end.

Eventually, we'll come across the ancient river Sherbet, and following it find Sherbeton's thick walls and cosy streets. There's snow on the ground, and from every window shines yellow lamplight that oozes like custard.

It might seem similar to your own town at first. But you can see many strange things, if only you look closely enough.

If we go up to the houses themselves, the walls will crumble at our touch. And if we lick that crumble off our hands, it won't taste of sour, rasping stone, but of sweet, buttery biscuit. That's right – all the walls are made of gingerbread!

Of course, you may have seen gingerbread houses before, maybe even made one yourself, but never any as big as these. People really live inside them here, with kettles and radiators and hot baths and every little thing they might need.

There are so many terrific things to see in Sherbeton under its enormous, empty sky. Let's play in the snowdrifts a while more, and admire all of the lights in all of the windows. It does seem that this is a place where nobody could ever be unhappy. Whatever could be wrong, the day after Christmas, with everybody stuffed and snoozing behind baked doors?

**Well, not everything is right in Sherbeton tonight. Let me lift you up, just like this, to a few of the windows, so that you can peer inside. What can you see, past those cheery glows?**



# Dunquestin, Snickersnack Estate

Let's look inside this drab and lumpy bungalow, far from the river. Give it a feel – the walls are built of ancient gingerbread, all stale and salty.

The glow from its window is a shower of sparks. You can see somebody sitting inside, wearing a great horned helmet. It's Elspeth the Clever!

She often sits like this of an evening, busying herself with three things at once: sharpening her favourite sword in one hand, flipping the last of her eggs atop a smoking oven with the other. She likes to take off her socks sometimes, despite the cold, and perform puppet shows with her feet. Her little boy sits on the floor in front of her, muffled under every blanket in the house, giggling softly.

Elspeth was once an adventurer, protecting the townsfolk of Sherbeton. She'd battle the monsters that crawled from the woods,

not to mention the smitten princes that begged her to marry them. But, one day, Elspeth decided she was tired of all this roaming and chopping and shouting. She hung up her sword and shield and announced her retirement.

The townsfolk were furious. Who would protect them from the monsters now?

Soon they stopped speaking to Elspeth at the shops, and when she found herself short of money, there was nobody to lend her any. Sometimes tourists would give her a few coins to pose beside the bones of monsters she had defeated in her youth, but it just wasn't enough. Elspeth and her son were forced to move from their lovely, sweet-smelling home, and all the memories they had there.

Life in this draughty, dripping bungalow is horrible. They can hear the dragons next door arguing and smoking, and Elspeth

worries they will burn the entire street down. Every day there's another crack and crumble, and every day she misses the sparkle of sugar in the walls of their old house.

Her young son, too, is a constant worry: despite his dimpled smile, he coughs and shivers, and often they have to go without dinner. Tonight, as she fries and sharpens and puts on her best show yet, Elspeth is trying not to cry.

'Should I pick up my sword and shield again?' she whispers to herself.

'The work is lonely and dangerous, and I would miss my little one so. And who would look after him? Nobody in Sherbeton will even talk to me.'



## Number 37f, Abdication Avenue

**D**own this yawning, tree-lined road, we find a tiny palace. It's only as big as a garden shed, but beautifully built: towers no thicker than your arm and a moat no deeper than a bath.

Look through that little window. All the lights are off, yet something shines inside – it's a fabulous bejewelled cloak. And who is that, cramped and grumbling underneath it? It's the Narrow King! And there's his Queen, asleep beside him.

You can see how crowded and uncomfortable it is: the Queen's toes are stuffed up the King's nose, his arms are bent backwards, and all in all they are thoroughly miserable.

The palace was not always this small, you know. Its corridors once stretched for miles, and the Narrow King would stroll down them all day, whistling and waiting for echoes. This was back in his kingdom far from Sherbeton, where he ruled wisely and kindly (as all the best kings do) and watched his children grow up to marry princes and princesses from other realms.

But one morning, just after breakfast, the King's evil auntie rose up against him. The royal couple and their butlers – all forty-seven of them – were forced to flee, with barely enough time to haul their palace atop a gigantic wagon.

Of course, an enormous palace and forty-seven fussy butlers aren't cheap. So as this funny little party trundled through the countryside, the King and Queen paid their way by selling their possessions: the uncomfortable thrones, the spotless cutlery – even the King's fine socks. But it was all in vain: before long they could not even pay the butlers, who stormed off with their noses turned up.

It was then that the Queen had an idea.

'We do not need all this space for just the two of us, dear heart,' she said. 'And it does cost us rather a lot of gold.'

'I read once that a famous wizard lives in the next village. I'm sure he will shrink the old pile down for us a tad.'

And so they found the wizard, and he did indeed shrink the palace down to the very size it is now. Before long they found the town of Sherbeton, and here they set their palace down and lived, cramped but content. They spent hardly any gold: after all, there was far less carpet to clean, ceiling to dust, and garden to mow.

But before long, there were new arrivals at the palace: the King's sons and daughters, now with wives and husbands and children of their own, begging for a place to stay. 'The world is such a cruel place,' they sighed. 'We can find nowhere to live; everywhere they ask for more gold than we have! May we stay with you a little while?'

From Pippin the Sweaty to Pale Runwick, every prince and every princess moved back into their old room. And now the palace creaks and groans with the strain, and it won't be long before it crumbles completely.



# The Giant Kennel, The Outskirts of Town

**O**n the edge of Sherbeton, where fish are frozen in the river like lollies, stands an enormous kennel belonging to the town giant. His dog is long gone, and in her place lives a normal-sized woman called Astrid.

Tonight she lies, shivering on a sofa of threadbare gingerbread. The only things keeping her company are ten little stars, twinkling red and white and blue, tied to her wrist by ten lengths of string. Though their light is dim and distant, she feels comforted.

Astrid, you see, is in a spot of bother.

Go on, creep in through the kennel's arch. Can you see, on the floor beside Astrid, a space satellite, all dull and battered?

Astrid used to work for the Mayor. It was a very important job, one Astrid took lots of pride in. Every night, at sunset, she'd climb aboard her satellite and, with the night sky

folded under her arm, launch into the air. Astrid would pin the night sky up by its edges using sticky tape and nails, draping it across the whole world like curtains, and switch on the moon. Just before dawn, she'd ride up again, and take it all down.

But a week ago, Astrid's boss, Mayor Elfwhistle, called her into her office.

'It's no good, Astrid,' she said. 'We're running out of money, and just can't afford you anymore. It's a lovely night sky you do – that nice swirl of Milky Way, all the white dwarves and red giants – but nobody needs a night sky, really. We'll survive without it, but I'm so sorry.'

And so the moon and most of the stars were rolled up and stuffed in a cupboard. Astrid did manage to save the last constellation and bring it home with her, those ten little stars. But her troubles were just beginning.

Without any money for food, she was forced to sell the house where she'd grown up. On the point of tears, Astrid turned to her friend the giant. Despite what you think you may know about giants, he was a cheery sort, with a whispery voice like a faraway waterfall.

'Don't worry, Astrid, love,' he shushed down at her. 'Things will work out. I can't give you much, but old Margaret's kennel is still out in the fields. Stay there until you get sorted.'

It was very kind of the giant to do this. But Astrid cannot possibly stay in Margaret's kennel much longer. The gingerbread is mouldy, and gives her a frightful cough, and without a front door the snow blows in all night long.



## Number 834, Catacomb Crescent

Let us go and see an extremely unusual house indeed. It stands at the very end of its street, in a narrow misty valley.

Can you see how the other houses, from number 1 to 833, crowd together at the other end, as if they were scared of it? Well, number 834 is far older than any of them, than any house in Sherbeton for that matter. The gingerbread walls have almost turned to brick, and no lamps are ever lit.

But tonight a weak, purple mist drifts from room to room.

You're not scared, are you? It's only a ghost – a toothless, dusty old thing, almost as old as the house itself. In fact, it's so old it doesn't even remember why it's haunting this particular house anymore. Not that it bothers the ghost too much. It likes it here, and has no intention of moving.

But tonight, as the ghost glides across the cobwebbed landing, it's unhappy for the first time in years. It's fallen out with its landlady, Madam Bea, and she threatens and insults the ghost everywhere it floats. Madame Bea, you see, is the house. That's right – she has rented herself out to the ghost!

Now, Madam Bea has always been quite an agreeable landlady. She did not mind when the ghost terrified the humans who also lived there. And even though she insisted on hanging awful pictures of poodles on every wall, the ghost has always felt at peace here.

The trouble started when Madam Bea began to act strangely. At first the ghost felt sorry for her; she seemed ever so sad. However, in her sadness Madam Bea let herself become dirty and untidy. The boiler stopped working and the water ran cold. And before long the humans moved out in disgust, leaving nobody for the ghost to haunt.

When the ghost complained to Madam Bea about all this, she took it rather personally. She rattled her shutters, banged her pipes and made her boiler bubble. She accused the ghost of being dirty and noisy, and never doing any washing up, even though it had been many years since the ghost had eaten anything at all.

No matter how much it apologised, Madam Bea would not change her mind. The ghost would have to leave.



So, now you see what troubles the town of Sherbeton on this bitter Boxing Day night. But now we ought to get you home, far beyond the iron-sloped mountains and the bottle-green forests.

There's no need to worry though. Things tend to turn out alright in this old place...

The very next day, Elspeth shows why they call her the Clever. She gathers the townsfolk together and promises that, if they give her some money, she will open a school in her living room – Elspeth's Academy for Clever Girls and Boys. Here she'll train her son and all the town's children, to be adventurers like her, so that they can protect their parents from the creatures in the woods. And to celebrate, she invites the dragons next door over for fried eggs.

The same day, the Narrow King calls upon the wizard once again, and asks him to shrink the royal family – himself, the Queen,

Pippin, Runwick and the rest – so they can fit inside the palace and each have a little space of their own. They even begin to help with chores now the butlers are gone. The King makes cups of tea for everybody, boiling droplets of dew in the sun. And the Queen is now rather handy at lighting the evening fire – a single, burning match where the entire court gathers, talking and laughing.

A week later, Astrid is in luck. The giant is about to throw away his ginormous old mobile phone, and after she asks nicely, he lets Astrid live inside, keeping it plugged into the wall. Among the wires and microchips, Astrid finds a cosy little hollow where she can live with her stars. Life is rather lovely here (apart from a few loud calls from the giant's friends who don't have his new number), and she even finds a new job, hanging up galaxies for the local observatory to point their telescopes at.

Two weeks later, when it has built up the

courage, the ghost speaks to Madam Bea. It listens to her talk about her life, her worries and her sadnesses. All of a sudden she lights up. The heating clicks on and the water flows through her pipes. Though she promises not to throw the ghost out, she asks for a few weeks to get herself in order.

In the meantime, the ghost lives in the cuckoo clock just up the road at number 833. It is warm and elegant, and the chirping of the wooden birds keeps the ghost company. Even if, try as it might, it cannot scare them one bit.

And that is how the story goes. I do hope you'll remember Sherbeton, and the wonderful people you saw on this Boxing Day night. They have their troubles, just like you and me, but we cannot call upon wizards or giants to help us. So we must help those in trouble in our own lives, be they ghosts or kings, neighbours or friends. And especially when the weather is cold, and the night is moonless and starless.

# Question time

Here are a few Sherbeton-based posers to help with your children's learning.

## Questions for Elspeth's story (Based on the Bloom Taxonomy Levels 1–3)

**LEVEL 1:**  
What are Elspeth's problems?

**LEVEL 2:**  
Draw two pictures: one of Elspeth's old, nice house, and one of her new, horrible house. Be as imaginative as you can!

**LEVEL 3:**  
What do you think Elspeth should do?

### Some suggestions, if you are struggling:

- Should she become an adventurer again, and take her son with her?
- Should she hunt for treasure in the dragon's house?
- Instead of spending money on food, should she feed her son on pieces of the bungalow's gingerbread walls, no matter how disgusting it tastes?

## Questions for the Narrow King's story (Based on the Bloom Taxonomy Levels 1–3)

**LEVEL 1:**  
Why did the King have to shrink his palace down to the size of a garden shed?

**LEVEL 2:**  
Draw the King, Queen and all of their children inside the tiny palace. Make sure that you show how cramped and uncomfortable they are.

**LEVEL 3:**  
What do you think the Narrow King should do?

### Some suggestions, if you are struggling:

- Should he throw his children, and their families, out into the wintry streets?
- Should he sell his beloved cloak to earn him some money to give to his children?
- Should he have asked the wizard to make the palace even larger, until it covered the entire town of Sherbeton? Then he might be able to walk his corridors in peace once again.

## Questions for Astrid's story (Based on the Bloom Taxonomy Levels 1–3)

**LEVEL 1:**  
Why did Astrid lose her job?

**LEVEL 2:**  
How do you think Astrid felt when she had to sell her house?

**LEVEL 3:**  
What do you think Astrid should do?

### Some suggestions, if you are struggling:

- Should she take a job in another town, far from her friends? The only job available is in a distant village, raising the sun every day. The pay is dreadful, and Astrid has never been a morning person.
- Should she sell her stars, and use the money to find somewhere to live?
- Should she steal the moon from the cupboard, raise it one last time, and show Mayor Elfwhistle what she is missing?

## Questions for the ghost's story (Based On The Bloom Taxonomy Levels 1–3)

**LEVEL 1:**  
Why did Madam Bea ask the ghost to leave?

**LEVEL 2:**  
Write a short letter from the ghost's point of view, as politely as possible, complaining about the state of the house.

**LEVEL 3:**  
What do you think the ghost should do?

### Some suggestions, if you are struggling:

- Should it ask Madam Bea what is wrong? She seems sad, and perhaps only needs somebody to listen to her.
- Should it stand up to Madam Bea, and insist on staying? This is, after all, its home, the only home that it can remember!
- Should it leave as she has asked, and go instead to haunt the bird bath in the garden? It would be a bit livelier there, a bit chirpier, and the ghost has always wanted to scare a robin.







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