

GHOST WALK

by Renata Hopkins



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“Grandpa! Did you see my score? At least *tell* me when screen time’s over.”

“I did tell you. Three times.” Grumpa had on his grumpy face. “It’s not my fault you’ve got selective hearing.”

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“Not to mention your square eyes and numb bum.” Grumpa waved a knife at some half-made sandwiches on the bench. “We’re going on a walk. Ham and egg or just egg?”

I groaned. “I don’t want to go on a walk.”

He did the face again, even grumpier.

“Just egg,” I said.

Fifteen minutes later, we were tramping down Fitzgerald Ave. Grumpa had packed sunblock, water, the sandwiches, and light refreshments ... whatever that was. All that food was a bad sign, but I asked anyway. "Is it a long walk?"

"About six kilometres, give or take."

Grumpa has dragged me on plenty of long walks. I knew how to crunch the numbers. On average, a human being covers around a kilometre in ten minutes. "So, that's an hour?" I said.

Grumpa nodded. "Each way."

"What!"

"It's six k's there, six back. Plus lunch. Call it two and a half hours, round trip."

I stopped walking. "I'm not coming."

Grumpa kept going.

I stood still, feeling the hot asphalt through my sneakers. Cars cruised by, lucky people on wheels. I wondered how long it would take Grumpa to come back, but after two minutes, I gave up.

I caught up with him on River Road. He was waiting beside a barrier with a sign: "Pedestrians and Cyclists Only".

"Welcome to the invisible Red Zone tour," Grumpa announced. "Your friendly local guide - me - will point out historic landmarks as we go. Keep your eyes peeled. Any questions?"

I put my hand up.

"Yes, green T-shirt in the front."

"How are we supposed to see historic landmarks if they're invisible?" I said.

"Excellent question. Fortunately, your guide has oldie-vision, which allows him to see things that aren't there. Anyway, weren't you developing your powers of observation this morning?" He waggled his bushy eyebrows. I couldn't help smiling. "Anything else?"

"Yes. When's lunch?"

"Sandwiches will be served at the munted Medway footbridge, but we'll stop for light refreshments on the way. At the home without a house."

"Where?"

Grumpa was already walking. "You'll see," he called over his shoulder. "Then again, maybe you won't."



When I'd heard adults talk about the Red Zone – the land where they couldn't rebuild after the earthquakes – it had always sounded like something from an alien movie. But apart from the roadworks on the other side of the river, everything was quiet and green. It looked like an empty park – or a golf course with no one playing. Still, there was something weird about the place. I just couldn't figure out what. Maybe it was the way the weeds grew through the road like they were eating it.

We walked for fifteen minutes, then crossed the river onto Avonside Drive. Two massive black swans glided downstream, the king and queen of the river. Apart from them, there was nothing much to see. I was just about to bring up the light refreshments when Grumpa stopped.

"Welcome to the home without a house," he said, pointing to a square of grass. "Isn't she a beauty?" Then he climbed the fence.

"I don't think you're meant to do that."

"Try and stop me," said Grumpa.

He took four big strides before turning to face me. "I am now standing in my first bedroom – well, mine and your great-uncle Ken's. I was on the top bunk, he was on the bottom due to his habit of rolling out of bed. Years later, it was your mother's room."

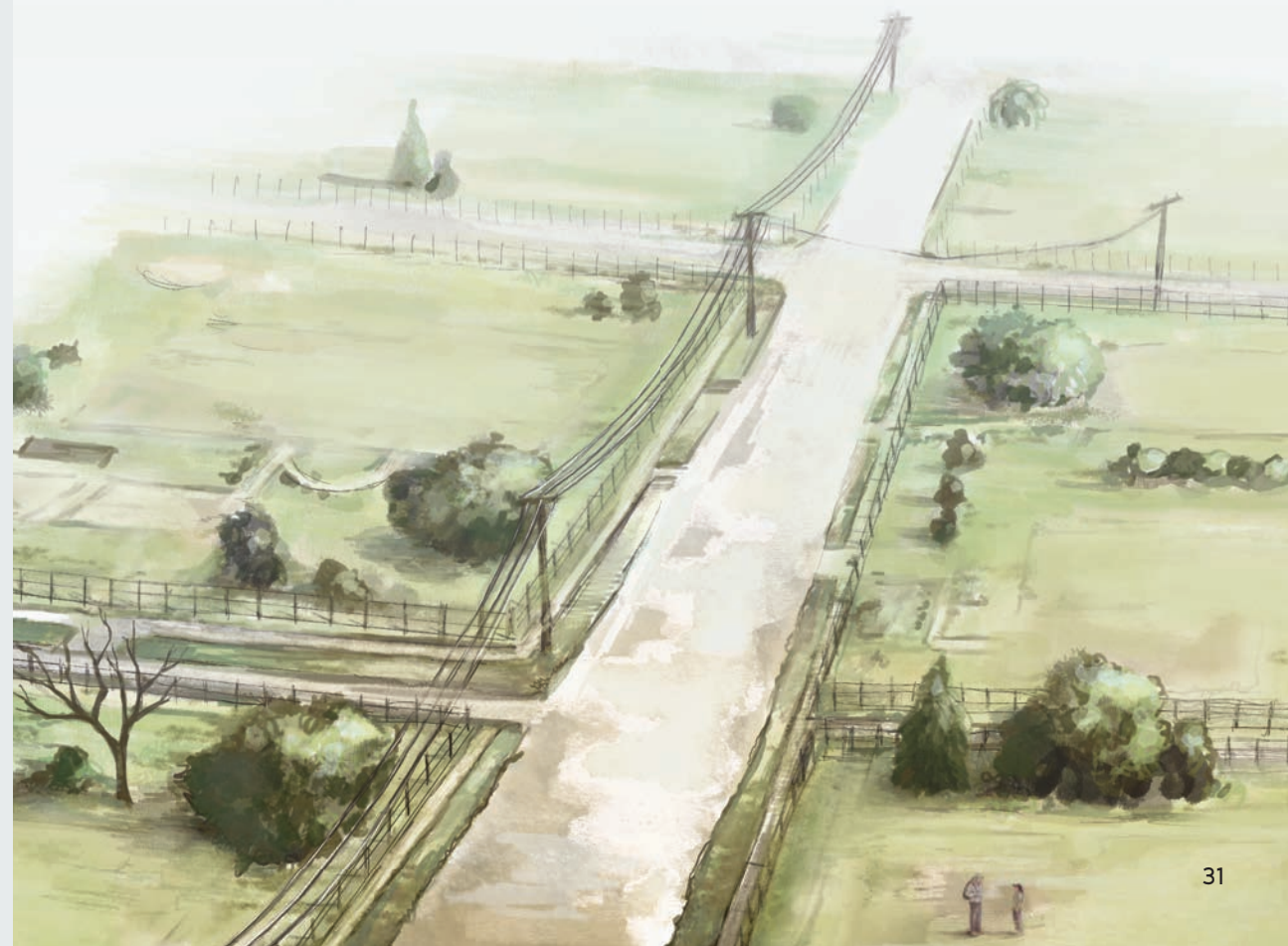


Grumpa took four big steps to the right. "Now I'm in the kitchen," he said. "This doorframe here ..." He rested his hand on an invisible wall. "All our heights were written on it – years of them. We even had yours. I think you were about two. You were the last one."

I'd only been joking about developing my powers of observation on the ghost game. But as Grumpa described the house that wasn't there, that's exactly what happened. My eyes got *sharper*. It was as if they were the lenses in a pair of binoculars that had just come into focus.

I suddenly saw that the empty patches of grass were spaces left by houses. The random trees and bushes weren't random at all – they marked the edges of people's sections. And the surface of the footpath kept changing because we'd been crossing old driveways. I'd spent half the morning looking for ghosts, and now they were all over the place. Ghost houses, ghost gardens, ghost fences and letterboxes and washing lines ...

"Come in. I'll show you around," Grumpa called.



I climbed the fence, and he led me through the invisible rooms, pointing out things he remembered as if they were right in front of him.

"This was the lounge. It got lovely sun." He laughed. "It still does, I suppose. We had a built-in bookshelf over there. Once you'd learnt to walk, you were always trying to climb it like a ladder."

"I can't remember," I said.

"No. Too young. But you spent a lot of time here ..."

"Do you believe in ghosts?" As soon as the question was out, I worried. Would it make him mad – or, even worse, sad? But he just looked thoughtful.

"Not the sort in the white sheets that go 'Woo-oo-oo'," he said. "But yes, I suppose I do."

"Have you ever seen one? Like, with your oldie-vision?"

"I can see them right now. I guess that makes this a haunted house, eh? Boo!" He shot his hands out to grab me, and I jumped. He laughed like anything.

The light refreshments turned out to be ginger loaf and a packet of nuts and raisins. We ate under the biggest tree, planted by Grumpa's mum. It was even older than him. "It's called a Cox's Orange Pippin. Grows a good apple – sort of sweet and sour at the same time."

"No wonder you like them!"

"Watch it, cheeky." Grumpa waggled his eyebrows again. "We'll have to come back in a few weeks to pick some." He patted the trunk as if it was a pet.



After we'd eaten, Grumpa started weeding the bushes. I went down to the river. At the edge, a black swan was weaving reeds and twigs into a big clump. It was making a nest. I thought Grumpa would like to see it, so I ran back.

There was no one there. He was gone, just like the house.

"Grandpa?" I called. I felt cold. "Where are you?"

He stepped out from behind a bush. The leaves had completely hidden him.

"What's the trouble?"

"I thought you were gone," I said.

Grumpa came over and hugged me. "Don't fret. I'm here." He rested his big hand on my shoulder. "I'll always be here one way or another."

I led him down to the river. When he saw the swan's nest, he smiled.

"Nice to see someone setting up house here." We watched for a while.

Then I took Grumpa's hand, and we started walking.

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