

The Winchester Mystery House is named after two things: the woman who built it, Sarah Lockwood Pardee Winchester; and the reason why it was built: a mystery.

The gargantuan estate can best be described as a labyrinth, or what one might imagine when they think of a Victorian-style, century-old escape room. According to the mansion's official website, it has 10,000 windows, 2,000 doors, 160 rooms, and 24,000 square feet to its name, made complete by all of the mansion's eccentricities: stairs that climb to ceilings, windows that open up into walls, and doors that lead to multiple-story drops.

Seen from the outside, on the second story, wedged between a semi-circular reading nook and a pair of stained glass windows stands a single white door. No balcony, no fence, just a kelly green placard right beneath that reads "DOOR TO NOWHERE."

Today, the Winchester Mystery House still stands, though stripped of most of the original owner's furniture and belongings. The only remains are the curious minds that buy tickets for tours, acknowledging that they would get lost in the walls after any attempt to explore the maze on their own. All who enter cannot help but search for answers to the titular mystery: why such a wealthy and brilliant woman like Sarah Winchester would waste away her life's work on a massive estate that would only ever be home to one.

The best answer anyone could come up with was that she must've been seeing ghosts.

As the house was under construction, the media swirled with rumors. That crazy rich lady who was building that weird house over in San Jose? She was haunted by the souls who died to her

family's creation: the Winchester Rifle. She was being followed by spirits, and had to build this house to survive. She was speaking with a medium. She had a seance room. She was unruly. She was selfish. She was insane.

The architectural imperfections of the Winchester mansion were described as distractions to confuse the ghosts that haunted the estate. The reality, however, is far less sinister: historians from the San Francisco Chronicle concede that it's likely that these abnormalities were just mistakes on Sarah's blueprints. When she couldn't find the perfect architect, she drew floorplans herself, which sometimes led to tangible errors when the house was actually constructed. Historians believe that when Sarah misplaced a window, she wouldn't waste the time to take it down. When she botched a floorboard, she simply paved over it. When the San Francisco earthquake devastated much of the house, she didn't bother to fully repair it. She kept moving-- kept building on. Without Sarah's persistence, the mansion would not be what it is today: a bit different from a normal house, sure-- but undeniably haunting.

What motivated her to keep moving, though, remains unknown to this day. Maybe the house is mysterious by design. Maybe the truth was lost to history. But after a century's worth of efforts to open Sarah's doors, they have led exactly where the house said they would: nowhere.

My new housemate told me that I could park in the driveway as I unloaded my belongings, even though I hadn't paid the extra fifty dollars for a parking permit from my leasing company. I guess I had thought street parking would have been easy to find. I figured July in a college town would be sleepy enough to open up large gaps along the curbs, let alone July during a pandemic.

Then again, I didn't know-- I'd never lived in a college town.

Nearing our destination, my parents and I drove in the direction of my new home beneath the shadows of the palm trees and the telephone wires dotted with hanging shoes. After staring out the window for a while, my suspicion was confirmed: the lack of cars gave us a glorious view of the dirt-riddled sidewalk. A few crushed beer cans had found their homes among the curbs, along with some abandoned pieces of furniture: desks, swivel chairs, even mattresses, left behind by graduated Gauchos who had outgrown their company-- who had nothing left in Isla Vista to furnish.

As we drove through I.V. on my move-in day, the air bore a familiar salty scent, and the neighborhood was quiet enough to allow the sounds of the waves to spill through the streets. It all seemed foreign; I felt like an intruder, like this was a place to which I was not supposed to return.

I lived in my dorm for just six months before COVID sent us back home, right as we freshmen were warming up to the idea of calling Isla Vista by that same name. Instead, the CDC deemed us all a threat to each other. Isla Vista was a "hotspot," not a home. It was dangerous, and we were cautioned to leave. So, we did, and we left shards of our hearts where our mattress toppers once slept.

Throughout Spring and Summer, everyone lost something-- a job, an opportunity, the life of a loved one. Even being one of the "luckier" ones, I lost my then-boyfriend, the ability to see my friends face-to-face, the luxury of six feet in closeness to my loved ones. I lost the opportunity to study abroad and go to the movies and get plastered in Isla Vista's most socially accepted

dumpster, commonly referred to as the Sigma Chi house. I lost my newfound freedom and independence. I lost the keys to my dorm room-- the ones that it seemed like I had just picked up. I lost the morning walks, the dining halls, the chance to complain about how much I hated biking to campus. Throughout those months in quarantine, I found myself bargaining with any higher power that would listen: *I swear, if you let me go back to campus, I'll bike every single day on my shitty little fixie and you'll never hear another word about it.*

My bike was locked to a tree behind the Sigma Pi house to avoid the impound that took place at the bike racks by the dorms. When I eventually retrieved it from its prison, it was covered in cobwebs, claimed by the spiders that typically resided in the frat bathroom. The lock was nearly rusted shut. The bell still worked. From March through July, my shitty little fixie had weathered the storm. The rest of us had tried hard to do the same.

One street away from the beach access point, my parents and I finally invaded the driveway of my new apartment. The vroom of the engine collapsed into a hush, which mimicked a sigh of relief after our 4-hour trip. I exited the car and felt my chin tugged upwards. I couldn't draw my eyes away from the second story of the tall, rectangular yellow structure that, to me, bore as much resemblance to a home as a gargantuan block of cheese would.

Victorian architecture gained its popularity during the reign of Queen Victoria, who ruled between 1830 and 1910. Victorian homes have several key characteristics, according to HGTV, including asymmetrical shapes, textured walls, one-story porches, vibrant colors, and decorative trim (sometimes referred to as “gingerbread”). These designs evolved from the Gothic-style

ideals that homes should be beautiful, rather than practical. Excess was encouraged for the sake of fashion, not function. HGTV describes it similarly: “ A common mental image of a ‘Victorian’ home looks much like a dollhouse.”

Though she shared an affinity for the finer things in life, Sarah Winchester was no doll.

A few years earlier, in March of 1881, Sarah had become one of the richest women in the world overnight. According to the timeline on the Winchester Mystery House official website, that’s when Sarah’s husband, William Wirt Winchester, passed away from tuberculosis. His death left Sarah richer in two ways: richer monetarily, with \$20 million in inheritance (now \$530 million) and 50% ownership of the Winchester Repeating Arms company, and richer in grief, which would further worsen when their only child, Annie, died a few years later.

Sarah then moved out west into a two-story, eight-room farmhouse in San Jose, comparable in size to my Isla Vista duplex. She started expanding that farmhouse, and never stopped.

Aside from its size, Sarah’s home was also notably innovative, being one among some of the first in America to use wool insulation, button-powered electricity, and indoor plumbing, according to the house’s website. Sarah herself was a well-read, forward-thinking woman, responsible for many of the house’s contraptions that are now considered “ahead of their time.” Sarah invented a contraption called an annunciator that would allow her to call any one of the 18 members of her staff to wherever she was in the house. She designed custom stairs that would ease her arthritis as she ascended them in her old age. Scholar Richard Allan Wagner explains in his article “The Truth About Sarah Winchester” that she integrated her many passions into the skeleton of her home-- architecture reflecting the fibonacci sequence, puzzles embedded in the walls that

referenced the Pythagorean Cipher, stained glass windows donning lines from Shakespearean plays. Both her mind and her house were ever-expansive.

Sarah quietly hammered away on her project, far from the circles of gossip that continued to stir in the absence of her comment. The San Francisco Chronicle published an article on February 24, 1895, laying the foundation for the rumors that persist to this day:

"The sound of the hammer is never hushed... The reason for it is in Mrs. Winchester's belief that when the house is entirely finished she will die."

During the time Sarah was alive, the prevalent cultural belief was that “white, upper-class women [could] and should be equated with their domestic spaces,” according to researcher Christine R. Junker in her article “Unruly Women and Their Crazy Houses.” Women’s bodies were considered houses for babies, and women’s identities were so deeply rooted in domesticism that a woman’s house became an extension of herself. Even a forward-thinking woman like Sarah fell into this cultural trap, under the belief that “her body, and the life that animated her body, was intimately linked to her house, in so far as extending the body of the house equated to extending her own life.”

Sarah continued to build up until the day she died, leaving nails half-driven into the walls when workmen heard the news.

If women are their houses, I don’t know what I am.

Home for me had always been Carlsbad, California, in the second of three white houses on Di

Vita Drive. You know, the one with the pansies, right down the street from Peppertree Park, a five-minute walk from Peet's Coffee. Home was a cul-de-sac and those spanish tiles, a wall shared with my brother, a long hallway to traverse in the middle of the night when I had a bad dream and needed the sanctity of mom and dad. But college was going to be exciting, the best time of my life, a time and space for me to learn what freedom meant.

But once the pandemic hit, it was right back to Di Vita. Then it was packing Di Vita.

Then, June. It was a rental home, where my family lived for a few months before moving to the new place. A checkpoint. Purgatory. The condo on Cormorant Drive was a cardboard box. The pictures on the walls did not belong to us. I prayed through a poem I wrote: "May glass frames stay intact / Among lives we packed." The glass in our boxes refused to shatter, and we carried on.

July came, and while I took off towards Isla Vista, my family moved beachward to the *new new* house. The inside was recently remodeled, washed white with specks of modern blue furniture. Windows spread from the ceiling to the floor, allowing light to flood into the new living room and settle on the patterned cerulean rug-- the warmth that my cats loved to bask in. My dad could bike to the beach from there, with his surfboard hanging from his bicycle, the smell of the salt filling him with the strength he needed to pedal up the massive "Dip in the Road," after which the nearby beach is named. I've only been back to the *new new* house a handful of times since the move nearly a year ago. The boxes in my room still haven't been unpacked.

In Isla Vista, I had four housemates and a thousand square feet to share with them. We were crammed together, constantly in each other's way, both figuratively and literally. The kitchen

was only about a yard wide, and you couldn't go in or out if the dishwasher or fridge were open. Someone was always in the bathroom or using the Keurig, sometimes at the same time. I couldn't play guitar because someone was always studying.

Before 2020, home had always been stable, something to count on. But, in the past year, it has been a million different things and then some, and changing every second. It has been the beach, the dorms, the pansies, the shoes on the telephone wires. It has been two places at once, three hundred miles apart, two times in a row. It has been people I thought would never leave. It has been things I took for granted. Home was a lottery-style assortment of proper nouns, and every day was a gamble. I got tired of playing the game.

Even in Isla Vista, by the time I should have already been settled, the space that belonged to me still seemed only to shrink smaller and smaller each day until it was confined only to the cushion of my twin XL bed. I worked, slept, cried, kissed, and cried some more, all in my bed. Everything I did was in one corner of one room of one miniscule Isla Vista shoebox and I could feel myself losing my breath. I was too afraid of taking up space anywhere else.

When Sarah felt the weight of her loss, she built another room, another hallway, another story. She found ways to add. She built a ballroom for \$9,000 when an entire house could have been built for \$1,000. She bought thousands upon thousands of dollars' worth of tiffany-inspired stained glass windows, filled with semi-precious stones.

My grief shrunk inward. Hers expanded outward. I thought I wanted to die. Sarah wanted anything but another death, even if it meant expanding until the day she passed away. My sadness made me small-- Sarah's let her go down in history.

It was hour number four of the drive south, and traffic had been terrible. The stiffness of my legs had hampered my ability to shift my foot to the brakes as I began my descent down the “Dip in the Road,” just a minute or so away from home. I winced at the soreness behind my eyes, the late afternoon sun not doing much to help. As I sped through the deepest part of the dip, the ocean sparkled to my right, a turbulent yet peaceful mirror of the sky. I fought the urge to stare at the sea, and instead kept my eyes on the road ahead. Just up the hill, another left, another right, and I’d be back with my family, at least for a few days. It was February, and I was tired enough to belt out a long list of expletives, but I was so happy. I hadn’t been home since Christmas.

When I arrived, I found myself welcomed, as always, by the open arms of Mom and Dad. The cats seemed indifferent, but I knew they loved me anyway. I had only just gotten the chance to take my suitcase out of the trunk when I was abruptly summoned by Dad.

“Hey, come to the kitchen, I have an important announcement to make.”

He always spoke in grandiose terms. An “important announcement” could have been anything from catching a killer wave to discovering a new favorite brand of IPA.

This time, however, something struck me. The urgency with which he brought me into the kitchen, the way he would barely allow me the time to use the bathroom after I arrived. It reminded me of the way he talked about the day he proposed to my mom, not letting her shower after a jog so they could walk to the proposal location by sunset. When he was stressed, he rushed to get things over with. I could feel my heart preparing for impact, raising its walls once

more.

“I got a big promotion at work, and we’re going to be moving to the Bay Area in October.”

You’re *joking*.

That single sentence marked the moment in time that I stopped looking at my surroundings for comfort, and instead for how easily they could be transported. I looked to my left: my mom’s paintings on the walls could be put into boxes. Down; the cup in my hands could be wrapped in packing paper and snuggled next to its buddies. Behind me, the cats-- oh, god-- they’d be an absolute nightmare on an eight-hour drive. The cabinets, the couches, everything that could have been sentimental to me if only given the time-- it all started to melt away. All at once, all the strings that Carlsbad had attached to my heart had been snipped. I felt cold, hollow and, admittedly, a little bit thankful that I had never unpacked those boxes in my room.

The neighborhood my parents had been looking at was in Walnut Creek, just an hour drive from San Jose, home of the Winchester Mystery House.

I am still learning who I am when I can’t hang pieces of myself on the walls. I am still tired from trying on new houses every once in a while just to see if I can find one that fits. I am still studying what a home looks like, if that’s a roof, a person, a place, or something that’s always changing. If it’s something temporary, permanent, or a little bit of both. To one person, it’s the Sigma Chi house, and to a spider, it’s my bike.

To Sarah, her home was her life’s passion-- something beautifully inconsistent and never quite finished. Maybe haunted, maybe not. Full of mistakes and even more full of room to grow.

Though I'm not quite sure what it is yet, I am certain my home will be the exact same way.