

TALES of HORROR and the SUPERNATURAL

by

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BEK

The rain fell from the dark sky and flowed along the gutters of the Old Town district of Stirling. A small, hooded figure stood by an old-rendered, turreted house. A couple appeared out of a doorway. The woman, a tall blond with too much make up, said: "What's a child doing out alone on a night like this?"

The small character turned slowly to face them, the hood hiding the facial features.

"Please help me, my name is Rebekah, and I'm looking for my mother!" said a pleading girl's voice as a strong feeling of menace invaded the atmosphere.

"Oh you poor dear," said the woman, who moved toward the figure, but the man pulled her back as the child lowered the hood to show a head of curly blond hair which tumbled onto her shoulders. The skin of her face was pallid and stretched over a fine bone structure. She stared at the couple with total black eyes.

"Come on Peggy," said the man with a quivering voice.

"Please, I have to go home!" beseeched the child, but the couple had gone and all that remained was the splatter of the rain on the pavement and road. She pulled up her hood and walked on through the night. The gargoyles high on the Barceló Hotel on the other side of the road spat out a steady flow of water which crashed onto the pavement. A drunk sitting in a doorway out of the rain gazed at the hooded figure as it passed by.

"Where are you going?" he barked.

She stopped and turned to face him. He was unshaven and wore a crumpled grey jacket which had seen better days. He whimpered as she pulled back the hood.

"Please help me, my name is Rebekah, and I'm looking for my mother!"

"Leave me alone!" the man shouted turning away.

A moment passed.

The man felt a finger jab his upper arm, and he turned to find the child's face next to his.

"Please, I have to go home!"

After a moment the drunk rose and shouted: "You keep trying!" as he walked off into the dark.

Crossing the road the figure passed the front of the monolithic Church of the Holy Rude. Light from spotlights reflecting on the water running down the walls, gave the building a dark-blue patina. She passed through the locked gates to the Old Town Cemetery as if they weren't there and followed the path between the dripping headstones. Shadows played hide and seek as statues gazed through a swirling mist which had descended on the graveyard.

The child stopped for a moment by the white iron and perspex cupola of the Virgin Martyrs. She looked inside at two marble female statues, one reading a bible to the other, both looked over by an angel. The rain drops ran down the perspex like tears from heaven.

She moved into another part of the cemetery where three statues stood on a raised area, over-shadowed by Stirling Castle in the background. A thick swirl of mist engulfed her; children's hands pulled her apart and her essence evaporated.

The next day the sun swept the rain clouds away and dried out the ancient burgh of Stirling. Peggy and Tom MacDougall made their way up through the Old Town district and entered the cemetery.

“What are we doing here Peggy? This place gives me the creeps,” complained Tom.

“I told you Tom, something’s attracting me here!” She looked through the headstones and statues and said, pointing, “Over there!”

The pair strode into an area which was much more ancient and unkempt than the others. Peggy then stopped in front of an old, weathered headstone and crouched. “Oh look at this Tom!”

“Here lies the remains of Flora Fraser. May God have pity on her soul,” read Tom.

“This means something about that child we saw last night.”

“What? Peggy, look at the date—1485!”

That night, Peggy sat in her spare room and searched Stirling’s historical files on the Internet, her face illuminated by the screen in the otherwise darkened room. The website had showed that Flora Fraser was burnt at the stake beside Stirling Castle for being a witch.

My God! Thought Peggy as she read on and found out that Flora had a daughter called Rebekah.

Next she accessed a site on black eyed kids and was tapped on the shoulder, causing her to jump.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” asked Tom.

“Heavens Tom, are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

“There’s the front door bell. I’ll need to go,” said Tom, turning and leaving the room.

“Yes. I would love a cuppa!” Peggy shouted after him.

After a few moments Tom shouted, “Peggy you’d better come and see this.”

She sighed, then left her computer and went downstairs. The sight of the small figure with long-blond hair and total black eyes standing at the front door made her legs quiver.

“Please help me; I need to find my mother? Will you come with me?” Rebekah pleaded.

“Now, Peggy,” cautioned Tom, who was standing behind his wife.

Peggy turned and kissed Tom and then grabbed her coat from behind the door, “it’s okay Tom, I know what I’m doing. I’ll be back soon.”

Rebekah took Peggy’s hand, and the pair walked through Stirling and then up through the Old Town. They stopped at the gates to the Old Town Cemetery although they were still open.

“I don’t know,” said Peggy, staring into the darkness.

“Come on, it will be all right!” Rebekah said, pulling on Peggy’s hand.

They entered the graveyard and Rebekah led Peggy to the area where the three statues of the Reformers stood with their backs to the dark leviathan that was Stirling Castle. A swirling mist engulfed them, and children’s voices hissed, “your soul is ours, daughter of ancient stake-burner!” Realisation descended over Peggy as she looked through the fog at Rebekah who had grown in size and was grinning revealing huge, pointed teeth. Instinctively Peggy let go of the hand and ran.

Stumbling between the headstones Peggy made her way toward the distant gate. She screamed as she came face to face with a stone angel. Then, stopping to catch her breath, she turned and gasped in horror as the swirling mist headed in her direction.

On and on she ran finally reaching a well-maintained gravel path. She turned her head as she sped along the path with the gates in sight, “Oh my God!” Peggy shouted in frustration as the mist tugged at her, pulling her back.

Then, just as small hands grabbed her, a figure stepped out from behind a big statue, and the drunk from the previous evening shouted, "Come and get me you bastards! Leave that poor woman alone."

"So we have you at last—son of ancient stake-burner!" growled a voice from the mist.

Peggy felt the mist release her, and she ran on-grateful to the man, engulfed in the demon-infested fog. She looked on in despair at the now locked gates, she didn't have the energy to climb over them.

She stopped and looked in utter horror as the fog swirled around her feet. Then suddenly there was the roar of an engine and the gates burst open. A red pickup truck reversed through them, and Tom threw open the passenger door next to Peggy, and shouted, "get in, quick!"

Peggy jumped in and slammed the door, then Tom gunned the engine and they flew out of the cemetery and away.

"Let's not go back in there again Peg," said Tom,

"I told you it gives me the creeps!"

A relieved Peggy could only nod.

UNWORTHY OF LIFE

I stared at the white-washed walls. I stared at the window with iron bars. I stared at the dirty blue and grey striped mattress, which was my bed. Grey stuffing protruded from a hole in the corner and was trying to escape the stitched confines.

The overall I wore was baggy and hadn't been washed for weeks. My hair, shaved off my scalp, was bristly to the touch. Being physically handicapped they confined me to a wheelchair.

The sound of marching boots outside - the sound of shouts and screams inside the building. Einsicht Mental Institution was an old prison with cold flagstone floors and had been my home for five years since I was given up by my mother.

She came to see me at the start, but after a while she came no more. Dieter, the nurse who cared for me, told me she had moved away because she wanted to give our house to good people.

When I was alone, I took out the small metal cross with the funny little man on it she had given me and I prayed for her the way she had shown me. I also prayed for the other people like me trapped in their rooms.

At night I pressed my hands to my ears to keep out the noise, and I dreamt of my mother, and of a time when we were happy in our Munich home; a time when people used to smile and call me happy, little Friedrich. But then darkness descended over our world and people looked at each other with frightened eyes. From the streets at night there was the sound of breaking glass and the smell of burning.

The dark became darker when it took my father away and left my mother crying into the night. I had wanted to go to her; to console her, but I needed help to get out of my bed. I cried: "Mama, mama!" But she never came.

The rest of 1933 we cowered in our home with the shutters over the windows and the door locked. Boots marched along the street and we heard cries as people were taken away from their homes and their businesses. I asked Mama where they were taking our friends. She told me it was better not to know. She also told me to love God, because he loved me and would not forsake me, and to always remember *that*, no matter how bad things got.

One day I peeped out of the space between the shutters of the parlour window and saw men in shabby clothes with dirty faces being marched along our street. The men had dead eyes. At the sides of the horde were soldiers in tan uniforms with guns. One man stumbled and fell onto the cobbled road. A soldier then ran over to him and hit him in the head with the butt of his rifle. I screamed with horror, and the soldier looked at me with such hatred in his eyes I cowered away from the window and hoped that they would go away. Mama came running into the room and closed the shutters and said: "When you hear marching boots you must not look out Friedrich."

The dark took my mother one evening while I slept. When I awoke with the first rays of a frosty dawn slipping through the shutters, I shouted: "Mama!" But there was no reply.

The whole of that day and the next night I called for her from between soiled sheets, but she never came. Then the next day she walked into my room; her skin was pale, and she had a faraway look in her eyes. "Mama!" I shouted with joy.

"Friedrich, look at you, I must clean you up son."

The next day she took me to the institution and told me that the doctors could look after me better than she could. "But Mama I want to stay with you!" I cried. I then

watched her as she waved and watched her as they closed the old metal-studded wooden door. I sobbed as a man in a white tunic took me to my room; a room with bars on the window.

One dark morning two men in white coats woke me and dressed me and told me I was going on a bus journey. "Where's Dieter?" I asked.

"He's gone on ahead," said one man.

The bus, an old, dark-green vehicle with wooden seats, sat in the courtyard. People like me were being helped into the coach by other men in white coats. Some people were crying others just looked bemused.

The bus took us away from Munich out into the snowy countryside. I pushed my hand into my trouser pocket and felt the comforting shape of the cross with the man on it. A man in a white coat who sat opposite me, looked at me briefly and smiled.

Big white snowflakes fell from the sky as we turned into the courtyard of a tall, sand-coloured building. We were then helped off the bus and taken into a low grey building with a flat roof at the side of the main house.

In a cold, bare room the men in white coats took off our clothes and then led us into another cold, bare room with only one small, round window. The shouting and crying was deafening as one man shut the large, thick door.

I looked at the cross I had grabbed from my trousers before they were taken away and, as an engine started and blue/grey fumes issued from a vent in the ceiling, I asked the funny little man why he had allowed me to be born at such a time with such a deformity, but most of all I wanted to know why he had forsaken me.

SMIRK

George Campbell was walking to work along the cliff top road when he heard the menace of the engine. He turned and then, moving over to the right-hand side, he jumped over a puddle to the relative safety of the verge as a metallic-green BMW X5 charged toward him.

The car swerved over to the right side of the empty road and then careered through the puddle sending a spray of muddy water over his kaki fatigues. He glared at the driver, John Conon-Forsythe, who had a smirk on his face, as he flashed by on his way to Bourachdale Golf Course at the end of the road.

George worked at the golf course as a junior green keeper; a job his father, the Bourachdale Estate Gamekeeper, had acquired for him. He hated it because the course was part of the estate, owned by the Conon-Forsythe's.

A tall blond-haired boy, John Conon-Forsythe had mocked and laughed at George most of his life, especially at primary school where George, a plump, shy boy, stuttered every time the teacher had asked him to read aloud. George's embarrassment had provided endless amusement for Conon-Forsythe and his chums—the sons of the 'well-heeled' of the area.

Later that day the course was empty as low cloud swept in from the North Sea bringing a fine rain which made the grass glisten. George was tidying up around the 11th tee when Conon-Forsythe and his friends: Callum MacDonald, the police chief's son and Michael Muir the son of the local hotel owner walked over from the 10th green.

Conon-Forsythe dropped a gum wrapper and then shouted to George: "Hey boy, pick that up will you!" George just stood and looked, as the threesome sniggered.

"Come on then, chop, chop!" Conon-Forsythe ordered as George walked toward the wrapper. But Michael Muir stepped in before him and picked up the piece of litter and put it in the tee-side bin. "Honestly John, you are the limit," he said as he looked at George and shook his head.

That night George sat in his bedroom brooding as his parents slept. *Something had to be done*, he thought. He could just leave Bourachdale, but where would he go? What would he do?

Secondary school at nearby Blairs had been much the same for George. He had found that he was retreating into himself and not speaking to anyone for fear of stuttering.

Relief came, however, when with the schooldays over, Conon Forsythe went off to university in Edinburgh. George found he could relax and his confidence grew. He worked at the golf course and had even struck up a platonic relationship with a local girl called Evelyn.

The college holidays, however, were dreaded; they were a time when he felt himself being dragged back into his shell. They were a time when his self-esteem sank. Something had to be done!

One night he crept down the stairs of the sleeping house and grabbed his father's keys from the telephone stand in the hallway. He then unlocked and opened the door of the small room at the back of the house where the gamekeeper kept his guns and ammunition.

George gasped as he then opened a small, secure cabinet hidden behind a bookcase which he had watched his father open as he peered through the keyhole.

Moonlight, which shone in through the small, barred window, reflected off the blue/grey barrel of a pump-action shotgun and made it look like something alien. He touched the barrel, it felt both cold and exciting.

George entered the kitchen the next morning and found his packed lunch sitting on the table. He looked out of the window; rain swept across the back garden driven by a strong off-shore wind. A shiver made its way down his spine, produced by gazing at the cold uninviting day from the warmth of the kitchen, he assumed; or was it from the thought of something else... something more sinister!

Pulling on his jacket George then grabbed his bag. He was about to leave when he spotted his father's spare keys on the telephone stand. *He couldn't*, he thought, and opened the front-door, but just as he was about to step out, Conon-Forsythe's mocking face flashed into his mind's eye. George ran through the hall, opened the gun-room door and then unlocked the smaller cabinet and took out the pump-action shotgun, then loaded up three cartridges.

George then left the house with the gun stuffed inside his jacket. Fortunately there was no one about as he walked up the hill which led to the cliff top road.

Low, grey clouds obscured Dale Mound, the mountain which provided a back drop to the golf course, as George walked along the road made slick by the rain. He looked over the edge of the cliffs and was about to throw the gun over when he heard the purr of a car engine. His heart-rate galloped when he turned to see the BMW X5 head toward him. Could he? Yes he could.

George walked out in front of the car and unzipped his jacket. Strangely, calmness descended over him and he felt confident as the BMW screeched to a halt.

"Get out of the way!" Conon-Forsythe shouted before bursting into a laugh. The mirth changed to sheer panic, however, as George raised the shotgun and pointed it into the car then pulled the trigger.

The windscreen exploded into a million pieces and Conon-Forsythe was flung back into his seat with a big red hole in his chest. His head then lurched forward and crashed onto the steering wheel as the car rolled, due to the camber of the road, toward the edge of the cliff. George stepped out of the way as he pumped the gun and blasted the rear left-side window taking part of Callum MacDonald's head.

Screams erupted from the front passenger's seat as the car went over the edge and careered down the cliff which was more of a steep grassy hill at that point, before crashing into the rocks at the bottom.

George slid down the slope and then peered into the battered car. Michael Muir, still strapped in, was screaming hysterically. An odour of excrement filled the vehicle and the rear ceiling was coated with blood and bits of brain tissue.

Muir stopped screaming when George aimed the shotgun at him through the smashed front passenger's window. He was about to pull the trigger when an image of Muir picking up the gum wrapper on the golf course crept into his mind, and he engaged the safety catch instead.

Michael Muir passed out, possibly due to his injuries, or more likely from emotional relief as George climbed back up to the road and walked into the small police station and threw the gun on the floor.

At the high court in Dundee, George was sentenced to life imprisonment, and, as he was led away from the dock, he turned toward where Michael Muir and the family members of the victims sat with a smirk on his face.

IF YOU GO DOWN TO THE WOODS TODAY

Evelyn Roberts turned onto the tree-lined road which led to Auchmithie village on the east coast of Scotland. She checked the rear-view mirror of her blue Citroen and sighed in relief at the empty road. She had left her husband, Colin, and two sons watching television in their semi-detached council house in Arbroath telling them she was off to see her friend Jaz. Her heart-rate increased as a muddy lay-by came into sight with a dark, green Audi parked at the far end.

Evelyn parked at the near end of the lay-by and turned off the engine. She again checked her rear—view mirror and waited until a white van passed before leaving the car and entering the woods. The path she took was well-worn by dog-walkers and led to the sea after winding its way through a stream cut den where ancient trees stood and watched.

The late August Saturday evening was warm, and the setting sun threw golden rays at the clouds. Evelyn left the path and pushed her way past a thick bush into a small clearing. She surveyed the area and was about to leave when a hand shot out from behind a tree and tapped her on the shoulder.

“All right, come out Alan,” she said with a smile.

“How did you know it was me?” Alan, a tall, thin man with thick, brown hair, asked as he stepped out from behind the tree.

“Who else would hang around here?”

They embraced and kissed.

“When are you going to leave that guy and come with me?” He asked when they stopped kissing.

She stared into his eyes and caressed one of his cheeks with the back of her hand. “I’ve told you before—it’s difficult. There’s the two boys to consider.”

“They could come as well.”

She laughed as she fell back onto the soft mixture of moss and long grass pulling him on top of her. They rolled about in each other’s embrace before he settled on top of her. He kissed her passionately and stuck his hand up under her T-shirt and caressed one of her breasts.

“Hey! What the hell!” Alan shouted as he stopped what he was doing and looked toward his feet.

“What’s up Al?” Evelyn asked dreamily.

“It’s... oh shit, another one!”

Evelyn screamed and jumped up as Alan was pulled away from her with two gnarled, thick roots wrapped around his ankles. Paralysed with fear, she could only look on helplessly as he struggled and grasped at the thin branches of bushes, which came away in his hands. In an instant he was dragged into a gaping hole, which had opened on the periphery of the clearing. The last Evelyn saw of her secret lover was his hands grasping at the air as the ground enclosed around them.

Shocked out of her paralysis, Evelyn ran over to where he disappeared and fell to her knees and thumped the re-formed ground. “Alan! Alan! Oh what’s happened?” she shouted through loud sobbing. Then, after a minute, she stood up and looked around while brushing pieces of moss from her jeans. Confident there was no one around Evelyn left the clearing the way she came in.

The sound of an engine made her pull back into the bushes as she was about to leave the cover of the path for the openness of the lay-by. She watched as a white Ford Focus passed. After the sound of the engine disappeared into the distance, she

left the cover of the bushes and ran to her car. With shaking hands she turned on the ignition and the sound of the radio made her jump. "This is ridiculous," she said to herself, "why am I running away? I've done nothing wrong!" *Cheated on my husband maybe—hardly a crime—or is it? Oh, but how could I explain Alan's disappearance? she thought.* Negotiating a quick three-point-turn she then gunned the engine and sped toward Arbroath.

Driving through the streets of the town Evelyn's mind was a mess. What would she do? Who would she confide in? She had to tell her husband about Alan, but how could she explain what happened? No, she had to bluff it out. No one else knew about her affair apart from Jaz, who would say nothing to anyone as they had been friends since childhood and had stuck-up for one another many times. But... did someone spot her car parked beside Alan's? "Now I'm getting paranoid," she told herself.

She turned into her driveway and switched off the engine then, after checking her makeup in the rear-view mirror, she opened the driver's door and left the comforting safety of the car.

"Hello! It's only me!" Evelyn shouted as she closed the front door.

"Hi Mum!" the two boys shouted in unison.

In the kitchen, Evelyn switched on the kettle and then filled a mug with two heaped teaspoonful's of instant coffee.

"How was Jasmine?" Colin asked as he strolled into the kitchen.

"Oh, she was fine."

"There's a movie just started," he said as he left with a packet of crisps.

"Yeah, there's always a movie starting," she said under her breath with a sigh. `

Evelyn stared up at her Aunt Cath. "Please, I want to go out and play?"

"There are green men out in the backdoor at this time of night that will come out of the ground and carry you away," warned her aunt with a stern look.

"But it's only seven o'clock; Mum lets me go out!"

"Well. I'm not your Mother. Now get ready for bed."

The telephone rang as Evelyn made her way upstairs, and she heard Cath pick it up and speak. Then, knowing that her aunt stayed on the phone for ages, she dashed back down the stairs. She then ran through the kitchen and unlocked the heavy back door and strolled out into the semi-dark garden of the small, two-storey building on the edge of town.

Evelyn watched as shadows fell across the path she walked on towards the small lawn where her skipping rope lay. She screamed as a bird flapped its wings and flew off from a nearby tree. The light had almost gone as she picked up the rope and skipped, but her heart wasn't in it. She threw the rope back onto the grass and was about to head back towards the welcoming lights of the house when a noise from an empty patch of soil beside the lawn captured her attention.

Through the gathering gloom Evelyn watched in amazement as a round, green object thrust its way up through the soil. After a few moments she froze in horror as she realised her aunt was right, for the green head of a man was protruding from the surface and was still rising.

She shook herself from the paralysis and grabbed a spade left in the earth and swung it, blade edge-on, at the green head. The spade chopped it off at the neck and left green ooze spurting as the head rolled away into the dark. Evelyn screamed as she threw the spade away and ran back to the house.

"What's wrong?" said Colin as he woke Evelyn up in the darkness of their bedroom.

She looked around with beads of sweat rolling down her forehead. “Oh, it’s that dream again.”

“You should see someone about that. It happens every other night,” he said as he rolled over.

Who was she to see? She was not even sure if it was a recurring dream. Did it actually happen all those years ago she wondered?

Monday morning, after dropping her sons off at school, Evelyn drove to her work at a bottling company on an industrial estate near the sea. Alongside Jasmine, she worked there part-time. The traffic was heavy, and she shouted at a driver slow at leaving traffic lights after they had turned green. “Whoa there Eve baby!” Evelyn said. “What’s happening? I’m letting this whole thing take over my life—I got to get a grip!”

After a few hours of mind numbing work Evelyn was sipping coffee during her lunch break and staring out at the sea through a plate-glass window.

“What have you been up to Eve?” Jasmine asked as she sat down beside her.

“What do you mean?” she asked brusquely.

“Oh touchy- eh! I *mean* Alan Harrison has been reported missing. According to the local radio he hasn’t been seen since Saturday night.”

“How would I know?”

“Well, you know, I thought...”

“Well, don’t think Jasmine,” interrupted Evelyn.

That evening, while Evelyn was preparing a meal, Colin strolled into the kitchen. “How are you doing Evie?”

“Oh, okay.”

“I see some guy from the town’s missing. Jim next door says the police found his car beside the woods on the Auchmithie Road and that they’re all over the area.”

“Oh,” she replied nonchalantly betraying the sinking feeling in her gut.

After the meal she ran to the toilet and threw-up and then sat on the edge of the bath and wept. “Why me?” she asked herself between sobs, but deep down inside she knew the answer. Sleep that night for Evelyn was impossible like the other nights except for when she lapsed into that dream. She tossed and turned, but couldn’t get the image of Alan being dragged away from her out of her mind. Suddenly she sat up and knew where she had to go.

Evelyn shivered as she pushed her way through the bushes and into the darkened clearing where Alan had disappeared. An owl hooted in the distance and small animals rummaged around in the undergrowth which surrounded the area. She was about to turn and run when someone said: “I couldn’t sleep either!”

Evelyn spun round in the direction of the voice, “Alan,” she said breathlessly.

“I’m Detective Inspector Marshall,” said a man dressed in a light-coloured rain coat with the collars pulled up topped off by a brown trilby which made it difficult to see his face. “We both seem to be here for something.”

“I don’t know what you mean!”

“Then why are you here?”

The man stared directly at Evelyn and she stared into black, hypnotic eyes and relieved her burden: “I never did anything. Alan was snatched by two roots, which dragged him under the ground.”

“Come on now; you don’t expect me to believe that?”

“That’s what happened,” pleaded Evelyn.

“What we can’t figure out is what you did with the body. We found traces of his blood in this clearing, and there’s evidence of a struggle.”

“I never killed Alan - I loved him.”

Suddenly the bushes at the back of the clearing shook violently as two uniformed police officers appeared followed by two plain clothes officers.

“Okay Miss, I'd like you to come to the station to help us with our enquiries,” said one of the plain clothes men.

After Evelyn was taken away one officer turned to where Marshall was standing and said: “Okay sir!” But there was no one there, so he shrugged his shoulders and left.

Marshall exploded with laughter as he walked further into the woods while casting off his clothes revealing a green body. His ploy to hypnotise the human keepers into thinking he was one of their masters worked perfectly. Getting them to hide in the undergrowth while she told her story, which sounded ludicrous, was then easy.

As he walked he sank into the earth, as if he was walking in quicksand. Before he disappeared, he said: “Rest peacefully my brother. The murderess will be dealt with by human rules and renounced by her family. Even if released, I will have something dear to her as you were dear to me!”

CAL I

One day at school during the morning playtime Cal, a thin, fair-haired boy, was standing in the corner as usual as the other kids buzzed around him. Grant Hanson, who was bigger than the others, stepped up to him and poked him on the chest. "You're a wimp, he said as he stuck his face next to Cal's, "and I heard your dad's not coming back!"

Cal shuddered and then fell onto his hands and knees with his head bowed. Hanson laughed as some other kids gathered around, but the laughing stopped when Cal lifted his head to reveal eyes with no eyeballs. He emitted a rasping noise as the group screamed and ran away. Hanson, however, was held next to Cal by an invisible force and squealed as Cal, now upright, walked around and stood in front of him. There was a choking smell of excrement in the air. A great force threw Hanson backwards, and he smashed into the perimeter fence as Cal again fell to the ground and stared blankly into the distance—his eyes back to normal.

Two female teachers came rushing out from the common room, one helped a howling Hanson while the other tended to Cal by putting him in the recovery position. Another teacher appeared at the main entrance and called the other children into the school. The teacher attending Cal got him to his feet and drove the boy home.

That night Cal's mother, Sarah, switched off her television and then sat in silence. She then stood up and blew the dust off her teak sideboard as she picked up her wedding photograph. A tear slid down her cheek when she ran a finger around the wooden frame. Her husband Paul looked smart in his uniform and she in a frilly white dress. She sighed and looked at another picture of Paul with some of his marine mates. He had been killed by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan while on tour there five months previously. She dreamed of their honeymoon when they lay on a beach in Cyprus in each other's arms.

Sarah then picked up a photograph of her son. What was to become of Cal? Should she be brave and tell him that his father wouldn't be coming home this time? The doctors had diagnosed epilepsy. Would he grow out of the malady that had begun a few months ago? And what of the force that threw that kid onto the fence? A thump from Cal's bedroom above made her jump. Then she heard running and a growling noise. She left her chair and crept into the hallway and switched on the light, but the bulb blew out. She climbed the stairs in the dark as the growling noise intensified. At the top of the stairs she peered through the gloom and could see that Cal's door was still the way she had left it hours before: slightly open. She pushed the door open. Beads of sweat rolled down her forehead. She stuck her head around the door.

"Hi Mum!" Cal shouted as he rolled off his bed followed by Rolfie, the next door neighbour's West Highland Terrier.

"Oh Cal, I thought..." she uttered with tears rolling down her face as she walked further into the room.

"What Mum?"

"Never mind," she said as she gave him a hug and patted Rolfie. "How did he get in here?"

"I let him in while you were watching 'Coronation Street'. What's happened to the light in the hall?"

She laughed. "The bulb's gone."

"Mum?"

“Yes?”

“I miss Dad.”

“I know; so do I honey.”

II

Sarah answered the ringing telephone as Cal played on the front lawn; she had kept him off the school until she attended a meeting with the school board.

“Yeah, hullo?”

“Sarah, it's Jean from down the road, could you help me with the twins? I have to get them ready for the playschool, and I'm running late?”

“Sure, I'll be there in a minute.”

Sarah locked the front door and asked Cal to come with her.

“I don't want to come Mum. I'm happy playing here,” he replied.

Well, it's okay, she thought, it was just along the road after all.

After she had gone Cal set his 'Action Man' figure down next to the transformer which had flown into the grass, as a shadow crept over the lawn. He gazed up at the figure of a man silhouetted in the glare from the sun. “Dad! Is that you?” he said.

“Aye son,” said the figure.

Cal stood up and hugged the figure. “I'm glad you're back Dad!”

“Come on, I'll take you along to McDonalds for a burger.”

“Okay Dad, but what about Mum?”

“She said it would be okay.”

They entered a grey Ford and drove away. And after a few miles Cal turned to the man with a troubled look on his face. “This isn't the way to McDonalds!”

The daydream lifted and Cal realised that the man wasn't his father. “Stop the car!” He shouted.

“It's okay we're just going for a wee run,” said the man switching on the central locking.

“I want my mum!” Cal shouted as they headed out of town.

The man who was wearing ill-fitting clothes switched on some loud music and took a back road, which led to the sea.

Sarah was just leaving her neighbours as another neighbour shouted that she saw Cal entering a grey car with somebody. She ran into the front garden to find his toys lying on the grass. “Oh my God!” she shouted and thought: *hadn't there been a warning about a paedophile in the area.* “How could I have been so stupid!” she screamed as she ran into the house and telephoned the police. She then grabbed her car keys and swore that no weirdo would harm her son.

The grey Ford pulled into a lay-by, and the man released his seat belt, opened the driver's door and jumped out of the car. He looked both ways, and with no one coming he opened the passenger's door and, after releasing Cal's seat belt, he hauled the boy out. He then led him down a tree-lined path where nettles and other weeds swung their heads in the wind.

“I want my mum!” Cal cried as tears flowed down his cheeks.

The man dragged him in behind an overturned tree and threw him to the ground. He landed on his hands and knees with head bowed.

“Your mum can't help you now,” hissed the paedophile.

“No, but I can,” growled an unworldly voice as Cal raised his head.

“Aargh!” howled the man as he jumped back from the sight of Cal’s white eyes and the saliva, which dripped from his mouth. He then turned and tried to run back along the path, but found his way blocked by an invisible force. He ran in the opposite direction until he came to a cliff top below which waves crashed onto seaweed-clad rocks. He gazed down for a while as if pondering whether to jump before turning to see Cal walking toward him. Suddenly he rose into the air and turned upside down to gaze helplessly at the sea. An odour of excrement wafted through the air as a brown liquid exploded through the rear of the man’s trousers and fell away into the sea.

Cal looked at the creature as if he was examining a painting and was about to let him drop when he heard his name carried in the wind.

“Cal!” Sarah shouted as she ran towards the cliff edge, “Don’t do it son, I know he deserves it, but... just don’t do it!”

She let out a whimper as she caught sight of Cal’s appearance. “What’s happened to you son?”

“Why do you want this thing saved? He was about to violate the body of your son!” Cal hissed.

“I was brought up a Christian; we value life—all life!”

Cal turned and looked at the paedophile then fell on to his hands and knees. Sarah rushed forward and caught the man’s ankles as he dropped. She fell to the ground as the man crashed onto the cliff face. “Cal, give me a hand!” Sarah screamed.

“Mum?” he said groggily. He then grabbed the man’s legs, and they both pulled him onto the grassy cliff top. The paedophile then stood up, staggered, and then ran back along the path toward his car.

Sarah hugged Cal “There’s something I should have told you: Your dad won’t be coming back - he was killed in Afghanistan.”

“I know Mum, but it was nice pretending he would come home.”

Sarah cried and gave him another hug before helping him to his feet. “Come on let’s go home.”

A few days later two men in grey suits knocked at Sarah’s door and announced that they were from the social services and that due to a complaint from the school and one from a member of the public they were to take Cal away for psychic evaluation. Sarah looked past them and saw a police car sitting at her gate.

“Wherever Cal goes, I go too,” she said with rising anger.

“Very well,” said one of the men.

That night the paedophile switched out the main light in his bedroom and slipped into his bed accompanied by the blue glow of a nightlight which sat on a bedside unit. As he drifted off to sleep he was awoken by a crash from within the room. He sat up and gazed into the gloom. His big wardrobe had fallen over and blocked the door. He jumped up and ran over to lift it back into position, but found it to be unusually heavy. He then smelled burning and turned to see his bed sheets burst into flames. The fire spread quickly to the carpet and up the walls. The man ran to the window and tried to open the lower frame, but it was unmovable. He then went to pick up his bedside unit—meaning to throw it through the window. But a ball of flames engulfed him and he ran wildly around the smoke-filled room screaming with his hair on fire before collapsing and suffocating.

The neighbours, awoken by the screams, rushed to their windows, and then realising where the noise came from, drew their curtains and went back to their beds.

RUTH

“Ruth will be a nice girl today,” said the tall, thin woman with crazy hair as she descended the stairs. She was dressed in an ill-fitting, grey cardigan under which was a purple blouse; her trousers were brown and well worn. Relief descended over the helper at Ruth’s side, a young, well-made girl with short, brown hair called Cath, when she heard the words.

“Ruth’s hungry today,” said Ruth as the pair reached the bottom of the stairs.

“Come on then Ruth let’s get you some breakfast,” said Cath.

Breakfast, any meal, in the dining-room at Turndale Nursing Home was a noisy affair. Ruth, however, sat in a small adjoining room along the passageway where there was one table and one seat. She suffered from Multiple Personality Syndrome and was kept away from the other ‘guests’ at meal times due to past trouble.

After finishing a bowl of porridge she was given a plate of buttered toast and a mug of tea by a carer who then went off to help in the dining room.

“Can I have more toast?” Ruth asked, after a while, in her soft voice.

A few moments later when no toast was forthcoming, a harsh voice cut through the din from the dining-room: “I want more fucking toast!”

“Okay Ruth,” said Cath as she popped her head into the room.

“Hurry up, Betty’s hungry!” Ruth hissed.

When breakfast was over Ruth went out onto the patio at the rear of the building. The trees in the garden were in full blossom and looked like large sticks of pink candyfloss. Every time a gust of wind swept in from the nearby sea there was a pink snowstorm.

A young man dressed in blue jeans and a red checked shirt sat on a wooden bench and stared at the garden. Ruth walked past him and stood at the wooden fence and watched as the wind released more blossoms from the trees.

“Hullo,” said the man in a distinct nasal tone.

“Hullo,” replied Ruth.

“What’s your name?”

She turned to face him. He had partial Downs Syndrome features. “My name’s Ruth. What’s your’s?”

“Ben.”

She sat down beside him. “The pink blossom - it’s pretty!”

“Yes, I like it.”

“I like pretty things.”

Silence descended over them broken only by the coo of a dove. The blossom remained on the trees.

“I haven’t seen you before?” said Ruth after a while.

“I was brought here last night, and I don’t know anyone.”

“You know me now!” she said as she stood. “Would you like to come for a walk?”

“Is it okay?”

“We’re allowed around the back garden, but not the front.”

They walked and chatted for an hour before being called back in to prepare for lunch. Betty never intruded! And for the next few days the pair walked and talked, which amazed the staff for Ruth had never interacted with any of the other ‘guests’.

The area psychologist, Doctor Ann Richmond, was pleased with her initiative, which was to take individuals from one home and place them in another and see how they reacted to their new surroundings. The results had been encouraging with the

individuals benefiting from the change, and sometimes the 'guests' in the recipient homes also benefited from someone new in their presence.

Ruth was just another face in the system. Diagnosed as schizophrenic at an early age her mother, being unwilling to cope, had abandoned her to the social services. There had been reports of abuse at a young age due to her mother having had some unscrupulous partner, but those were unsubstantiated

The Multiple Personality Syndrome had been diagnosed finally when she was eighteen. Then, after going from a mental hospital to various homes, she ended up at Turndale, where she has been for the last eighteen years.

One morning, after breakfast, Ruth found the rear doors unlocked; so she headed out onto the patio. A haze, which had rolled in from the sea softened the sun's rays. The bench where Ben usually sat was empty; so she sat down and waited.

After an hour Cath appeared next to her. "Are you okay Ruth?"

"Where's Ben?"

"Ben's gone back to the home he came from honey."

"Oh," said Ruth as she got up and then headed back inside without another word.

Lunchtime came with the usual sound of loud voices, plates being scraped and chairs being hauled across the linoleum covered floor.

"Where's Ruth?" The nurse who was administering pills from a trolley asked.

"I don't know I haven't seen her since she was out on the patio earlier," said Cath as she ran a hand over her hair. "I'll nip up and see if she's in her room."

The faded white door on the upper floor had a brass number eight under a photograph of Ruth.

"Ruth!" Cath shouted as she knocked on the door. When there was no reply she tried the handle; the door was unlocked, so she pushed it open—slowly!

"Oh my God!" she cried as she ran and pressed the emergency button.

Ruth lay face up on her bed with arms splayed and palms open upwards. There were deep slashes on each wrist and red disks had formed on the duvet under her hands where blood was seeping into the fabric. A razor blade lay on the floor beside a bedside unit with blood on one edge.

"Fuck off! Betty wants to be left alone!" Ruth shouted in a deep, but faltering voice.

A male carer came running in with a green first aid box followed closely by the nurse. They pulled on disposable gloves and then the nurse opened the box and took out pads and tape. "Call an ambulance!" the nurse shouted to the Cath. "Hold her Tom," she then said as she applied pads to the wounds and wrapped tape around the wrists. She then raised Ruth's arms. "Here, hold the left arm and press on the pad," the nurse said, presenting the man with one of Ruth's arms. "So much for Richmond's initiative!"

The hospital ward was in semi-darkness as the nurse walked along the polished aisle between the ends of the beds on her rounds. The regular bleep of monitoring equipment accompanied the sound of patients sleeping. She was about to leave when a soft voice from an end bed, where a patient with crazy hair lay, said: "Can I come home now Mummy?"

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