



Dad, Ghosthunter

I was psychic once about my gerbil. My Mom was saying ‘I think Snowy is...’ and, you know, I didn't even let her finish the end of the sentence but I jumped in and said ‘...Dead!’ And it was true. It turned out Snowy was. Totally deceased. I don't know how I knew it - I just did. I didn't foresee Mom's death though. Even if you can see things in advance, it doesn't mean you can change them. Perhaps you aren't even aware of the really dangerous things that are edging closer and closer until it's too late. Sometimes it feels like Mom just walked out of the room to make a cup of tea. I feel her that strongly. It doesn't feel other-worldly or strange.

She died in a car crash four years ago this summer. Her sister, Auntie Jean, told us she'd gone to live with the angels and I told her not to be so silly. (Auntie Jean thinks I'm a bit too ‘self-possessed’ – well, I think that's a good thing.) We did do some bereavement counselling but Dad still misses Mom a lot more than he ever makes out. I don't really think he got so seriously obsessed with ghost things until that point. Maybe he wants to know if there's anything on the other side. Who knows? There are so many things to believe in. Well, I love you, Mom, wherever you really are.

Uncle Phil and Uncle Pete, his older brothers, say that Dad was always into spooky goings on and liked reading horror stories from an early age, pestering Granddad to let him stay up late to watch old movies on TV like *The Old Dark House* or episodes of *The Twilight Zone* and *Out of the Unknown*.

Dad once told me that the scariest movie he ever saw was *The Trollenburg Terror*, which was set in the Alps and had these giant alien octopuses that lived in a cloud that came down on top of the mountain and they decapitated climbers and sucked all their blood out. I'm not sure he is the best film critic though. He recommended *Dracula Has Risen From the Grave* with Christopher Lee. I watched it and thought it was rubbish. I say, ‘Give Vampires a Rest.’ I don't believe in them one bit; I think they're completely made up.

I do believe some of the things he tells me though. Like: black cats with green eyes are witches' cats - or used to be. They were born with witches' hands and they have ten lives instead of nine. Dad likes to refer to that bit in *Hamlet* about there being 'more things betwixt Heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy'. Well, I really do believe that one.

The past is never dead, it isn't even past, wrote an American writer from a long time ago called William Faulkner. Dad has read some of his books and he has this quote pinned up in his study. I should explain; when Dad finds a quote that he thinks is interesting he prints it out from his computer on a sheet of A4 paper and blu-taks it decoratively around the book shelves.

You will find that most of his books have any of the following words in their titles: Unexplained, Uncanny, Macabre, Terror, Ghosts, Hauntings, Supernatural, Mysteries, Legends. Or some combination of those words; for example, *The World's Strangest Mysteries and Hauntings*. He is currently reading a book written by the President of the Ghost Club about the Ghosts and Legends of Britain's Historic Buildings, probably planning what to do with our next free weekend.

I used to ask him all the time, 'Dad, why can't we have a normal holiday? Just for once? Please?' Every year, especially on Bank Holiday weekends, we don't pack our bags and buckets and spades for a day at the seaside. We don't go to Alton Towers or Legoland. No, Dad won't have that. He'd rather we go looking for the ghost of an unhappy woman in the summerhouse of a ruined abbey or the apparition of a black dog on an ancient hill-fort.

Maybe the weather has something to do with it. Gloomy or overcast, the weather woman says. Another beautiful English summer, the likelihood of rain storms creating the right sort of atmosphere for mystical disturbances. Dad goes by a different kind of forecast. He'll spend days in his study, looking at various reference books, muttering about portents and such. He still reads comics too. *Swamp Thing*, *Sandman* and *Hellblazer* have been particular favourites of his over the years. We don't get proper bedtime stories, more lectures on some recent investigation by The Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena. Well, they start off as a possibly interesting story but then he gets sidetracked and goes off into some footnote or other. 'Can we have a story about dancing bears instead?' we'll ask. 'No chance' will be the answer.

If we go to London, we probably won't go to Madame Tussauds to get our photograph taken with the Queen or the pop stars there - or even somewhere like the London Dungeon, though he has promised we will one day because it's supposed to be seriously haunted. If we do get to London, I expect we'll end up in some obscure shop off the Bethnall Green Road where he'll swop arcane information with some old crustie. Let's face it, if we ever to the seaside, instead of shells, he'll be collecting spells.

'Incantation' is one of Dad's favourite words - in fact, he has several of these written out on small cards he carries in his pocket. 'Parchment' - he likes that one too; the kind of words that are difficult to use in Scrabble. He'll spend hours on the internet doing his research, when we want to get onto the computer to play the online deluxe version of *Deathbird II*. He'll tell us to do our homework and the

sentence will always end with ‘...while I do mine, kids!’ You see, my Dad likes to think of himself as a supernatural sleuth, a witch finder, a ghost hunter, a tourist in the paranormal, whatever you want to call it. Well, he used to be anyhow. Maybe he’ll sort of retire now. Though he’s not that old, his hair is snowy white.

After recent events, I’d like to think that things will be different in future, but I’m not sure. You see, he has boundless enthusiasm for the subject of the occult. Very little ever seems to set him back. He has a really boring job, doing economic monitoring, so maybe he channels his enthusiasm into compiling reports of apparitions in the back of beyond. Or maybe he thinks we love doing this stuff with him. Now that’s a truly scary thought!

I used to ask him things like: ‘Dad, instead of hunting ghosts, can’t you do something useful, like invent a back scratching machine? And make it invisible so I can wear it to school and it can scratch my back and my head and the teacher won’t know.’

He calls them ‘adventures’ but, in all honesty, they’re a bit predictable. He plans our itinerary thoroughly – wherever we go, we’re always on the lookout for white ladies, brown ladies, monkish spectres, singing and chanting nuns, hurrying clerics, figures in black hats and cloaks. I thought searching for the ghosts of ancient Roman soldiers might be a bit more interesting, but it generally consists of tramping through woods in the middle of the night disturbing the birds.

There are three of us to help him out as apprentice investigators: me, Holly - now aged a cool 13 - Bobby aged a not-so-cool 11 and John aged 8. I don’t think we were born on dates with any deep astrological significance but Dad told me my name was chosen because Holly is a protection against evil influences. Perhaps it used to work. I have never felt a cold presence in any house or heard phantom footsteps bumping about or seen spectral lights or a headless horseman. Granddad said he once saw one of those - on a dark moonless night when he was an insurance salesman driving round the wilds of Staffordshire - but I personally have never seen anything remarkable, not even a trout in a sacred well. I have never been in a trance or encountered the Dudley Devil, Theophillus Dunn, either in dreams or in the flesh.

I have seen, though – in a museum display - a 70 million year old sea urchin fossil that country people used to call a ‘fairy loaf’ but the only fairy folk I have seen were in *The Lord of the Rings* films. I have also seen the Hand of Glory that is kept in Walsall Museum: a genuine mummified hand of a child, found with a Cromwellian sword in an attic in an old coaching inn, supposedly used as a charm by sorcerers and thieves. This is a bit creepy, even by Black Country standards; see, what they used to do was cut off the hand and lower arm of a hanged criminal while the body was still on the gallows, pickle it in salts and vinegar, then dry it in sunlight. It was then used as a holder for a candle made from virgin wax, sesame and fat from a dead man’s body. Yuk! is all I have to say about that. When I looked at it, I felt sad and wondered what that kid ever did to deserve such a fate – probably stole a cabbage from Darlaston market I expect.

You might think I am making some of this up but, you know, I have actually been in the very attic where it was found – there were no handprints in the dust or other peculiar things, just a boring art exhibition on show. Dad knew the

organiser and so he had got an invite to the opening, but I knew it that was just an excuse for him to have a good nose around the place. You see, we're always doing this kind of thing, making day trips to haunted airfields, castle ruins, miscellaneous standing stones or National Trust properties, each with some terrible secrets to be uncovered, by day or night. The meaning of tarot cards, the history of gargoyles, why people touch wood, the rites of Spring, these are the sorts of things you learn about with a Dad like our Dad. It's a bit hard to explain to friends. 'What are you doing Saturday?' Oh, just the usual, we're going to this place where they found this dead kid's hand.

Generally, though, we try to humour him. 'Yes, Dad, that *might* have been a floating orb you saw...'

Once Dad took me and my friend Natalie to White Ladies Priory (see what I mean?) at midnight. We had to go along this muddy lane and I can't tell you how much it was ruining our trainers. He lit candles and told us this story about Granddad camping there in the old days with the Boy Scouts and how it had been raining heavily and they saw a mysterious robed figure walking about in the ruins and when they plucked up the nerve to go and look it disappeared and there were no footprints to be seen in the mud. Dad, at one point in telling the story, dramatically cried out, 'Look! What's that?' and pointed over to an old crumbling archway. Just as he did, the wind blew the flames of the candles out and there was a very loud noise. We all jumped out of our skin, then Dad explained it was someone off in the woods firing a shotgun, poachers probably. I asked Granddad about the story and he told me it happened at some other ruined place and not there at all. So we were petrified for nothing. When Natalie told her Mom about it, she wasn't allowed to sleepover again. She didn't come to our Halloween party either.

Dad says that Evil can only be invited in, that it only has power over you if you *let* it in, that you can *feel* things like mixed up emotions and these things might come from residual energies but they can't physically hurt you. Not if you don't want them to.

This reminded me of a story Mom told me once about a science fiction TV film she liked where there was this brilliant Professor and he was in a coma and so a volunteer had to be wired up to him and go into their mind to help him come out of the coma. The volunteer went through this dark castle and had to overcome all sort of obstacles and creatures and guardians that the Professor's mind was creating. Finally, at the last hurdle, the Professor put in the way a giant monstrous spider and it turned out the volunteer was terribly afraid of spiders. The volunteer was frozen with fear and the spider was about to eat him when he remembered to back when he was a little boy and used to have horrible nightmares, until his Mom put a water pistol by the bed at night and said, 'In your dreams you can use the water pistol as a special weapon that will protect you against everything'. And so, while trapped by the spider in the Professor's mind, he saw the water pistol lying on the floor and he picked it up and it destroyed the spider. Then the Professor came out of the coma and that was the end of the film.

It was a bit like a recent video we watched with Dad that had similar fantastical ingredients - Jennifer Lopez played the mind-travelling volunteer. 'The

moral of the story is,' Dad remarked, 'the more you fear something the stronger it becomes, feeding off your emotional energy. In those kind of situations, you have to stay calm and focused.'

Ok, Dad, we get it! But I'm not too fond of real spiders and I've found that the heel of a shoe is more effective than a water pistol in those situations. Adult's behaviour is a bit mystifying, isn't it? I prefer to collect travel brochures, making a cuttings scrapbook of all the alternative places we could visit. There are definitely no graveyards in this scrapbook. I reckon there are enough things in real life to be scared of without dreaming up more.

Sometimes we'll do something ordinary, like go and stay with Auntie Jean on the other side of town. She works as a solicitor and Uncle Dave works as something important in the City Council, so believe me when I say they have a big house with plenty of room to fit all of us in, along with our cousins, Richard and Kate and their dog. They have a pond, a conservatory, a tree house and two bathrooms. We usually have a big Sunday roast with them or they might do a barbeque.

Last year – it seems ages ago - we got invited to go to France on a week's holiday with them and we all went to Euro Disney for a few days. Dad soon got bored in Frontier Land. Then, of course, The Phantom Mansion got him thinking of the possibility of spectral presences of one kind or another.

'This is about as close as you're going to get to a real ghost,' laughed Uncle Dave. He explained to us all about the history of the Pepper's Ghost illusion and how it worked with just glass, mirrors and lights. That was pretty clever but I preferred going on Space Mountain and my brothers liked the Indiana Jones ride the best.

But all this was never going to be satisfying enough for Dad. When we went on a trip into the centre of Paris, he insisted we go in search of ghosts that might be haunting the site of the old Cabaret of Nothingness or Death on the Boulevard de Clichy. We didn't find it but we saw where The Moulin Rouge was located. It was nothing like in the film. The street was full of neon-lit sex shops and Auntie Jean clearly thought it was an unsuitable place to be. She didn't let us linger there, but she agreed that we could all go and visit the famous Catacombs instead. The Catacombs are tunnels underground and are really a bit chilling – John gripped my hand tightly the whole time. It's full of the bones of about six million bodies, all crammed into a quiet damp darkness. You have to go round with flashlights.

Dad told Bobby, 'Whatever you do, don't mess with the skulls.'

Uncle Dave said it was so crowded and cramped down there it reminded him of the time he had caught The Night Train to Hell, the overnight sleeper from Paris to Rome.

Afterwards, we went for some lemonade and cakes at a pavement cafe. This gave Dad the chance to get out one of his obscure guidebooks and persuade us to go in search of the grave of Abbe Francois de Paris, who was part of a religious sect. He told us how, in the 1700's, this man had been like a dead rock star and declared a saint and young girls would come to the grave and eat the soil, fall into religious ecstasies and that sort of thing. At first there were only a small number, 10 or so, but this fan club rose to over 800 pretty quickly. They asked to be beaten by

passer-by's, they pierced their tongues, hung heavy weights from their chests, raked their flesh with metal combs, levitated and trampled hysterically on each other until they passed out. After loads of complaints from the general public, the King walled the cemetery, kept the gates locked and put guards there to arrest people, then passed a law forbidding those 'seized with convulsions' to do so in public. The girls continued to meet and have convulsions in private houses instead, refining their religious ecstasy to include strangling themselves in front of invited audiences. Their stage repertoire also included swallowing hot coals and leather bound editions of the New Testament. One performance included a girl who had herself crucified by being nailed to a wooden board. And adults and politicians worry about what teenagers get up to these days!

Auntie Jean's only comment was: 'Typical French behaviour...' She's been to France about twelve times. I really don't know why as she doesn't seem to like the people there very much.

I don't think she has a high opinion of Dad either. A little while ago, when she asked John if he believed in God he gave her a long answer she would not rather have heard. He told her that if you're a Devil you live under the ground and if you've been bad you come back and haunt people above the ground. He told her you become a Devil if you're in jail and die; if you've just been in jail once, you can get to be a ghost but if you've been in hundreds of times - or twice - you have to live underground. Auntie Jean looked like she'd swallowed a bar of soap. As I said, there are more things betwixt heaven and earth.

Anyway, after that week in France, we haven't been invited on any other holidays with them. Instead, when we should have been enjoying the rollercoasters on Blackpool Pleasure Beach, we're glued to borrowed binoculars on the shores of Loch Alsh, in the rain and mist, eyes straining for a glimpse of a seventeenth century Spanish sailor. Have you ever camped by a loch in a rainstorm that lasts five days with the wind howling off the water? Three pairs of socks are not enough, the calor gas stove keeps blowing out, you miss your toaster and there are spiders living in your tent. Dad thoughtfully brought along inflatable beds, but the air leaked out of ours in the night. I'm looking for a particular kind of book for Dad for his next birthday – *Really Creepy Ghosts of the Mediterranean* – but I have a strong feeling that ghosts only like places that are cold and waterlogged and miserable.

Which brings me to two weeks ago, when things turned serious. Believe me, it wasn't funny. Two weeks can make such a difference to how you think about the world and what it means. Dad says this is what happens when you grow up; sometime things change so quickly when you'd like them to stay the same. It was the half-term break and Dad decided we would go exploring in the West of Wales. There had been immense thunderstorms all week and, with the Scottish experience in mind, Dad promised we would only camp some of time and we could stay in Bed and Breakfast accommodation as well.

When we go away on these little trips, we don't take any fancy ghost-hunting equipment. We don't have infrared or radar devices or scientific monitoring units which sense vibrations, changes in air pressure or temperature – though we do carry a small thermometer. We take with us pens and pads for notes and

observations, chalk for marking the position of furniture in case there are poltergeists around, a camera and tripod, a watch with a quartz backlight, a compass, torches, lots of spare batteries and maps. Dad has saved up for some new resources: a brand new camcorder that can film in the dark and night-vision binoculars - which he must have got cheap because they only have one lens. Dad is a bit technologically inept, so I made sure I read all the instructions carefully. Of course, Dad always carries with him a small wooden crucifix, rosary beads and a plastic bottle full of Holy Water. That's the superstitious side of Dad, not the logical one who talks about electromagnetic fields and how they can cause disturbances. He comes back at night with gallons of blessed water which he keeps in home brew containers in the garage. Maybe there's a superstore somewhere for this kind of thing.

He spends ages the night before packing and unpacking the car until there's barely room for us. I noticed that this time he also stuffed into his old blue canvas rucksack some very unghostly items. 'Dad, we're not going to do something different this time, are we? Like run away to the Circus?' He just smiled.

I should explain a little: you see, last year Dad went on course for work, this sort of team building thing and as part of it they had to do all these circus skills. He may sound a bit of stick in the mud but he came back with a fire-eating kit and he learned how to do it properly. It seemed a bit out of character, but he went and did it at the school fete to raise some money for charity so I was quite proud of him - but I had no idea why he'd put the kit in the car, except maybe he was going to entertain us round a campfire on the beach one night. That was a delicious thought - that we might actually go to a beach and forage for driftwood and build a fire and cook potatoes and beans and marshmallows like castaways.

Our first day in Wales was promising; we left home early and got to Barmouth, went for a walk on the beach and had fish and chips for lunch. It wasn't raining. Dad even took us to a visitor attraction for a change, which told the story of the Ancient Celts, who had enough superstitions to keep him engrossed. John took a great interest in the bits about human sacrifices, which is a worrying development if you ask me. They had a good shop too. I bought a cute little Celtic Ring Circle, which represents the wheel of life and acts as a protective talisman, and I put it straightaway on the silver neck chain I always wear - it's special because Mom gave it me when I was little.

Then we drove along the coast road south and stayed the night in a nice Bed & Breakfast. Perhaps this holiday was going to be different! We watched a programme on TV about crop circles before we went to bed. The next day we found a quiet campsite in some woods near a rocky stream. Still no rain. As it got dark, we lit a fire with real wood and looked at the stars a lot because it's harder to see them at home. Dad had to spoil the atmosphere by telling us a stupid story about a family of vampires who went on holiday to Italy and took a liking to red wine and Parma ham. It made us a bit miserable because a holiday in Italy sounded more exciting than a week in Wales.

We spent a few days looking round some ancient ruins and then went to a country park which had a beach several miles in length and a history of ghostly sightings. In the olden days, local people put lanterns in different places on the

headlands to mislead ships' navigators, hoping to lure vessels on to the rocks, in order to loot their cargo. Survivors of the shipwreck were not spared but brutally murdered so there would be no witnesses to the plundering and lots of people were not buried properly so their spirits were left to wander the world. Unfortunately, it was raining heavily by the time we got to the beach so there was not much to see.

Dad told us a story about a night watchman from these parts who kept watch in a guard tower on the shore, 60 feet high. There was only one ladder to get to the top of the tower and a single hatch door. On one night shift, he was feeling very cold and put on an extra overcoat. When he looked out of the window he saw these faces looking in, floating there up above the ground, just looking in normally, as if they were casually looking in a shop window.

'I don't want a job like that, Dad,' said John. 'When I grow up I want to be a driving instructor.'

I wasn't too keen to spend time on this particular beach. Low tide + rain + mudflats = an unpleasant mess. Fortunately, Dad decided not to stop there long and carry on driving. The rain and the hum of the road usually lulls me to sleep but I had the beginning of a nasty headache. The hills were closing in around us and the clouds were getting lower. I was hoping we would soon give up on today and start looking for another Bed & Breakfast. After a while, Dad turned off down a side road, following a sign that promised to lead us to the New Millennium Discovery Centre.

'A Discovery Centre for discovering what, Dad?' asked Bobby.

'I don't know,' he replied. 'Let's stop and have a look anyway.' The road eventually took us down into a secluded estuary. There were no spectacular views available due to the mist that rolled in off the water. We pulled up in an empty car park. 'Let's take a break and stretch our legs,' he said. 'Maybe we get a cup of tea and some toasted tea cakes.'

'I just want some salt and vinegar crisps,' said John.

Bobby screwed up his face. There were clearly no rides of any kind here, though there was an adventure playground over to one side, looking desolate in the grey vapour that clung to the land. 'Great,' he muttered. 'A lot of signs for bird watching. Just the thing to do on a day like this.'

'Then it's a good job we've got our night vision binoculars,' said Dad. He marched ahead of us and went inside the building.

Bobby sniggered. 'Do you think we'll get in? It looks *really* crowded today.'

I shrugged. The Discovery Centre - a low rise stone building with a smoky glass façade - looked brand new. I could just make out a few shadowy figures inside. I thought they were staring at us, willing us to come inside.

The air felt heavy, the rain coming down like globules of spit splashing on my head. We went over to the entrance. A large sign stood there with red letters that said TAKE A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE next to a painting of a little red Welsh dragon. A sodden leaflet lay on the ground. On the front it said: *With so much to see and do you'll be spoilt for choice. You can be sure of a great day out - whatever the weather!*

John looked up at me. ‘After I get my crisps, will you take me to the playground?’

‘Course,’ I replied. ‘Might need our umbrella though.’

We crossed the threshold. It was a bit of a shock to the senses – it felt incredibly warm compared to outside and everything was so vividly coloured it hurt your eyes. Large corridors of displays ran in every direction with different themes like *A Birdwatcher’s Paradise*, *The Haven of Wildflowers*, *The Hidden Marsh* and so on. It all looked a bit maze-like from the entrance. Dad had already moved quickly to the end of the first section – staring at photographs of Little Egrets and Kingfishers were not quite his thing.

‘There’s a funny smell,’ said John quietly.

It smelt suddenly of daffodils. And really strongly.

Over to one side, there was an information desk with the people we had seen through the glass. As we passed them, I realised the man looked just like our Maths teacher, Mr. Perry – who’s short and stocky and talks about rugby league football a lot, with a sad attempt at a moustache and wild tufty black hair swept back in an uncombed sort of way. Maybe it’s his twin, I thought. Same ruddy burnt complexion, like someone who’s outdoors a lot but never takes his shirt off. He gave me a strange look – a bit scornful, suspicious and frightened all at the same time, like I might be about to shoplift or something. He had a large badge, which said Visitor Services Manager. There were three women next to him, with badges which each said Visitor Services Assistant. They all wore blue uniforms and like the displays around them they seemed to glow brightly.

They each looked up in turn. One was busy painting her nails. She had about four jars of different colours lined up in front of her and she seemed to be applying about 20 coats. I made a mental note to experiment with the florescent bubblegum nail polish I borrowed off Kate. One of the women was meticulously arranging displays of leaflets. The third stood still as a statue; her hair was bleached and coloured bright blonde and her skin was a bright orange colour but she looked like she might be really old.

‘Good afternoon,’ she purred politely. ‘What a lovely day to visit!’ She beamed at me with a very false and stiff grin.

I looked closely at her. Her teeth were really rotten. I said quietly to Bobby, ‘She needs to brush more often.’

‘What are you on about?’

‘Her teeth. They’re terrible.’

‘They’re just teeth,’ he said, looking at me like I was mad.

I stopped and glanced back and the woman smiled again, but no yellow and blackened teeth were to be seen. I must have been mistaken, a trick of the super bright light in here.

I caught up with the others. It didn’t look like there was much for kids, except that playground outside which was probably underwater by now. Bobby and John were going to get bored pretty quickly. The displays were informative but you’d need all day to read them – and sunglasses to protect your eyes. My head was really throbbing. We walked down the corridor to where Dad had paused, facing a large diorama of wetland. He had a funny look of concern on his face. He

was mumbling to himself about something being off. His judgement, Mom used to say.

‘Can you smell it?’ he asked.

‘You mean that cow manure smell?’ said Bobby.

‘No, not that. That’s just the countryside air. There’s something else.’

‘Daffodils,’ I said.

‘No, I can’t smell any flowers.’

‘Perhaps nail polish?’ I suggested helpfully, because in truth that is all I could now smell. The flower smell had abruptly dissipated.

‘Don’t move from here,’ he said. ‘I mean it. I’ll be back in a minute.’ He rushed back to the entrance and out to the car.

‘What’s up with him?’ said Bobby.

‘Now can we get some crisps?’ asked John.

I looked around for a sign for the café. I couldn’t see one. The edges of my vision seemed a little blurred. I needed an aspirin.

Dad came back clutching his old blue canvas rucksack and from it he took the small plastic bottle of Holy Water. He unscrewed the cap and sprinkled a little it over one of the displays.

‘Dad! What are you doing?’

‘Don’t worry, the attendants can’t see us.’

He was right; their desk was out of view, somewhere behind the display but maybe they had CCTV. I was feeling a bit embarrassed, so I walked over to the side to see if they were paying any attention to Dad’s antics.

The older woman with the bleached and coloured blonde hair looked sideways at me with a scowl, the kind of look that said to me, ‘*Pesky little children, I wish you were dead...*’ Almost like a voice ringing inside my head. It startled me.

The second one paid us no attention. She’d finished with the nail painting and was now filing them – that seemed back to front to me but what do I know. The third was all hyperactive, arranging and rearranging leaflets but in fast forward. Something about them made me feel very uncomfortable.

I looked back to where Dad and my brothers were standing. They were staring up at the display, transfixed. I followed their gaze and shook my head. The display was decaying and smoking. There’s no other way to describe it. Decaying before our eyes. It looked ancient, worn and eroded and discoloured. Apart from the whirls of smoke coming off it, it was also dripping – that was the best way to describe it. *Dripping*. The sparkling photographs became fuzzy, their colours draining away, the Peregrine Falcon looked emaciated; the edges of the picture started to ooze what looked like Evostick glue, all brown and gloppy.

This was getting genuinely weird. The Visitor Services Manager looked towards me, frowning and chewing his lip. I watched the Bleach Blonde leave the information desk and slowly walk in our direction. She looked a bit wobbly on her very high heels. She stopped at the corner of the display and then strolled up and down, shuddering unsteadily, struggling to maintain an air of normality but she was staring at me unpleasantly. I stared back. Her roots were really showing and I didn’t remember them being this way before. Either I had a problem with my eyes or things were getting stranger by the second.

'It's them! Those three!' said another voice in my head. *'An unholy triumvirate!'*

I remember that Mom used to joke and say that about me, Bobby and John. This voice seemed familiar but it spoke with urgency, as if warning me. And it sounded a bit like her voice, even though voices are harder to recall than other things. I found myself touching the Celtic charm on my neck chain.

'We're not fully open yet,' said the Bleach Blonde in a shrill voice. 'But I'm sure you'll find something of interest here.'

'Remember what the Master told us,' said Nail Polish, who appeared on the other side of us.

'I'm sure he won't mind. Think of it as pre-season practice...'

Nail Polish was rubbing her hands together. 'Hmm, a hors d'oeuvre! Oh, how naughty!'

'But then we always are,' sighed the Bleach Blonde.

Dad was nodding idiotically at their every utterance. He looked over at the Visitor Services Manager. 'Perhaps I should be talking to your Boss instead,' he said.

'Oh, he's not the Master,' she laughed. 'He's just a servant, a plaything...'

'And we need so many!' they chimed together, bursting into an uncontrollable fit of giggles.

I swear I could see steam rising from their heads.

Dad seemed excited. 'I've got your number,' he said resolutely.

I felt as if the room was beginning to spin. I tried to focus on those women, two of whom were standing over there right in front of us a second ago but somehow had moved around to this side in a flicker of the eye.

'666, I suppose?' said the Bleach Blonde. Those roots were really prominent now, like black ink was trickling out of the top of her head and down each strand of hair.

I didn't like this.

'999 is the number you'll be needing,' cackled Nail Polish, without looking up, creeping a little bit closer, continuing to file her nails but even more vigorously than before. Blood was now seeping from the ends of her fingers. She didn't seem to notice this and carried on filing away. It made a nasty grating sound.

'Fire! Police! Ambulance! Alarum! Alarum! Alarum!' mocked Bleach Blonde. 'Fee! Fie! Foe! Fum! I smell the blood of an Englishman, Be he 'live or be he dead, I'll grind his bones to make my bread.'

I looked back to my brothers. They were unmoving, still staring at the display, their mouths were open and their tongues lolling. I tried to go over to them but my feet wouldn't move. I began to feel very cold.

I thought, I hope Dad knows what he's doing. Then I thought - 'Hush, thoughts! Shoo! Get out! Course he does.' This is the sort of thing he's been preparing for all his life, probably.

The shapes of things were getting indistinct and unsolid. The Visitor Services Manager seemed oblivious to everything. He was hardly moving. His mouth was open, quivering a little, as if he about to say something but he was incredibly slowed down. Dad pulled out his crucifix. The Leaflet Woman, back

behind the desk again - how did she do that? - blanched slightly. You'd have to be sharp to notice. It was just for a second and then she was back in the rhythm of shuffling printed literature.

Dad stepped closer to the display. He lightly pressed the crucifix to its surface. It seemed to shrink back and glowed a sickly green around the shape of the cross, pulsating as if it were alive.

Nail Polish tipped her head to one side, concerned. 'WHAT are you doing to our display?' she said in a whining voice. 'THAT is council property!' The eyes of Visitor Service Manager looked like they were about to pop out of their sockets. He was staring, his face all purple as if he were holding his breath and were about to choke. Leaflet Woman let out a high-pitched giggle, then cackled again in way that was not human. She smiled sweetly at me, sickly sweet, her teeth yellowing and sharp looking. She was floating towards us with a dreamy hypnotic motion.

Bleach Blonde was reaching out to me. I noticed her feet weren't touching the ground either. Dad stepped in front of her, at the same time sprinkling Holy Water. She sizzled and her make-up fizzed and popped. Huge blisters appeared on her face.

'Oh that's nice,' she hissed. 'You wouldn't believe the time I've spent this morning getting that right.' She was no longer in the air, but pacing up and down in a very irritated way.

'An eon, you might say,' said Nail Polish. She started to wave her hands about, flicking blood onto the floor.

'You're finished, demon,' said Dad firmly.

'Oh, really?' smirked Bleach Blonde, her hair quite a dirty colour now and there were things writhing in it. 'Oh, go on then. Do whatever you like. Cast me out. I dare you. Do your worst.'

Dad held up the crucifix.

'Is that it?' she said, hands on hips.

'No,' said Dad. He put down the crucifix on the floor, rummaged in his rucksack, pulling out a small can and a stick which had linen wrapped around one end. He opened the lid of the can and dunked in the stick. He then took out his lighter and lit the end of the stick.

'Oh how nice! A torchlight procession!' mocked Bleach Blonde.

Dad then took a swig from the can.

'Good idea, dearie,' said Nail Polish. 'Your breath stinks...'

'I can smell it from here,' said Leaflet Woman. She was licking her teeth and panting like a dog.

I knew what was going to happen now. He did a few fancy twirls with the torch, just like at the school fete, and then with all his might - hey presto! - he spat the liquid through the flame towards her. Whoosh! She went spinning round like meat grilling in a kebab shop. Whoosh! The flames turned blue and went higher and higher around her, all out of proportion to the actual amount of fire that Dad had blown. The Visitor Services Manager started to gibber. The flames spluttered and went out, as if she had just sucked them into herself.

‘Is that it?’ said Bleach Blonde, only now she was sporting a sort of fried sausage look.

‘I think I hear an echo,’ said Leaflet Woman.

Bleach Blonde sprang forward. Dad didn’t flinch. He punched her fairly and squarely on the jaw. She went down. Bang! In a puff of smoke. I saw that coming. I didn’t mention it before but on his middle finger he wears a magic ring, something he claims to have picked up at a car boot sale. It appeared to work anyway. She was gone.

‘C’est la vie,’ said Nail Polish, flexing her fingers and rising up into the air.

Leaflet Woman grabbed the Visitor Services Manager by his tie and lifted him up. It seemed impossible – he was twice her size. She swung him back and forth. ‘This is what we do with interfering local spiritualists!’ she said. ‘Always moaning about spirits that move things, switch things on and off, lock you out of your house, set off your alarm. Pathetic minor intrusions.’ She began to spin him around her head.

This distracted Dad for a moment, long enough for Nail Polish to sweep down and dig her claws into his shoulders. He screamed and they went tumbling to the ground, rolling over in a terrible struggle. Dad had his rosary beads in his hand and he managed to get them round the neck of the demon. She shrank back as he pulled out one of those little cards he keeps for occasions like these and which I really thought he had got from a Joke Shop. It said: ‘Read After Me’ and then went into some mumbo jumbo in Latin. He quickly read out whatever it said on the card.

‘Never cast spells with spiteful intent!’ squealed Nail Polish as Dad completed the incantation. She was vibrating on the floor like a hundred thousand volts were going through her. She seemed to be shrinking, deflating, parts of her breaking off. Dad crawled away from her.

Leaflet Woman was getting closer to me, the Visitor Services Manager held up by some vile unseen force, still twirling round. I was shaking and feeling nauseous but still frozen to the spot. She seemed to be changing shape, like dark fog, shadowy tentacles stretching forth towards me, and so many teeth. No, not to me... past me, moving with vindictive purpose towards my immobile brothers!

Dad climbed to his feet but he looked like he was weakening. I was shocked to see his hair had actually turned white. He tried to stagger between us, but one of the tentacles cast him aside.

Her voice boomed out, sneering at us: ‘There shall not be found among you he that maketh his son or daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard or a necromancer...’

She swung round, those tentacle things dancing in the air above our heads.

‘Deuteronomy XVIII, verse 10 and 11...’ she added with an eerie contemptuous laugh.

I was feeling hot and cold at the same time, touched by a peculiar energy. I clasped my necklace and it’s talisman. The thought came into my head: ‘*I was born with a different power and you have no power over me.*’ In my hand I saw a water pistol. I started to laugh. I pointed it at her face and pulled the trigger and watched the jet of water hit her dead between the eyes and that was the finish of it.

Whatever it was, it was unexpectedly gone and everything with it. No fanfare. No big exit. There was just me, Dad and my two brothers standing in a half-built building with the rain drizzling on our faces. I knew it was over.

We stumbled into the car, out of breath, just staring at each other. When we looked back, the whole place had just vanished into the roughness of the mist. The memories of what had happened that afternoon soon faded too, for the others at least. No-one comments on the colour of Dad's hair. They probably think it's just some fashion thing: one of his friends at work - who is a landscape architect and old punk rocker - even dyes his hair blue.

Well, all that was just two weeks ago. I have no explanation for it and - no matter how different I feel - I just try to get on with normal everyday life.

As much as I can. Today I got up, got dressed, had my breakfast, went to school, did some work, had lunch, did some more work, came home and watched television for a bit and realised it was 8'o'clock already and time for a bath. I really wanted a bath, not a shower. A nice hot soak but - can you believe it? - there was none of my favourite moisturising bubble bath to be found, even though a few days ago the bathroom was full of the stuff. Everyone claims they haven't used it. It's a mystery.

'Maybe we've got a poltergeist,' said Bobby with a cheeky grin.

Well, I guess it's the least of my problems.

Dad looked up from his book, muttering. 'Kids, I was thinking we could go camping next weekend - there's a place in Hertfordshire called Spooky Wood. What do you think?'

Even if you were standing right at the end of the street, you could probably hear our collective groan. Later, I just thought, Thank God he doesn't want us to go to Bettiscombe Manor in search of some Screaming Skull or other.