Ghost Stories
Ghost Stories
The best of the Daily Telegraph’s Ghost Story Competition
Contents

*Grace* ~ Gill Baconnier

*Daniel’s Caul* ~ Ceri Hughes

*A Hollow Cause* ~ Craig Drew

*The Rites of Zho* ~ Justin Crozier

*Gimme Shelter* ~ Pat Black

*Friends* ~ Richard Crompton

Sample of Susan Hill’s *The Small Hand*
Grace

Gill Baconnier

The painting slides out from between the folded yellowing sheets in my mother’s linen chest. I recognise it immediately – the house, I mean, not my father’s painting, which isn’t very good. he’s written the name and address on the back: Le Mas Fontblanche. Ventabren. Near Aix. But I would have known it anywhere.

Strange how I haven’t thought about it in all these years. Tracing the outline of the water-coloured stones, I try to remember. My finger comes to rest on a shutter, half open and bleached to the colour of sun-dried lavender. My throat constricts with a long-forgotten panic. what’s this? a figure peering from the window: a pale wisp of a creature, hardly more than a smudge really.

It’s her – I know it’s her …

We went to France the summer I was twelve. My mother was French and the house belonged to her cousin, René. He was going to meet us at the station.

I stepped off the train in aix-en-Provence, gasping at the heat. I remember the smell of dust and burnt earth and a sound like sandpaper rubbing together. ‘Cigales,’ Mum said, smiling. Cicadas. My mother was happy – I think she had missed coming home. Dad picked up the cases and we walked through the brief coolness of the station building and I could tell he was happy for her too.

The car wound its way through narrow streets and out into the country. a stark, white mountain was etched into the brilliant sky. ‘Look angela, Sainte Victoire,’ said my mother. i’d seen it in a painting by Cézanne – maybe Dad would try to paint it.

The car window was open and the air was thick with the smell of rosemary and thyme and so heavy with heat it was like breathing honey. My bare legs stuck to the leather seat and my hair was damp around my shoulders. it seemed to take an age to get there.

When my father died I came home, and then my mother fell ill, so I stayed to look after her. They have a new word for it now: carer. I didn’t mind. Caring is what I do best – after all, I used to be a nurse. anyway, I always felt safer at home.

But in this empty, silent house, I feel bereft. not lonely exactly: I have enough memories to keep me company and no great need for friends. I simply feel, as I have often felt, that life has eluded me.

I close the lid of the chest and take the painting downstairs, hugging it close. I know exactly what i’m going to do.

There was a hand-painted sign pinned to a tree. It said: Le Mas Fontblanche and we turned up a rough, dry track through dusty fields. ‘The House of the White Fountain,’ said my father, pleased to have understood something at last. Mum laughed and said there had been a spring there, years ago, but it had long since dried up. Looking around at the arid landscape it seemed to me that everything had dried up.

Then the Mas was there in front of us, a huge, L-shaped farmhouse of pale grey stone. We climbed out of the car and followed René into the dark, cool house. My bedroom was at the top of the stone staircase and down a small corridor. I could see the Sainte Victoire from the window, beyond the dry, rock-strewn fields.

I saw another door, in the far wall of the room. René said it led to a part of the house that wasn’t used anymore and that it had been locked for as long as he could remember. The short stroke of the ‘L’, I thought.

I hadn’t realised plane tickets were so cheap. The young man in the travel agency even found me this hotel right in the centre of aix at a reasonable price. I managed to get here without mishap and I feel quite daring. who would have thought it?

The Tourist office is just around the corner so I get myself a guidebook, then I sit at a café on the Cours Mirabeau, sipping Perrier-menthe and thinking about the painting. i’ve come to the conclusion that my father was merely recording a memory: a sort of morbid holiday souvenir. after all – and this much I do remember – the incident was responsible for the panic attacks that blighted the rest of my childhood.

My father could not possibly have seen her, could he?
One day, I opened the door. My parents had gone down to the village and I was alone. I don’t know what made me try, as I knew it was locked. Only it wasn’t: I turned the handle and it opened easily. I went in, and found myself in a bedroom. From somewhere came the sound of piano music, melancholy notes drifting through the house like strands of gossamer. The shutters were open, which puzzled me. Didn’t René tell us this part of the house wasn’t used anymore? The window was on the same side of the house as my own yet, moving towards it, I realised that the view was different. I could see rooftops where there should have been only fields. It was raining hard outside and the sky was the shade of a swollen bruise, but I knew that here, thunderstorms could take you by surprise.

I turned from the window, just as she came into the room.

I had a bad night. it may have been the heat or the noisy air-conditioning but I couldn’t sleep. and now I stand at the window looking up at the blue, blue sky and wondering why on earth I came. That would be a first. I don’t want to go to Ventabren. I don’t have to. i’m on holiday. I could go anywhere: avignon, Marseille, Manosque … Besides, what could I hope to achieve by going back? The house might not even be standing and certainly, I have no idea where it is. I was only twelve.

The bus to Ventabren leaves at 9.45. as it winds towards the village I find myself scanning the countryside, just in case. The driver drops me outside a supermarket and, swinging my rucksack on to my back, I start to walk towards the village.

No. not this way.

I turn around and head into the hills.

She was a girl of about my own age, tall and thin with long, black hair. It was her eyes that startled me: the palest of grey, like an icy lake in winter. She closed the door and leant against it, staring straight ahead.

‘Hello,’ I said.

She turned those beautiful, strange eyes to the window, looking straight through me. Then she started to cry.

‘Are you all right?’ I asked. I wanted to reach out to her but I felt awkward, being caught in her room like that. She didn’t answer, but ran past me as if I wasn’t there and fell sobbing on to the bed. I didn’t know what to do, so I stood and watched her for a moment and then slipped quietly out, back into my sunlit bedroom.

There was no sign that it had been raining at all.

The heat seems to have eased off, for which i’m thankful. i’ve been walking over half an hour with no clear idea of where I am. what does surprise me is the number of modern villas with swimming pools and landscaped gardens. Such a pity.

And then I spot it. not the same sign, of course, but still pinned to the tree: Le Mas Fontblanche.

My heart is thudding. oh for goodness’ sake, it’s just a house! I take a deep breath and begin to walk. They’ve put tarmac on the road and fenced off the fields on either side but wildness still lingers about the place.

The house looms up before me against a darkening sky. I feel suddenly weak. a woman is in the garden, unpegging a line of billowing sheets. She stops when she sees me approaching.

Mum and Dad didn’t believe me, so I made them come upstairs and see for themselves. The door was locked and wouldn’t open, even when my father rammed it with his shoulder. My mother thought I must be suffering from the heat and insisted on taking my temperature. When I checked outside, later that afternoon, the shutters on that part of the house were indeed closed.

A few days later, I tried to open the door again, but it really was locked. I began to think I must have fallen asleep that afternoon and dreamt the whole thing. Yet that night, I couldn’t sleep at all. She troubled me, that sad girl with her ice-grey eyes. I wanted to be her friend, to help her maybe. I didn’t even know her name … I sat up and saw a strip of yellow light underneath the door, so I got out of bed and turned the handle.

It was open.

The woman is wondering who I am. I explain why I am here and it must sound to her as is does to me – sentimental nonsense. I tell her that my parents are both dead and that this house represented the last happy moments of my childhood. if only she knew.

‘when we stayed here,’ I say, ‘that part of the house was closed up’. I can see that the short stroke of the ‘L’ is lived in now. There are curtains at the windows.

‘Ah,’ she says, frowning, as the first drops of rain begin to fall, ‘let me finish this and i’ll show you around.’
She starts to fold the sheets.

I pushed the door gently, not wanting to startle her. She was lying on the bed, her black hair spread over the pillow. I moved closer and saw that her eyes were open, lifeless, frozen. One arm hung over the side of the bed, the thin, white hand dangling like a broken wing. I watched helplessly as the steady trickle of blood crept in scarlet rivulets across the floor.

outside, the rain was lashing against the window. was it already daylight? Surely I had only been in the room for a few minutes? I rushed out, shouting for help. as I flung open the door of my own room, my father was running down the corridor towards me.

Only then did I scream …

The house has been modernised and I can barely recognise it inside. it has a great deal of black ash furniture and an enormous television set in the sitting room. I have to be patient while the woman shows me her streamlined kitchen and the new patio door and then I ask her if I could see my old bedroom.

‘Of course, madame,’ she says, leading the way up the stone staircase. ‘it is empty now. My daughter Grace has the room next to it.’

I can’t understand why I am trembling so hard. The room is bare but familiar all the same. I look out of the window at the Sainte Victoire that rises beyond a new housing estate. a memory flickers: rooftops where once there were only fields. The rain is lashing against the window now; the sky is the shade of a swollen bruise. and someone is playing Chopin.

I turn as a door opens. The young girl is standing there, watching me, pale as a ghost. She pushes back her long, black hair with a thin, white hand. She doesn’t smile and, of course, she can’t recognise me, but as I meet her gaze, I feel the blood rushing to my head. Because her eyes are like lakes of ice and fathoms deep with all hope drowned, and suddenly, I know. it isn’t too late. it never was too late. I know why I had to come back.

‘Grace,’ I say, as I reach out to her at last.
The rain flailed across the windowpane like hawsers. She watched the squally, grey, white-tipped waves as they moved urgently across the bay. She looked down at the serene face lying next to her. he was, of course, beautiful.

‘Good grain,’ her mother had explained. ‘You know what I mean, love, he’s got a lovely grain.’ his skin was unblemished, smooth and peach-like, as soft as the nap on a suede sofa. She had looked at every freckle, examined every tiny hair on his ears and counted a hundred different shades of blue in his perfect, periwinkle eyes. They had created him and now he was asleep, lying next to her in his tiny crib.

It was such a shock when he was born. his beautiful face had been covered with a fine, gossamer-like membrane.

‘whatever is it?’ Lisa had panicked, feeling sick to the stomach; she hadn’t even seen him yet – what on earth was wrong with him?

‘It’s a caul,’ her mother had enlightened her afterwards. ‘They’re very rare. it hasn’t hurt him. it sometimes happens when the amniotic sac attaches itself to the baby’s face. it’s most unusual, but people born with a caul are believed to be very fortunate. it’s thought, round here, that if you dry it out, keep it safe and carry it with you, then you will never die by drowning. Sailors would pay you a lot of money for it!’

Lisa’s thoughts drifted. watching from her window, she thought of all those who risked their lives each day, bravely scouring the seas for their livelihoods. The sea was remorseless and unforgiving. it kept every drowned body for its own pleasure.

Her gaze skimmed across the harbour. Sleek, shiny yachts had moored alongside bigger working tugs and fishing boats. Metal halyards strummed urgently in the rising wind as masts swayed urgently to and fro. once a busy fishing village, it was now a safe harbour that entertained passing yachts. Visiting sailors moored up briefly and then left to explore further down the coast. The small granite-walled cottages, built for fishermen, now only opened up for tourists during the summer, and remained eerily empty at this time of year.

Their cottage was tall and narrow, three storeys high. only the front door was at street level. The lower floors had been carved out of the cliff face centuries ago. once inside a steep, stone, spiral staircase opened in front of you.

Two low-ceilinged rooms, either side, were cosily furnished. Two bedrooms were on the floor below.

She sat in the baby’s room, watching the sea in the harbour. a big picture window gave her ample opportunity to gaze, and a peaceful newborn gave her plenty of time to indulge her thoughts. Every day she lost herself in his beautiful blue eyes. She saw every kind of feeling wavering in their depths like seaweed at the bottom of a clear sea.

She hadn’t had much sleep last night. She tried not to wake Dan too much. he was the main breadwinner now. his work was tough and hazardous – he couldn’t skipper the fishing boat if he was tired. She felt guilty, as she always secretly enjoyed watching bad weather coming in. The contrast between their warm cottage and the approaching dark grey clouds bringing a relentless downpour of rain made her shiver with pleasure.

The ring of the doorbell startled her. Checking the baby hadn’t woken, she hurried up the stone stairs. as she opened the door, the wind caught her breath. The door hammered against its frame.

‘Come in, come in, please.’ She shouldered the heavy door to shut out the storm, as her visitor ducked into the room.

‘Good morning Mrs Penrose.’ The woman smiled efficiently.

‘Good morning. what terrible weather. Can you believe it? i’ve been watching it get worse all morning. it’s playing havoc with my geraniums. There’ll be nothing left if the rain doesn’t let up. Jenny phoned earlier, told me about the ferry, and told me you’d be coming instead. hopefully it can start running again soon … if the storm blows itself out, of course.’

She paused, silently cursing herself. why did she talk so much, so fast? She was gabbling like a mad woman. She was sure the midwife didn’t want to hear about geraniums. Since the birth, Lisa had been alone too much.

‘The birth – was it easy?’ the woman enquired abruptly.

‘Yes, yes.’ She hesitated, puzzled. She had been through all the details with Jenny, her midwife, including telling
her about the caul. The first week at home had been tough – sleepless nights, endless nappy changing – but Jenny’s daily visits had been regular and comforting.

‘Did the baby bring you anything? a gift?’ the woman persisted.

‘I’m not sure I understand …’ Lisa paused, puzzled by the questions. The woman had a local accent, not unlike Jenny’s. Lisa felt a mild panic rising in her chest. She tried to think clearly, get her thoughts in order. how foolish. She should have asked for some iD. The papers were full of warnings about bogus callers, trying to distract you and take your money when you’d left your purse on the kitchen table. Even worse, some tried to snatch children … babies too. The rain hammered on the windowsill. Lisa shivered. Too late, she realised the woman had brought a freezing chill into their cottage.

The woman sensed her discomfort. ‘worry not, Mrs Penrose. i’m here to help you. You can call me Mandy. You’ll be feeling tired, babies always make you tired. it’s normal to feel cold when you’re tired.’ She smiled again. The woman’s green eyes stayed focused on her face, so why did Lisa get the unnerving feeling that her gaze could explore the whole room at the same time?

‘well, look here, I don’t actually know you … do i? how do I know that Jenny sent you? we’re told to be very careful these days …’

Mandy laughed bitterly. ‘how would I know your name, Mrs Penrose? or where to find you? or that you have a beauty boy here, down those stairs? of course your friend Jenny sent me. She can’t help you now. i’m the only one who could get here, you see. all the others are waiting on the other side.’ a forced smile played on her lips.

Lisa wondered why Mandy’s assurances didn’t make her feel any better.

‘Yes, yes, of course I realise that the ferry’s not running. nobody can come across to this side until the weather clears.’ She released a tiny breath, as she felt her chest tighten, while she pondered the stranger’s words. Jenny had explained that Mandy would cover for her today and that she lived on this side of the estuary, along the top road. with a sinking feeling in her stomach, Lisa asked, ‘how did you get here, in all this terrible weather?’

‘Top road, Mrs Penrose. I rushed here at once. only a beauty boy would be worth it, don’t you think?’ She smiled icily again, while her long white fingers explored the handrail that led down to the baby’s bedroom.

‘of course.’ Lisa squirmed awkwardly. She was sure that the stranger had moved noiselessly alongside her, but she couldn’t be sure. She needed to think. She must protect her baby. ‘i’m so sorry, i’m forgetting my manners, would you like a cup of tea or something? Jenny always does,’ she offered helplessly. outwardly trying to appear calm, inside she felt terrified.

The woman’s eyes clouded slightly. ‘Just a glass of water, if you please, just water …’

The kitchen was on the ground floor of the cottage. She motioned to Mandy to go ahead down the stairs, petrified, yet keeping an eye on her. when they reached the closed bedroom door, Mandy paused and breathed in deeply. it was as if she had smelt something – like a brief scent of the sea, in a winter breeze, drifting over a sandy beach. She exhaled slowly, turned to smile coldly at Lisa, and then carried on. She floated effortlessly down the stairs. when they reached the kitchen, Lisa opened a cupboard door, reached in for a glass and walked over to the tap to fill it, making sure that the woman was in view the whole time. her hands shook as she filled the glass.

‘The beauty boy – he’s called Daniel, yes?’

‘Yes … yes … we named him after my husband, Dan.’ in fact she was relieved that she had produced a boy. if the baby had been a girl, Dan had insisted on amanda. her death still weighed heavily on him. he blamed himself, even though it was so long ago, when they were much younger. it wasn’t his fault that the boom rolled across so suddenly that she didn’t see it coming. it was dark.

They were coming into the harbour after a long, tiring day racing far out at sea. he did his best to find her, but the icy water defeated him. nobody in the village had ever blamed him. Much later, she was there to put the pieces of his shattered life back together, to help him finally move on. Lisa loved him dearly. She couldn’t deny him anything, but even Dan knew she wouldn’t agree to that name. it would have been such bad luck but, of course, Dan didn’t see it that way. he laughed at all her superstitions.

The sharp trill of the telephone brought her mind back to the kitchen. a chill made her shiver. She glimpsed the glass of water she had given Mandy – the water heaved, as if rattled by an unseen spoon, tossing an invisible boat on its surface. She couldn’t stop staring at it. She tried to pull her eyes away from it. The telephone persisted. Something was badly wrong. although a storm was brewing outside, Mandy had neither a coat nor an umbrella, nor dripped a single drop of rainwater inside the house. how stupid. why hadn’t she noticed before? where was she now?

A screaming blast of cold air blew through the cottage. She was frozen to the spot. Every sinew of her body
tensed. She felt as though the slightest touch would shatter her into a million icy shards. She heard Jenny’s shaky voice as the answerphone clicked in. ‘Lisa … you must come … you must come. Dan … Dan … needs you. Please Lisa … please … his fishing boat …’ abruptly, the message cut out.

She howled like a wounded she-wolf, but knew no one in the empty cottages nearby could hear her. She heard the front door slam. Mandy had gone. her mind raced back to the baby. Suddenly released from their frozen state, she willed her legs to move and dashed up the stairs to the bedroom. Before she got there, she knew that he had been taken. Blood pulsed in her ears. She sat, her chest heaving with sobs, on the bed.

Then, through the white sheets wound around his little body, she saw him – lying on the floor. She grabbed him to her, held him so tightly she nearly squeezed all the life out of him. Thank the Lord. he had not been taken after all. She cradled her helpless little baby as she looked up through the lashing rain, across the wind-whipped bay, still breathing heavily. Tears slowly rolled down her cheeks. Dan would be home soon. She longed to see his tired face, hear his heavy footsteps on the stairs. She would hang up his wet clothes, hug him to her and never let go.

She looked back to her tiny infant. awake now, his eyes glittered like icy water. She felt herself slowly falling into them, a heaviness pulling her down, down. Slowly, with horror, she realised. The bedside table had been ransacked. The box where her mother had kept Daniel’s caul, the perfect impression of his beautiful face, lay empty on the floor. The bedding and furniture in the room looked as if a storm had blown through it. ‘Oh no.’ Mandy didn’t want to take her beautiful boy but, as amanda, she needed his caul. it was too late to be of use to her, but she wanted it for someone they both loved, to save him from drowning. Lisa looked out of the window. an icy, tingling feeling crept along her spine. ‘Dan, Dan … no!’ she wailed.

The baby’s eyes, no longer periwinkle blue, had turned the same colour as the dark grey, stormy, merciless sea.
These are the words of a dying man, so listen well. I know I do not have much time. In truth I never imagined I’d live this long. I presumed some lag on the make would shank me in the showers, or I’d get a good kicking while the screws’ backs were turned. It happens all the time. The press would turn them into heroes.

The staff are not what you would call attentive, but they appear at regular intervals to flood my veins with morphine. I am not allowed to administer my own analgesic; it is feared I will hasten my own death with an overdose, or attempt to at least, and with good cause. I never thought I’d be prevented from topping myself, but then the authorities have never known what to do with me.

Reading is difficult when the spasms are coming thick and fast. Someone dumped an old jigsaw puzzle on the table beside me as I slept one day; some bridge I don’t recognise, and the box looks like someone sat on it. I bet, just to rile me, they gave me one with some of the pieces missing. The screws love their petty torments. I tip them all out one afternoon and manage to get the perimeter done, plus a bit more, mostly sky and water, before losing interest. What’s the bloody point, I think.

I’ve been locked up for so long I forget I am no longer in my cell but a hospital room. The greater part of my life has been a succession of guarded rooms, this one no different, if slightly airier, with alternating guards out in the corridor who look in once at the start of each shift to check I haven’t been knifed on their watch, but who otherwise have nothing to do with me. Still alive, I say sometimes, just to see if I get a response. I never do. Sometimes I hear them gassing with the better-looking nurses. How much longer’s he got, the hairy one asks. Difficult to say, says the nurse. Could be another month.

Some quack came to see me a few times, irascible man, spindly limbed, expecting me to feel the need to unburden myself. Last time it was a woman who came instead, and things got a bit heated. Don’t you think it’s time you took responsibility for what you did, she said. If not for yourself then for all the families who lost loved ones. I told her to piss off. They nailed me, I wanted to say. What more do you want? in the end the other guard, the tall one, had to come and get her. Remember an old lady with red hair, you bastard? she said as he dragged her out.

I don’t.

Her mother was one of your … victims, I am told later. She should never have been able to get in here. It won’t happen again.

Which one of you is doing the jigsaw, I ask, when pieces start finding their way into the puzzle, but not from my hand. They think me delirious. I tend to agree with them. Most worrying of all is I know the picture that should be forming is one of a sunlit bridge, surrounded by sky and water, but from the bed, all I see is darkness.

A boy keeps getting into my room not long after this. I try bringing it up with the guards, but they just look at me like I’m some kind of loon. I know in an instant when he’s around because the air thickens and coils around him. At first, when a nurse appears without warning, he scuttles under the bed and hides, so I presume he is the child or grandchild of a hospital patient and think no more about it. Soon, as the morphine addles my days, I lose track of whether he is under there or not. I start calling out to him — Coast’s clear! — on tenterhooks that he might be there, disappointed when he is not.

He is no more than a stranger to me, yet gazes searchingly as if I am known to him. Though wary at first, when I come to one day he is standing over me. He is of personable appearance, wearing nondescript clothes, though not, it seems to me, of contemporary fashion, with skin as grey as the iron-clad December sky. He has absolutely no hair, I note, with a quiver of unease, and eyes of such cavernous expectancy that my own wretchedness is reflected in their mournful beauty.

Out of desperation I decide to converse with him. He clearly wants to communicate something, but no sounds ever come out of his mouth.

I don’t know who you are, I tell him eventually, when his unwavering attention becomes a source of discomfort. Yes you do, his eyes seem to say.

To counter the one-sidedness of our exchanges, I start intuiting the boy’s responses. It makes it seem less like I am talking to myself. I used to have a little one like you, I tell him. Back in the day. Before all that other business.
What other business is that?

The more the jigsaw fills, the surer I become that he is no mere hallucination. There is something not quite right about the puzzle; in fact, it is all wrong. Somehow I feel I am under its scrutiny, and don’t like it one bit. Before long I resolve to resist its pull, though it doesn’t rest dormant in the periphery of my vision but throbs, restless, with an unsettling intensity. I will have all your attention, it warns.

He’s an angel come to guide you on your way, says the chaplain, when I tell him about my visitor, but I know better than to be moved by such gibberish. I don’t know him from Adam, I say.

The chaplain’s here for my deathbed conversion to our Saviour Jesus Christ. How many men have caught a glimmer of death further on up the road and done just that?

Have you thought about what we discussed last time, he asks. You must seek God’s forgiveness if you want to go to a better place.

I scoff at the very idea. But you live in a world of superstitions, Father, and you cling so desperately to them because to do otherwise would be to concede that your life’s been an entirely fruitless enterprise. Get hit by a truck and lie bleeding and helpless by the side of the road, see how far your belief in God gets you. Ask your God to patch you up and make you well again. It’s my name you should be reciting on bended knee, Father, begging for forgiveness, these hands that have had the power to save lives – can the same be said of your Phantom?

He absorbs this, as one absorbs body blows, then says very quietly: You had that power as a doctor, yet you chose to end lives, not save them. He sits forward. First you must admit what you’ve done, and ask for forgiveness.

I sigh. You think your God will smile when he sees me on the other side after what I’ve done?

Pain is the great leveller. Sometimes I clench my jaw so ferociously with the pain that my teeth loosen in their gums. Already I am addicted to the itch and shudder of the morphine, though it brings with its relief the strangest pins and needles, like I’m crawling out of my skin. Did anyone in the early part of my life ever inspire such utter devotion? The default image of my wife that most readily springs to mind finds her in a state of distress, crying softly to herself, crouched half on the bed, half on the floor. I am also in the room, but somewhere unseen, stoical, remote. She never recovered from this moment, I tell myself, for the first time in years.

Why is she crying, asks the boy.

You know why, I tell him.

What do I feel for them now, my blood? Remember what it was like to feel something? Is this regret for what I’ve done toiling away in the pit of my stomach? My wife always thought me cold, though she never said as much. Unattached to my emotions. Is this fear proof that she was wrong?

I cannot deny the respite that comes with giving vent to these morsels of my personal history. I feel I can tell you anything, I say one day. He stares back as impassively as ever, deadly serious, never breaking into so much as a smirk, but he is good company none the less.

I swear to you I had the best of intentions at first. All I wanted was to end people’s suffering. People I’d known for years, decent people who in sickness had lost everything. They would look at me so sadly, as if to say, do something. So I did. I told them they wouldn’t feel any more pain, I gave them an injection, and they slipped away.

You did it out of love.

Yes, I say, seizing upon the idea. Exactly.

But? He prompts.

But … it was just so easy, and so thrilling to watch the light fade from their eyes. And I was the cause of it, as if I’d strangled out their breath with my bare hands. In time I couldn’t stop myself doing it, even to the healthy.

When he hasn’t appeared for an inordinate length of time, I turn and see the jigsaw is complete, and feel I can deny no longer the unearthly pull towards the great eye in its midst, twitching with malevolent life.

Come to me, it says.

I don’t know where I find the strength, but before I know it my ankles are creaking under the weight of my diminished frame as I lift myself from the bed. Only when I reach the table I see no eye at all but an image of the boy instead, waving frantically, beckoning me to join him.

My breath swirls ahead in ragged gusts. The wind lifts the fog for a moment to show a line of figures huddled in an alleyway, staring at me in a most unnatural fashion. When I turn back, I find I am enveloped on all sides by the teeming horde, inching forward at no discernible speed, until I am cramped and squeezed by their chilly limbs.

They have been waiting for me, I think, with the first prickings of fear. I reach for the boy but he retreats into the
assembled throng as if this is all but a game.

I showed you mercy, I berate them as they close in upon me, and when they shake their heads in unison there are a great many more of them than I first presumed, hundreds I see now as the fog shifts, lengthening my view.

They hold me taut and prone on the ground, and at first, in their great numbers, I think they will rip me to pieces. Some chanting old crone breaks free of the swarm, kneels on my chest, snaps at my eyes.

I remember now the cause of my wife’s distress, the bundle of rags in her arms, which is all that’s left of our child, our beautiful son, the most serious boy who ever lived, whom I couldn’t save, however much he suffered from the shattering disease that took all his hair, and then his life, and which now has finished mine.

Let’s start with your eyes, says the redhead crone, wrenching a clump of eyelashes out from the root.

My boy, my boy! I cry, with tears in my eyes, as he glides through bodies jostling for a view, twixt coats and skirts and scarves. only when the air alights with the sound of my screams does he turn and smile.
I had not seen Ronald Kirklees for more than twenty years when I encountered him on the London train from Edinburgh. It was a wretched wet night and the first-class carriage was almost empty. My seat was across the aisle from his. I recognised him immediately – despite the startling changes that time had wrought upon him. Always lean, now he was gaunt, even haggard, a wraith of his former self, his eyes underslung with great bruise-coloured pouches. Nevertheless, he was unmistakably the man I had known in college. Evidently, though, I was not as easily recognised – much as I prided myself that I was largely unmarked by the passing of youth.

But while I recognised him he looked up at me in apprehension, almost fear. He seemed to index my every feature before he relaxed and replied to my greeting, fumbling for my name.

And so we sat and started to while away the journey, first with college reminiscences and then my outlining of my career and family. We ordered the first of two bottles of vile red from the restaurant car. I was no longer much of a drinker, but Kirklees went at it with gusto, and as he drank, he told me about his life.

When we left college, I had gone straight into the law: safe, comfortable, ultimately boring. Ronald had taken a teaching position in western China – ‘Chinese Turkestan’ was how he quaintly styled his destination when a crowd of us had gathered in a London pub to send him off all those years ago. He was full of that sort of thing then – ‘the orient’, ‘East of Suez’, ‘taking the road to Mandalay’ – his view of the East equal parts Kipling and Maugham.

But the undergraduate gaiety was gone. He had, I learned, taught English in Xinjiang for three years, then studied in Beijing for two more years, honing his Mandarin, and then to Hong Kong, where he eventually procured a position in a well-known auction house specialising in antiques and art from the mainland.

‘There were difficulties, of course, with Chinese officials – especially when our buyers were Japanese, as so many were then. But there were always ways round the rules. There always are in Asia, or so I thought. And strangely, things got easier after the handover in ’97.’

And so he, with his mix of fluent Chinese and English public-school charm, became something of a success, first for the company and then in his own right. He became an expert in identifying and classifying urns, axeheads, Tang camels and Ming porcelain, and the baroque curios of the Qing court, selling to interested parties both inside and outside the Middle Kingdom. Business was thriving and he had enjoyed all the trappings of expat success: the opulent apartment, a succession of glamorous girlfriends and even a limited degree of local celebrity.

‘But all of that stopped three months ago,’ he said. ‘I’m never going back.’

I refilled our glasses and settled back. Somehow, given his hangdog expression, I expected the story to end in a request for a loan, to fund a business proposition or smooth some intractable problem with the Chinese authorities. That was an unworthy thought: it was not bankruptcy or officialdom that had driven him back west. It was something quite different – and far, far stranger.

His troubles began when a Chinese acquaintance called Jia Lei came into his showroom. Jia was a sometime business partner, and an occasional buyer of small pieces. But this time he had something to sell: a ts’ung. This was an ancient object of dark-green jade, a box carved so that a central cylinder was housed in regular, abstract shapes for its entire length.

‘It was exquisite! I had to have it. Already, I was calculating what one of my clients would pay for it – one Taiwanese buyer in particular, who had a particular interest in anything with imperial connections. This was surely from the grave of some early emperor or king.

‘All my instincts told me that it was genuine – not least because I knew that Jia had contacts in an archaeological project in Henan Province. And the look of the thing – the deep green of the jade – the peculiar geometry of the cuts around the cylindrical chamber – the markings on the lid: its elegance and its sheer alienness. It was an artefact found in the royal graves of two millennia ago, in the Shang and Zhou dynasties. Jia’s dig in Henan was almost certainly a Western Zhou site.

‘I knew not to ask questions. That’s the business, I’m afraid. Of course, for Jia to have got the thing off the mainland, he must have had the proper certification. Of course …

‘Jia wanted a quick sale. He was anxious to get rid of the thing, he said; it made him uneasy. His certificates must not be as well forged as usual, I thought. So I paid him a relatively modest price and phoned my buyer in Taipei. He
was excited – and would be in Hong Kong within the week.

‘That night, I sat in my apartment and toasted my luck, the ts’ung beside me on the table. I wondered at its purpose. The Rites of Zhou, one of the Confucian classics, links these objects to the earth – but their purpose remains obscure.

‘I removed the lid and peered into the smooth chamber. It seemed to me not quite empty, and so I upturned it over my coffee table. A little dry earth fell out onto the glass surface, and I felt a strange thrill to have this ancient dust anointing my gleaming apartment.

‘That was the night it started. Before then, I hardly ever remembered dreams. But this one was so vivid, and every detail of it stayed with me. I was gazing down into the ts’ung again, but this time it was huge, a tunnel leading down into the earth. And as I watched, something came crawling up out of the darkness towards me. It moved slowly, deliberately, with a dreadful scraping sound, and I could hear its breath rattling in the jade passage as it hauled itself up.

‘I awoke then. But the dream came back the next night, and the next. My sleep was ruined – I would wake sweating and be unable to sleep again. And so it went on. I shut the ts’ung away and waited for my buyer. And on the fourth night I drank so heavily that I didn’t dream at all. That was sweet relief.

‘The next night, the last before my buyer arrived, the dream returned. This time, I dreamed a little longer and I saw its face – vile, bloated, slack-mouthed. The face of a dead thing, but with light in its eyes. It reached over the lip of the ts’ung and grasped at me with terrible, tattered hands.

‘I thought I was going mad. You must think I am mad. But somehow, I thought that the nightmares would pass once I got rid of the ts’ung. After all, hadn’t Jia Lei been quick to get rid of it to me? And so I met the buyer and tried to disguise my relief by negotiating hard over the price. The Taiwanese was delighted, and flew back with his treasure, along with Jia Lei’s doubtless spurious certificates. And that, I thought was that.

‘I was wrong. It got worse – far worse. The dream came back most nights – at least when I hadn’t drunk enough to escape dreaming altogether, which I did when I could stomach it. But that was the least of it.

‘The first time was about a week after my buyer left. I was walking off a hangover through a bird market. With the bustle and the colour and the noise of the birds and a cacophony of Cantonese chatter, it was a world away from my nightmares. But then I saw her: an old woman selling caged parakeets. She was bent over her table, counting her takings. And then she looked up – and she had the face of the dead thing.

‘I fled. I tried to call Jia Lei, but his number was no longer working. I thought of calling my Taiwanese buyer – but what would I say?

‘You think I’ve lost it, don’t you? A week later, I saw it again, as I was about to take a taxi. I was half into the cab, when the driver – a man with a shaggy black mane – turned his face to me. And it was that face again.

‘I had to leave Hong Kong. I made arrangements for my showroom and my apartment. I booked a flight to London and a train to Edinburgh and a cottage in Perthshire. Perhaps, I thought, it was Hong Kong, the city, the stress. The Scottish countryside seemed the perfect contrast. And so I left, though not before I had glimpsed that dreadful thing again – under the brim of a policeman’s cap, in a crowded hotel lobby, reflected in a shop window.

‘That first week in the highlands was bliss. I stopped drinking, I went for long walks, I read. I conjectured that the dreams and apparition were brought on by the crowds, the pace of life and the constant threat that my trade might attract unwelcome attention from the authorities. I had burned out, I reasoned, gone a little crazy in the hubbub and heat of the East. I would not be the first.

‘But at the end of the first fortnight, I woke to hear someone at the door of the cottage – not knocking, but scratching, scrabbling – and the rattling sound of breath. I spent the whole night with my head in my hands, not daring to glance at the windows, with that slow, deliberate scraping at the door. That was almost the worst of it – the sense that the dead thing was in no hurry. When it stopped as morning broke, I heard it sigh.

‘That was three days ago. After that night, I returned to Edinburgh. Yesterday, as I walked back to my hotel, a beggar in a cloke asked me for change. I rummaged in my pocket for a coin. When I looked up, I saw that he had that face.

‘I know what you’re thinking. I’ve made arrangements to see someone in London. A shrink, whatever. I don’t care what drugs they give me. I’d take electro-shock treatment – anything to make it stop. I’m sorry – I’m sorry for ranting on like this. But it’s more than I can take.’

We had finished our wine by this point. The suburbs of the great city flitted by in the darkness outside. When we got to Kings Cross, Kirklees all but begged me to dine with him. We went to his small Upper Street flat afterwards,
for coffee and scotch – and for him, I noticed, sleeping pills as well. Eventually, he slipped into an anaesthetised sleep. I wrote him a note with my number and email address and left him – feeling a little guilty as I did.
Gimme Shelter
Pat Black

As the freezing fog came down, Emma headed to the shelter. It was an instinctive move, as there was something chilly about the prospect of being isolated in the dirty white glow.

She shivered as she strode along the train platform, the mist barely showing the lights of the closed-up station house. Somewhere further down the track, a red light was barely visible through the fog.

The shelter was one of the older ones, built to last, but not lasting well. Paint peeled off the brick-work in the rare spots that hadn’t been covered in jagged graffiti, and an ancient stench fouled the air despite the two open doorways. Rickety benches ran along the inside, but Emma didn’t want to sit down on them with just her tights covering her legs. Standing in the doorway, she paced and stamped her feet to generate warmth.

She heard footsteps coming down the platform long before she saw whom they belonged to; a workman in an orange boiler suit materialised from the fog. He seemed to get a fright when he noticed her.

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘Hello.’

‘Hi. Do you know when the trains are coming back on?’

‘Oh, might be a while yet, love. were you on the diverted train?’

Emma nodded. ‘They told me this was the best station to wait for a connection.’

The engineer shook his head. ‘Silly. The points are out on this line, now. You’d have been as well getting it back to Central. You’d have been warm in there. They’d probably put some taxis on.’

‘They said it would be another twenty minutes, tops. That was’ – she glanced at her watch – ‘forty-five minutes ago.’

The engineer looked pained. ‘Look, i’ve got ten minutes spare. I can give you a lift as far as a taxi rank, if you like. I know that sounds a bit odd, but this station’s a funny wee place. You get some rough kids going around here.’

‘No thank you.’

He smiled sadly, then was lost to the fog.

Emma sent some text messages to friends and family, but no one was about for a lift. Jed, who she’d arranged to meet that night, offered to come out and meet her in a taxi, but she said the train would be on its way soon. She was beginning to wonder if she’d been too hasty in dismissing the engineer’s offer when someone coughed behind her in the shelter.

She’d heard no one approach, and was sure that no one had been sitting there when she first took shelter. A young man was on the benches, a military-style khaki backpack in his lap. He wore glasses and had greasy black hair, unfashionably cut, with a dark anorak zipped to the neck. He might have been anywhere between those awkward signposts of seventeen and twenty-one, like Emma.

He coughed nervously. ‘Sorry. Didn’t mean to scare you.’

Emma smiled at him and turned back to the tracks. She could barely see into the petrified winter foliage beyond the tracks. Eyes glittered amid the stones laid beside the tracks now and again, the eerie yellow fox-glow she recognised from where she lived.

In both directions – a faint tinge visible through the fog – the lights were still red.

The boy came out and stood beside her, leaning against the brickwork. ‘Engineering work. always a pain.’

‘Hmm,’ Emma said, taking a sidestep away.

‘I mean it’s probably something to do with the points being frozen or something. It happens, when you get a freezing fog like this.’

‘It is freezing,’ she agreed.

‘I don’t like waiting around at this station. You get a right bad lot around here, sometimes.’

‘That’s what the engineer said.’

‘Yeah. I bet he has to put up with all sorts. Do you know that they throw stuff at emergency workers? Firefighters and paramedics, just doing their job. when there’s been an accident.’
‘That’s terrible.’ She wrapped her arms around herself and stamped her feet.
The boy looked at her long legs, then to her face, then grew embarrassed. ‘Um, it’s a really, really cold night, I suppose.’
She smiled. ‘not really dressed for the season, am i?’ The boy looked away and giggled. he reminded her of her young brother, and that comforted her. he said:
‘Did the engineer guy say how long it’d be?’
‘A while yet.’
‘Hmm. Nightmare.’
Emma sighed, and fiddled with her phone. although she was glad of some company, she didn’t particularly want to get into conversation either. her breath spiralled up into the air in twin streams, mingling with the fog.
The boy hitched the khaki backpack over his shoulder. ‘hey, did you see that?’
‘what?’
He nodded towards the point where the tracks merged with the fog. ‘There’s some kids mucking about on the tracks.’
‘what? I don’t see them … are you sure it’s not foxes? I saw a fox running around a couple of minutes ago.’
‘No, definitely kids. Look. See.’
She squinted, picking out pinpricks of light, and fancied she heard the chittering howl of foxes – the kind of squalling that sounded like a little girl in distress. Then she made out a vaguely human shape moving around.
‘Idiots,’ she said. ‘There might be a goods train coming through here.’
‘I know.’ The boy shook his head. ‘Lots of kids, mucking about on the line here, a fair few of them have been killed, you know. There was one girl the other week. She was about twelve-years-old. She’d been drinking cider with her mates, and wandered on to the line. The train was pulling in to stop, they say. it was slowing down. But it was still quick enough to kill her.’
‘we have to warn them …’
‘I wouldn’t bother. I would leave them to it. There’s a bad lot hangs around here at night. You have a go at them, you end up with a bottle in your face.’ he shrugged. ‘That’s how it goes.’
‘I’ll phone the police.’ She weighed up the phone in her hand.
‘There was one lad, you know … he was waiting for the train. he was right here, at the station, on his own. a bunch of kids came down – well, a gang of lads, to be precise. Drunk, as usual. They caught a hold of him and threw him onto the tracks. Did you hear about it?’
Emma shook her head. There were several children on the line; some of them no older than primary school age. it was very difficult to make them out, but there seemed to be at least one little girl. a shrill laugh reached her through the gauzy mist, and she recoiled.
‘Yeah, they threw him on the tracks. Right there, just in front of us. he was on his way to a camp with an outward bound youth group.’ The boy laughed, as desolate a sound as the one carried to Emma had heard in the fog. ‘and they wouldn’t let him climb back up. and so the train came in, and…’ The boy smacked a fist into his palm.
A girl staggered into view on the line, not more than thirteen-years-old. She had short, spiky hair, almost a boy’s haircut except for a fringe tracing a wave across her forehead. it was too severe for her rounded features. The girl was in some distress, and from her swaying gait on the horizontal tracks it was clear she’d been drinking.
‘I want to go home,’ the girl moaned. Behind her, hidden in the fog, shadowy figures hooted and grunted.
Emma started forward. ‘hey. hey there! You have to get off the tracks. a train might come in.’
The boy stroked his chin. ‘i would just leave her.’
‘You can’t just leave her!’ Emma hissed. ‘She’ll be killed.’
‘I want to go home,’ the girl said. She rubbed her eyes and stopped short.
‘Here,’ Emma said, leaning forward. ‘Climb up onto the platform. Take my hand.’
The girl looked up. Behind her, in the distance, yellow pinpricks reflected the waning light.
‘Come on,’ Emma said. ‘i’ll help you.’
‘I want to go home,’ the girl said.
‘i’m cold.’ ‘i’m not surprised honey, you don’t even have a coat on,’ Emma said. ‘now come on, you have to.’
The faint reddish glow in the mist blinked and turned green. The girl on the tracks nodded, as if fighting sleep, and then sat down heavily.

‘Oh my God.’ Emma looked down the track; no sign of any approaching lights. She half-remembered some pedant telling her that the green light came on when the train was two stops away. That was plenty of time. The cold bit into her hands as she crouched and lowered herself down, the stones clicking beneath her heels. The girl stared up at her.

The boy, standing above, looked up the track and sucked in through his teeth. ‘I wouldn’t have done that. It’s a trick.’

Emma ignored him. The girl’s head had sunk, her wrists propped her wrists on her knees. Emma gripped her by the armpits. ‘Come on,’ she grunted. ‘I’ll help you climb up. There’s a train coming. Do you understand? There’s a train coming. Get up!’

‘Leave her. Seriously,’ the boy said.

‘Shut up and help me! I can’t lift her!’

Although Emma was sure she had the girl by the armpits, she didn’t have any impression of weight; and the figure didn’t budge. The girl looked up at her … and the expression changed from befuddlement to malign amusement. Her eyes flickered yellow, just for an instant.

Then there were other children on the tracks, surrounding her. One round-faced lad with a cherub’s cheeks but a blank expression; a taller boy with a 1980s pudding bowl haircut and a fluffy moustache; two teenage girls with far too much make-up on, cobalt-blue eyeshadow smeared across their features. They reached out for her, and Emma felt clammy hands on her cheek, her neck, her hands.

Beneath her, the rail began to shudder.

‘I tried to warn you,’ the boy said, hissing out breath between his teeth – which failed to steam up in the frigid air. ‘They only want people to bring down to their level. They’re not nice kids. Anyone will do.’

‘Come with us,’ the two girls with the eyeshadow said.

‘You’re so warm,’ the drunken girl whispered.

‘You’re pretty,’ said the boy with the pudding bowl haircut.

Twin beams of light tore through the gloom, like crackles of lightning through cloud. The rumbling beneath her feet increased. And Emma couldn’t move; the frozen hands had a firm grip of her. The pale faces surrounded her, yellow flecks in their eyes. One of them giggled.

‘You’re coming with us,’ someone whispered.

Emma screamed. And then something caught her eye on the platform; a blur of orange, booted feet crunching the salt, lungs labouring with exercise for the first time in years. The engineer leapt onto the platform, almost collapsing with the effort. The lights bore down on him as the train lumbered towards them – not fast, but quick enough to kill them. Electric blue light blazed along overhead. The engineer got to his feet and sprinted towards her, even as the train’s siren hollered and the emergency brakes spat sparks along the rails. And as the engineer lunged for her, hands gripping her coat, the children seemed the dissolve into the mist and the man took hold, yelling, propelling them both into the frozen vegetation by the side of the track as the front carriage lumbered past them.

The pair of them lay there in a rude heap, even as the driver started shouting, their haggard breathing making fluid sculptures in the air.
For an unpopular guy, Lake sure had a lot of friends. Thousands, according to his profile. Intrigued, I sent him a friend request. He declined.

‗Sorry pal,‘ he said, when I saw him in the elevator. ‗But, you know, I got so many friends, I gotta be selective. No offence.‘

‗They say,‘ said Matt, in the bar that evening, ‗the founders only keep him on because they feel sorry for him. A year after start-up, he got offered stock, but took cash instead. Bought a pizza meal for four, ate it alone. Man, that’s got to be the most expensive pizza ever made.‘

‗Do you think he ever sees sunlight?‘ asked Dee. ‗I mean, I’ve never seen him outside the server room. And the smell! Thank God that place has powerful air-con.‘

‗I just don’t get it,‘ I said. ‗According to his profile, he has, like, a bazillion friends. And what, I’m not good enough?‘

‗Count yourself lucky,‘ said Joel, who’d come back with a handful of beers. ‗You don’t want to be that guy’s friend. All his friends are dead.‘

‗What?‘

‗Sure. They’re all dead. Every one of them. Don’t you know what he does?‘

We all looked at Joel blankly. No one at our company knew what anyone else actually did.

‗Lake’s in charge of the dead accounts.‘

Despite the music, a sombre silence fell over us. The dead accounts. They were something we seldom thought about, and never spoke of.

The company had grown exponentially these last few years. From a chat room for high school kids, we’d flourished to become one of the biggest social networks in the world. We had millions of members and, as you’d expect, every now and again, one would die.

That’s where Lake came in, explained Joel. After a user’s death, their profile remained online. After all, we had no way of knowing the difference between a dead user and a merely inactive one. A few years ago, we’d got a subpoena from the mother of a seventeen-year-old who’d died of leukaemia. Alongside the usual tributes and condolences his friends had put up on his profile, some sickos had started posting a load of jokes and offensive comments. We avoided a lawsuit by promising to monitor the profiles more closely.

Lake took to the task with relish. We couldn’t just take down a profile after a complaint from the bereaved family – after all, it might be a hoax. We had to check it out. Lake cross-referred the death report with newspaper obits, police records, funeral notices. This, of course, was all reactive. Lake wanted to take it further. He wrote a set of macros that could spot when one of our users was potentially deceased: sudden cessation of user access, accompanied by a spike of friend activity; occurrence of keywords like ‘RIP’ and ‘goodbye’.

Then some of the families began to request that, instead of taking the profiles down, we left them up – as a sort of tribute to the dead person.

‗In memoriam,‘ said Matt.

Dee shuddered. ‗I think it’s creepy. Being dead, but still having a presence like that.‘

‗So that’s what Lake does,‘ said Joel. ‗He looks after the memorials. He has to remove any inappropriate posts, monitor the accounts. And, of course, even those profiles we take offline, we don’t delete. They get cached. Saved. Stored in silicon.‘

‗Cached in their chips,‘ offered Matt.

‗I don’t think it’s funny,‘ said Dee. ‗All those dead people on our servers. Like we’re sitting on top of a graveyard.‘

‗You still haven’t explained,‘ I said, ‗why he’s got so many friends.‘

‗Ah, yes,‘ said Joel. ‗Lake’s friends. Well, there’s not much to it. Every time we have a confirmed death, Lake simply adds the dearly departed to his friends list. That way, if there’s any activity from the user, he’s the first to
know about it.’

‘Activity?’

‘I don’t want to talk about this anymore,’ said Dee. ‘Can we change the subject?’

‘oh, you’d be surprised,’ continued Joel, ignoring her. ‘hackers. Pranksters. identity thieves. not to mention good, old-fashioned ghouls. People have always wanted to resurrect the dead.’

I had to go back to the office to get my bike. as I swiped in, I noticed a light was on down the stairs that led to the server room. The door opened with a sucking sound and a blast of frigid air. The omnipresent hum of thousands of tiny fans served as a velvety backdrop to utter silence. The several hundred server towers were arranged in rows. I could see a glow of light at the end of one of the aisles, but no sign of Lake. no sign of life at all, unless you include the blinking monoliths looming on all sides.

I picked an aisle and walked down it. it was barely wider than my shoulders. God knows how Lake, with his generous proportions, managed to get around his realm. I called his name, cautiously. no reply.

At the far end of the room, I found Lake’s cubicle. a light was on, but he was not there. The desk was scattered with the usual technical detritus: hard drives, cables, a soldering iron, programming manuals. But these were lost under the pile of used junk-food cartons, crumpled soda cans, candy wrappers and styrofoam coffee cups fuzzed with mould. I guessed the cleaners didn’t come down here too often.

I leant on the partition and Lake’s monitor flickered into life. The mouse must have moved and woken his computer. Curious, I looked at the screen. I saw the faces of kids. So many kids. white kids, black kids, hispanic kids. Goth kids, indie kids, sporty kids, geeky kids. Smiling at the camera, snarling, pouting, flirting, waving, hiding. I found the mouse and scrolled. There were hundreds of them, thousands of them, each thumbnail photograph a tiny assertion of individuality; each, in turn, a tessellation in a mosaic whose pattern was too massive to make out.

‘Those are my friends,’ said Lake.

‘Jesus Christ! You scared me.’

‘You’re at my desk.’

‘Sorry.’ I moved away. ‘is it true? are they all …?’

‘Dead? Yes.’

‘How did they … ?’

‘How does anyone? all different ways. Look at them. Meghan, sixteen, Sacramento. Broke her spine putting up Christmas decorations. The stepladder was only three feet off the ground. Lauretta, twenty, Boise, idaho. Transplant never came through. Ramon, thirteen, Culver City. Left his Medicalert bracelet at home that day. Didn’t want to be teased about it.’

‘How can you bear it?’

Lake raised his bleak, bloodshot eyes to mine. ‘These are their testaments,’ he said, in a lower voice. ‘i am their witness.’

He sat in his chair and his hand fell automatically onto the mouse. he rapidly scrolled and a blur of faces rolled by, until he landed on a picture of a blond, confident boy with an athlete’s smile. ‘Joshua Fallows, Eau Claire, wisconsin.’ he clicked the picture and Joshua’s profile came up. ‘Football team, debate team, choir. Been awarded a place at Rutgers in the fall. Then, this.’

Lake highlighted some text. it read: ‘in da Veitchmobile w Emz n Madz. Gonna PaRTY 2nite!!!’

He clicked back to the friends list and highlighted the next profiles.

Emily Beaumont, Eau Claire, wisconsin.

Madison Moritz, Eau Claire, wisconsin.

Andrew Veitch, Eau Claire, wisconsin.

‘Look, man,’ I said – the others would kill me for this – ‘a bunch of us go down the Palms most evenings after work. why don’t you come along some time? Get a change of scene?’

As though not hearing me, he said: ‘Let me show you one more.’

Caitlin Sanders, thirteen. ‘oMG so I met my moms new bf 2nite. hes a hunk!’

‘I don’t want to see this,’ I said.

‘It’s all here,’ he replied, dully. ‘The mother’s boyfriend didn’t stick around long. But he made contact with
Caitlin again, through our site. wanted to stay friends. Suggested they meet. Don’t tell your mom, though. our little secret.’

I felt my pity turn to anger and disgust. ‘what are you, sick? Do you get off on this stuff?’

‘These kids,’ he hissed, ‘they open up their lives on our site. i’m bored, i’m happy, i’m sad. I hate school, i hate my folks, i hate my life. hey! Look at me! Everyone! Someone! See my pictures! See my status! Be my friend! Desperate, desperate – for someone to notice. Just to validate their existence. and then, suddenly …’

His fingers mimed a bubble popping in the air.

‘They’re gone,’ I said.

‘Oh, they’re not gone,’ he giggled. ‘You can’t take all those experiences, emotions, plug them into a worldwide network with a hundred trillion more receptors than a human brain, and just expect them to disappear. You think after all that input, when the status updates suddenly stop, they’re not going to ask: where am i? what’s happening?’

I looked at his flabby white face, aghast. ‘You’ve been down here too long,’ I said.

‘Look,’ he said. he clicked on Latest. ‘Can’t sleep – just updated a moment ago.’

He clicked on a profile. Brown mop of hair, pale face. Brian McKay, eleven. Sweetwaters, illinois.

In a new tab, he called up the Sweetwaters Sun-Shopper, three days old. Boy dies in fire. Same photo.

I shrugged. ‘Could be his mother. Grief makes people do weird things.’

‘No,’ replied Lake. ‘The account is frozen. Can’t be a hacker, either.’

‘A glitch, then. Computers aren’t infallible. an iP error. Maybe he wrote it weeks ago, it’s been floating around in cyberspace all this time.’

‘Floating around in cyberspace? Uh-huh. what if we reply?’

I felt reluctant, uneasy. what could possibly be wrong with replying? Yet it felt like hollering into the mouth of a crypt. Lake rattled his fat fingers across the keyboard. ‘what’s up?’ he typed. I stared at the screen until the pixels blurred. But nothing came back. Lake put a small USB drive into his PC and started dragging and dropping files across the screen.

‘This week’s latest additions,’ he said. ‘i’m gonna take them to join the multitudes.’

As he finished and reached to take out the drive again, I glanced back at the screen, at the unclosed tab, with the words ‘Just can’t sleep’.

I looked again. This was a reply. Someone had replied to our message.

Can’t sleep.

What’s up?

Just can’t sleep.

Lake had got up and was already disappearing into the maze of servers. I wanted to call out, but my dry throat barely managed a croak. I dashed after him.

He moved swiftly to the very farthest corner of the mausoleum. There, one tower stood alone. ‘This is where my friends live,’ he said. ‘not just their profiles from our site. I download their whole online existence. Blogs, music, videos, browsing history. Their entire personality.’

‘That’s illegal!’

‘one day,’ he spat, ‘it’ll be illegal not to do what i’m doing. once, people thought they could delete the deformed, the retarded, the so-called lower races. You think we should delete these kids, too, just because their bodies are dead?’

‘You’re insane,’ I said, turning away.

He grabbed my arm. ‘Just touch it.’

He pushed my hand against the server wall. I flinched. it was hot.

‘So what? These servers are working 24–7. They’re all hot. That’s why the air conditioning’s so high.’

‘Those servers are processing,’ said Lake, his eyes flashing, ‘because they’re networked. This one isn’t. it’s stand-alone. Completely offline.’

I looked around. The only cable was the power input. ‘So where’s the activity coming from?’ I gasped.

He knelt before the tower and tenderly plugged in the USB drive. we watched the LED on the drive flicker as the
data was transferred, then it died. But it wasn’t over. we both looked up. Timorously at first, then with growing confidence, the LEDs on the server started to pulse and dance like a myriad of stars cascading into black: swirling, constellating, coruscating with joy.

‘They’re meeting their new friends,’ he said.
It was a little before nine o’clock, the sun was setting into a bank of smoky violet cloud and I had lost my way. I reversed the car in a gateway and drove back half a mile to the fingerpost.

I had spent the past twenty-four hours with a client near the coast and was returning to London, but it had clearly been foolish to leave the main route and head across country.

The road had cut through the Downs, pale mounds on either side, and then run into a straight, tree-lined stretch to the crossroads. The fingerpost markings were faded and there were no recent signs. So that when the right turning came I almost shot past it, for there was no sign at all here, just a lane and high banks in which the roots of trees were set deep as ancient teeth. But I thought that this would eventually lead me back to the a road.

The lane narrowed. The sun was behind me, flaring into the rear-view mirror. Then came a sharp bend, the lane turned into a single track and the view ahead was dark beneath overhanging branches.

I slowed. This could not possibly be a way.

Was there a house? Could I find someone to put me on the right road?

I got out. opposite me was an old sign, almost greened over. THE WHITE HOUSE. Below, someone had tacked up a piece of board. it hung loose but I could just make out the words GARDEN CLOSED in roughly painted lettering.

Well, a house was a house. There would be people. I drove slowly on down the track. The banks were even steeper, the tree trunks vast and elephantine.

Then, at the end of the lane I came out of the trees and into a wide clearing and saw that it was still light after all, the sky a pale enamelled silver-blue. There was no through road. ahead were a wooden gate and a high hedge wound about with briars and brambles.

All I could hear were birds settling down, a thrush singing high up on the branches of a walnut tree and blackbirds pinking as they scurried in the under-growth. I got out of the car and, as I stood there, the birdsong gradually subsided and then there was an extraordinary hush, a strange quietness into which I felt I had broken as some unwelcome intruder.

I ought to have turned back then. I ought to have retraced my way to the fingerpost and tried again to find the main road. But I did not. I was drawn on, through the gate between the overgrown bushes.

I walked cautiously and for some reason tried not to make a noise as I pushed aside low branches and strands of bramble. The gate was stuck halfway, dropped on its hinges, so that I could not push it open further and had to ease myself through the gap.

More undergrowth, rhododendron bushes, briar hedge growing through beech. The path was mossed over and grassy but I felt stones here and there beneath my feet.

After a hundred yards or so I came to a dilapidated hut which looked like the remains of an old ticket booth. The shutter was down. The roof had rotted. a rabbit, its scut bright white in the dimness of the bushes, scrabbled out of sight.

I went on. The path broadened out and swung to the right. and there was the house.

It was a solid Edwardian house, long and with a wide verandah. a flight of shallow steps led up to the front door. I was standing on what must once have been a large and well-kept forecourt – there were still some patches of gravel between the weeds and grass. To the right of the house was an archway, half obscured by rose briars, in which was set a wrought-iron gate. I glanced round. The car ticked slightly as the engine cooled.

I should have gone back then. I needed to be in London and I had already lost my way. Clearly the house was deserted and possibly derelict. I would not find anyone here to give me directions.

I went up to the gate in the arch and peered through. I could see nothing but a jungle of more shrubs and bushes,
overarching trees, and the line of another path disappearing away into the darkening greenery.

I touched the cold iron latch. it lifted. I pushed. The gate was stuck fast. I put my shoulder to it and it gave a little and rust flaked away at the hinges. I pushed harder and slowly the gate moved, scraping on the ground, opening, opening. I stepped through it and I was inside. inside a large, overgrown, empty, abandoned garden. To one side, steps led to a terrace and the house.

It was a place which had been left to the air and the weather, the wind, the sun, the rabbits and the birds, left to fall gently, sadly into decay, for stones to crack and paths to be obscured and then to disappear, for windowpanes to let in the rain and birds to nest in the roof. Gradually, it would sink in on itself and then into the earth. how old was this house? a hundred years? in another hundred there would be nothing left of it.

I turned. I could barely see ahead now. whatever the garden, now ‘closed’, had been, nature had taken it back, covered it with blankets of ivy and trailing strands of creeper, thickened it over with weed, sucked the light and the air out of it so that only the toughest plants could grow and in growing invade and occupy.

I should go back.

But I wanted to know more. I wanted to see more. I wanted for some reason I did not understand to come here in the full light of day, to see everything, uncover what was concealed, reveal what had been hidden. Find out why.

I might not have returned. Most probably, by the time I had made my way back to the main road, as of course I would, and reached London and my comfortable flat, the white house and what I had found there in the dusk of that late evening would have receded to the back of my mind and before long been quite forgotten. Even if I had come this way I might well never have found it again.

And then, as I stood in the gathering stillness and soft spring dusk, something happened. I do not much care whether or not I am believed. That does not matter. I know. That is all. I know, as surely as I know that yesterday morning it rained onto the windowsill of my bedroom after I had left a window slightly open. I know as well as I know that I had a root canal filling in a tooth last Thursday and felt great pain from it when I woke in the night. I know that it happened as well as I know that I had black coffee at breakfast.

I know because if I close my eyes now I feel it happening again, the memory of it is vivid and it is a physical memory. My body feels it, this is not only something in my mind.

I stood in the dim, green-lit clearing and above my head a silver paring of moon cradled the evening star. The birds had fallen silent. There was not the slightest stirring of the air.

And as I stood I felt a small hand creep into my right one, as if a child had come up beside me in the dimness and taken hold of it. it felt cool and its fingers curled themselves trustingly into my palm and rested there, and the small thumb and forefinger tucked my own thumb between them. as a reflex, I bent it over and we stood for a time which was out of time, my own man’s hand and the very small hand held as closely together as the hand of a father and his child. But I am not a father and the small child was invisible.

Two

It was after midnight when I got back to London and I was tired, but because what had happened to me was still so clear I did not go to bed until I had got out a couple of maps and tried to trace the road I had taken in error and the lane leading to the deserted house and garden. But nothing was obvious and my maps were not detailed enough. I needed several large-scale ordnance Survey ones to have any hope of pinpointing an individual house.

I woke just before dawn and as I surfaced from a dreamless sleep I remembered the sensation of the small hand taking hold of my own. But it was a memory. The hand was not there as it had been there, I was now quite sure, in the dusk of that strange garden. There was all the difference in the world, as there was each time I dreamed of it, which I did often during the course of the next few weeks.

I am a dealer in antiquarian books and manuscripts. in the main I look for individual volumes on behalf of clients, at auction and in private sales as well as from other bookmen, though from time to time I also buy speculatively, usually with someone in mind. I do not have shop premises, I work from home. I rarely keep items for very long and I do not have a large store of books for sale at any one time because I deal at the upper end of the market, in volumes worth many thousands of pounds. I do collect books, much more modestly and in a disorganised sort of way, for my own interest and pleasure. My Chelsea flat is filled with them. My resolution every new Year is to halve the number of books I have and every year I fail to keep it. For every dozen I sell or give away, I buy twenty more.

The week after finding the white house saw me in new York and Los angeles. I then went on trips to Berlin,
Toronto and back to New York. I had several important commissions and I was completely absorbed in my undertakings. Yet always, even in the midst of a crowded auction room, or when with a client, on a plane or in a foreign hotel, always and however full my mind was of the job I was engaged upon, I seemed to have some small part of myself in which the memory of the small hand was fresh and immediate. It was almost like a room into which I could go for a moment or two during the day. I was not in the least alarmed or troubled by this. On the contrary, I found it oddly comforting.

I knew that when my present period of travel and activity was over I would return to it and try both to understand what had happened to me and if possible to return to that place to explore and to discover more about it—who had lived there, why it was empty, and whether, if I returned and stood there quietly, the small hand would seek mine again.

I had one disconcerting moment in an airport while buying a newspaper. It was extremely busy and as I queued, first of all someone pushed past me in a rush and almost sent me flying and then, as I was still recovering myself, I felt a child’s hand take my own. But when I glanced down I saw that it was the real hand belonging to a real small boy who had clutched me in panic, having also been almost felled by the same precipitate traveller. Within a few seconds he had pulled away from me and was reunited with his mother. The feeling of his hand had been in a way just the same as that of the other child, but it had also been quite different—hot rather than cool, sticky rather than silky. I could not remember when a real child had last taken my hand but it must have been years before. Yet I could distinguish quite clearly between them.

It was mid-June before I had a break from travelling. I had had a profitable few weeks and among other things I had secured two rare Kelmscott Press books for my client in Sussex, together with immaculate signed first editions of all Virginia Woolf’s novels, near-mint in their dust wrappers. I was excited to have them and anxious to get them out of my hands and into his. I am well insured, but no amount of money can compensate for the loss or damage of items like these.

So I arranged to drive down with them.

At the back of my mind was the idea that I would leave time to go in search of the White House again.

Three

... was there ever a June as glorious as that one? I had missed too much of the late spring but now we were in the heady days of balmy air and the first flush of roses. They were haymaking as I drove down and when I arrived at my client’s house, the garden was lush and tumbling, the beds high and thick with flowers in full bloom, all was bees and honeysuckle and the smell of freshly mown grass.

I had been invited to stay the night and we dined on a terrace from which there was a distant view of the sea. Sir Edgar Merriman was elderly, modest of manner and incalculably rich. His tastes were for books and early scientific instruments and he also had a collection of rare musical boxes which, when wound and set going, charmed the evening air with their sound.

We lingered outside and Sir Edgar’s blue-grey coils of cigar smoke wreathed upwards, keeping the insects at bay, the pungent smell mingling with that of the lilies and stocks in the nearby beds. His wife, Alice, sat with us, a small, grey-haired woman with a sweet voice and a shyness which I found most appealing.

At one point the servant came to call Sir Edgar to the telephone and as she and I sat companionably in the soft darkness, the moths pattering around the lamp, I thought to ask her about the white house. Did she know of it? Could she direct me to it again?

She shook her head. ‘I haven’t heard of such a place. How far were you from here?’

‘It’s hard to tell … I was hopelessly lost. I suppose I’d driven for forty-five minutes or so? Perhaps a bit longer. I took a byroad which I thought I knew but did not.’

‘There are so many unsigned roads in the country. We all know our way about so well, but they are a pitfall for the unwary. I don’t think I can help you. Why do you want to go back there, Mr Snow?’

I had known them both for some four or five years and stayed here overnight once or twice before, but to me they were always Sir Edgar and Lady Merriman and I was always Mr Snow, never Adam. I rather liked that.

I hesitated. What could I have said? That a deserted and half-derelict house and overgrown garden had some attraction for me, had almost put me under a spell so that I wanted to explore them further? That I was drawn back because ... how could I have told her about the small hand?
‘Oh – you know how some old places have a strange attractiveness. and I might want to retire to the country some
day.’

She said nothing and, after a moment, her husband returned and the conversation turned back to books and to
what he had a mind to buy next. he had wide-ranging tastes and came up with some unusual suggestions. I was
always challenged by him, always kept on my toes. he was an exciting client because I could never second-guess
him.

‘Do you know,’ he asked now, passing me the decanter, ‘if another First Folio of Shakespeare is ever likely to
come up for sale?’

I almost knocked over my glass.

IT WAS HALF an hour later but the air was still warm as we gathered ourselves to go inside. I was fired with
enthusiasm at the same time as I was coolly certain that no First Folio was likely to come my way for Sir Edgar. But
even the speculative talk about it had made me think of his wealth in quite new terms.

As I was bidding him goodnight, Lady Merriman said suddenly, ‘I think I have it, Mr Snow. I think I have the
answer. Do just give me a moment if you would.’ She went out of the room and I heard her footsteps going up the
stairs and away into the depths of the house.

I sat in a low chair beside the open French windows. The lamp was out and a faint whiff of oil came from it. The
sky was thick with stars.

And I asked in a low voice, ‘Who are you?’ For I had a strange sense of someone being there with me. But of
course there was no one. I was alone and it was peaceful and calm.

Eventually, she returned carrying something.

‘I am so sorry, Mr Snow. what we are looking for has always just been moved somewhere else. But this may
possibly help you. it came to me as we were sitting there after dinner – the house. The name you gave, the white
house, did not register with me because it was always known as Denny’s house, to everyone locally – it is about
twenty miles from here, but in the country that is local, you know.’

She sat down.

‘You really shouldn’t have gone to any trouble. it was a passing whim. I don’t quite know now why it affected
me.’

‘There is an article about it in this magazine. it’s rather old. we do keep far too much and I have quite a run of
these. The house became known as Denny’s house because it belonged to Denny Parsons. Have you heard the
name?’

I shook my head.

‘How quickly things fall away,’ she said. ‘You’ll find everything about Denny Parsons and the garden in here.’
She handed me a Country Life of some forty years ago. ‘Something happened there but it was all hushed up. I don’t
know any more, I’m afraid. now, do stay down for as long as you like, Mr Snow, but if you will excuse me, I am
away to my bed.’

I went out on to the terrace for a last few moments. Everything had settled for the night, the stars were brilliant,
and I thought I could just hear the faint hush of the sea as it folded itself over on the shingle.

IN MY ROOM I sat beside my open window with the sweet smell of the garden drifting in and read what Lady
Merriman had found for me.

The article was about a remarkable and ‘important’ garden created at the white house by Mrs Denisa – apparently
always known as Denny – Parsons and contained photographs of its creator strolling across lawns and pointing out
this or that shrub, looking up into trees. There was also one of those dewy black-and-white portrait photographs
popular in such magazines then, of Mrs Parsons in twinset and pearls, and holding a few delphiniums, rather
awkwardly, as if uncertain whether or not to put them down. The soft focus made her look powdery and slightly
vacant, but I could see through it to a handsome woman with strong features.

The story seemed straightforward. She had been widowed suddenly when her two children were nine and eleven
years old and had decided to move from the Surrey suburbs into the country. when she had found the white house it
had been empty and with an overgrown wilderness round it, out of which she had gradually made what was said in
the reverential article to be ‘one of the great gardens of our time’.

Then came extensive descriptions of borders and walks and avenues, theatre gardens and knot gardens, of fountains and waterfalls and woodland gardens set beside cascading streams, with lists of flowers and shrubs, planting plans and diagrams and three pages of photographs. It certainly looked very splendid, but I am no gardener and was no judge of the relative ‘importance’ of Mrs Parsons’s garden.

The place had become well known. People visited not only from miles away but from other countries. At the time the article was written it was ‘open daily from Wednesday to Sunday for an entrance fee of one shilling and sixpence’.

The prose gushed on and I skimmed some of the more horticultural paragraphs. But I wanted to know more. I wanted to know what had happened next. Mrs Parsons had found a semi-derelict house in the middle of a jungle. The house in the photographs was handsome and in good order, with well-raked gravel and mown grass, fresh paint, open windows, at one of which a pale upstairs curtain blew out prettily on the breeze.

But the wheel had come full circle. When I had found the house and garden they were once again abandoned and decaying. That had happened to many a country house in the years immediately after the war but it was uncommon now.

I was not interested in the delights of herbaceous border and pleached lime. The house was handsome in the photographs, but I had seen it empty and half given over to wind and rain and the birds and was drawn by it as I would never have been by somewhere sunny and well presented.

I set the magazine down on the table. Things change after all, I thought, time does its work, houses are abandoned and sometimes nature reclaims what we have tried to make our own. The white house and garden had had their resurrection and a brief hour in the sun but their bright day was done now.

Yet as I switched out the lamp and lay listening to the soft soughing of the sea, I knew that I would have to go back. I had to find out more. I was not much interested in the garden and house. I wanted to know about the woman who had found it and rescued it yet apparently let it all slip through her fingers again. But most of all, of course, I wanted to go back because of the small hand.

Had Denny Parsons stood there in the gathering dusk, looking at the empty house, surrounded by that green wilderness, and as she made her plans for it felt the invisible small hand creep into her own?
Ghost
STORIES
Table of Contents

Cover Page
Title Page
Contents
Grace
Daniel’s Caul
A Hollow Cause
The Rites of Zhou
Gimme Shelter
Friends
The Small Hand