

## Fragments of Other People's Lives

Kate was six when she first saw the Hanged Man in the living room, dangling in the living room. She wondered, as she sat in the passenger seat of her brother's car, if he would still be there when they arrived. She'd stopped being scared of the way he twitched. And once he knew she could see him, he would wave her off every morning before school. They had never actually talked though, the noose made conversation pretty one-sided.

'Are you even listening to me anymore?' Ben asked, turning his head enough to hit her with a reproachful look. 'I should have realised. You haven't been that quiet since Mum brought you back from the hospital.'

'I'm sorry,' Kate raised her hands in a placating gesture. 'I was somewhere else. What were you saying?'

'I said a lot. But importantly, I think this is a stupid idea.'

'Of course you do. Because you don't see them.'

'Because I'm sane, that's why. You know, everyone in town used to laugh at us for what Mum used to "see". All that stuff about people who weren't really there... She was sick.'

'Grandma used to see them too.' Kate folded her arms.

Ben sighed. 'Grandma lives... *lived* alone, and smoked more pot than a hundred-and-nine year old should even see. She's not a *reliable witness*.'

Kate said nothing. She couldn't argue. Millie Baker *had* been high as a kite for the majority of her final years. But she was the reason they were barrelling down the M11 at 10pm on a Wednesday night.

'All I'm saying is,' Ben produced a sympathetic smile. 'Maybe it's time we acknowledge that the women in this family aren't... healthy?'

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'You think I'm crazy!' Janet said, rocking the crib. 'Ed thinks it's post-partum depression. Said I need *perspective*.' The last word dripped with venom. Her blue eyes were deep-set and bloodshot, her skin nearly translucent. She flinched as Millie placed a hand on her shoulder, and held her close.

'I believe you,' Millie pleaded, stroking her daughters hair. 'Earlier, I could hear it in your voice. I've never heard you sound like that. Not even when you told me about Jo.'

Janet pulled away, sliding a gentle hand down into the crib, smoothing the wisps of hair that sprouted from her baby's head. Kate's forceful, rhythmic breathing would one day develop into an unfortunate snore. But Janet didn't care. She'd never care. 'I'll keep you safe,' she whispered.

Millie moved awkwardly across the room, and lowered herself into the rocking chair in the corner. 'I don't see anything. But this *gift* isn't an exact science, I only know what's been passed down to me. Tell me again.'

Janet drew a long breath. 'I feel something watching. Something dark at the edge of my vision, and no matter how quickly I turn I can never see it. Before I called you, it... touched me. I've never felt one before. Pure awful *emptiness*.'

'We aren't supposed to feel them *physically*. They're parts of other people's lives, not our own. Do you feel it now?'

Janet shook her head. 'No. Only when I'm alone.'

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In the low gloom of the street lamps, the two story house looked better than she remembered it. The low light helped to hide some of time's damage; the roof of the porch was beginning to bow precariously and the living room window was milky

white where condensation and damaged seals had combined to wreak havoc between the double-glazing. It had been some time since it had seen proper care.

Ben cut the engine with a flick of his wrist, and turned to say something to Kate, but she was already walking up the drive. The midnight air set the hairs on her arms upright, and an unnatural queasiness coiled in the pit of her stomach. Ben tugged the zipper of his parker up to his chin and followed close behind. He'd given up trying to change her mind fifteen miles ago.

'You reckon he's still awake?' He asked.

Kate gestured towards a faint, flickering light in the upstairs window. 'Probably watching TV in bed. Don't worry, I'll protect you.' With a wry smile she thumped a gloved hand against the door three times.

There was a long moment of nothing. Only after a second round of knocking, did the upstairs flickering settle to a steady illumination. Foot steps thundered down the stairs, accompanied by a stream of muffled obscenities.

Eddie Keynes, opened the door with a great deal of effort. A skinny, man in his middle years, Eddie's skin was like a paper bag. His lips were stained by overshooting his lifetime allowance of cigarettes by a couple of thousand cartons. He pulled his dressing gown tight against the evening chill.

'What the hell do you two want?' His voice sounded like someone breaking gravel with a cheese grater.

'Nice to see you too, Dad,' Ben grumbled.

'We're here to see, Mum,' Kate pushed past him, heading deeper into the house.

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'So you saw the old man too?' Janet asked, wiping the tears from her daughter's cheeks. Kate nodded, her round face pink with the effort of screaming for thirty-minutes, uninterrupted. Janet smoothed the child's hair, and rearranged her dishevelled brown bangs. 'The one with the... face?' She traced a line diagonally across her own with a finger, illustrating the scars. Kate nodded again, a large glob of crusty snot peaking out from her nostril.

'Who was he, Mummy? Why did he look so ugly?'

'I don't know, Honey. He's not a ghost I've seen before.'

'A ghost?' Kates whined, taking a deep breath. Ready for another terrified scream.

Janet held her daughters tiny face in her hands. 'You don't need to cry. Ghost's can't hurt you. They can't even touch you. That man was dead. It looked like he'd been killed in an accident, a long time ago.'

'If they aren't scary, what do they do?' Kate's voice affected a tone of sad curiosity, but her face still threatened to resume it's tearful tirade at a moment's notice.

'They don't do much of anything, really. They normally just do the same thing, over and over again. Like they're living out a memory. Sometimes that's something they regret, sometimes it's their last moments, and sometimes it's something happy. Ghost's are just memories, stuck on repeat. They're unable to move on. And they're no more dangerous than our own memories.'

'So it's OK to see them?'

'Of course it is. Not many people can, but the women in our family have been able to see them for generations. It means you're special.'

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Kate clawed at the moss entrenched on the old stone. She dug her fingernails into the green flesh and pulled away dirty chunks, trying not to think of the extortionate cost

of her recent manicure. Ben and her Father stood watching her a few paces back, having one of their signature passive-aggressive catch ups. She was barely listening to them. Since arriving at the old house, she'd become uncomfortably aware of another set of eyes on her. A fourth heartbeat. Something very painful. She wished for all the world that she could tune it out, but of course she couldn't, it was the reason she was there.

She stood, wiping her hands on her jeans and admiring the shoddy job she'd done cleaning her Mother's head stone. 'You said you'd take better care of it,' she gave her father a scolding look.

'It's hard to get out here so much since the operation,' Ed slapped his hip, producing an unnatural thud. 'And it isn't like either of *you* are going to give me a hand, is it?'

Ignoring the bait, Ben asked: 'Why did Mum even want her headstone here? My ex's back garden isn't exactly where I'd want to be laid to rest.'

'How should I know?' Ed grumbled. 'I hadn't heard from your mother in five years. Then some lawyer turns up at my door claiming to be the executor of her estate, or something. I tried to stop it, honestly, but she still owned part of the house. And it was the only condition for me inheriting her half.'

'A beacon of compassion,' Ben muttered.

Ed opened his mouth to round on Ben, but before could speak, Kate cut in: 'She came back because she had to stop running,' she turned to look at the two men; one had been an ever-present force of support in her life, the other a mythic figure of wasted potential. She loved them both. 'She wanted to be buried here because of Jo, right Dad?' The name hung in the air between them. As soon as she said it, she felt the gaze from the upstairs window burn with renewed intensity; the lizard part of her brain screamed at her legs to run.

Her father flinched, eyes wide. For a moment, he looked like the old man he truly was, lonely and afraid. 'How do you know about that?'

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Kate sat on the edge of the bed, listening to the electric hum of the heart beat monitor. The speckled hand of the dying woman squeezing hers tightly. Millie lay back, staring at the ceiling with glassy eyes. She'd been lost to the visions for a long time now; the doctors thought it was epilepsy, but Kate knew she was seeing things beyond scientific definition. The women in her family didn't see things that weren't there. They saw memories. Fragments of other peoples lives. And Millie was lost to them now.

Suddenly, dormant eyes flew open and for the first time in a long time, Kate's grandmother saw her. 'The sister,' the old woman's words were barely more than panicked breaths. 'The baby died so soon. Sometimes it feels like no one remembers her. Even Janey pushed it down, refused to grieve such a loss. Afraid to feel. How can I blame her? She spent her whole life running. But no one can out-run something like that. She'd always change the subject, so I stopped asking... I saw nothing... because there was nothing to see. She was too young to remember. But she didn't forget. Oh god, if only I'd understood then. Forgive me... Jo...'

All of Kate's questions fell upon dead ears.

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Ben waited on the stairs for a long time. After their father had finished, he'd cried more than the man had cried in a lifetime. Then Kate had gone into the upstairs bedroom, alone. Father and son shared a sombre drink, before Ben had helped his Ed to bed, promising that he'd remember to lock the door when they left.

How had he forgotten a sister? He supposed he'd been too young to

remember. But even now he recalled the name. From time to time he'd hear whispers through the bedroom door. He tried to ignore them.

He'd spent most of his life trying to rationalise the strange events that encircled the women in his family. It had to be some kind of hereditary psychosis, he had thought. But that didn't explain how Kate was in there talking to their forgotten sibling. Or that time when he was ten, when she'd woken him up complaining of the burning man in her room. It wasn't until the next morning that he heard about the church that burnt down two miles down the road, killing a vicar. The truth was, it was easier to believe it was an illness, shrouded in coincidence, than that his sister lived amongst painful memories.

Ben waited on the stairs for a very long time. Until his little sister came out and hugged him tightly. He stroked the back of her head, just like their Mum used to. 'It's not OK,' Kate said, rubbing sleep from her eyes. 'But it will be.'