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Those Experiences

Clemency

My own experiences have not been particularly haunting, but I am perhaps more open to the supernatural than most people. Supernatural, to me, does not always mean ghoulies and ghosties, but things that cannot be easily explained. And sometimes, things are better left unexplained.

I am a teacher, and I sailed through most of my teacher training. I was (generally) quite patient, and I'd learnt from a very young age that being humble was the best way to get places. So I breezed through three school placements, and all of my college work.

When I came to my fourth, and final, placement, I came across a situation I just wasn't used to - the headteacher disliked me. In fact, and I have no idea why, she made it her mission to make my life a living hell. I mean, you get them, don't you? I'm sure we've all come across people who, in my tutor's words, are "incompatible". And, well, if that person wants to use their power to stop you from achieving your dream job...well, then, you've got a long and bumpy road ahead. And this is the situation I found myself in during May 2017.

My tutor wanted to meet up with me. The headteacher had contacted her to complain about me, so it was her job to talk to me about it. I didn't envy her one bit, but my nerves were in shreds. I was a hair width away from chucking the whole teaching-towel in. What's more, my tutor wanted to meet up in the local hotel...not in a private room, but in the lounge.

In a place like Wick, you know a lot of people and I was stressed about others overhearing what I knew would be a very difficult conversation.

I felt exhausted, sick with stress, hungry but unable to eat, and I couldn't get through an hour without shedding a tear. It was a terrible time. Dreadful.

My tutor was late, so I sat in the lounge and waited. As it happened, there was only me and one other lady (who was playing the piano) in the room. I got up to go to the bathroom to try and compose myself, and wipe off the tear stains, and then went back to the lounge to wait.

The other lady in the room continued playing the piano. She began to play "You Raise Me Up" - the Aled Jones arrangement. I don't know if you know it, but it's one I've been very familiar with ever since I was little. She played it over and over again and, although there were no words, I could hear them in my head. They danced around my befuddled mind, led by the uplifting tune, and began to waft away the worries and pain.

I felt as though I really was being raised up. As though someone was holding my hands and pulling me to my feet, to escape all the dark thoughts that I had had.

The lady continued playing that tune until I felt infinitely comforted in the knowledge that actually, yes, I will be raised up...whatever happens. It no longer mattered that the headteacher hated me enough to cause me misery. It no longer mattered that I was having to endure this meeting in a public place. I knew that I wasn't alone.

I didn't recognise the lady, and I wouldn't know her again if I saw her, but she shaped my life after that. I got through that time, with her help and my family's, and I got that job I was aiming for. But sometimes I wonder...

I wonder what made her play that particular tune, at the particular moment, in that particular place. Does she know that she changed my life, as she was going about her own daily existence? Or was there something at work there which I can't quite understand?

Was she actually there at all?

~*~

I used to have an imaginary friend. His name was Tom, and he lived with us in our ancient farmhouse. He and his sister, Elizabeth. We used to have conversations and play together until, gradually, he began to fade.

As an adult, it makes me wonder...

What exactly are imaginary friends?

~*~

I'm scared of the dark. Always have been. Probably always will be. I'm a bit of a cliché really: scared of the dark, scared of heights, scared of zombies! But enough about me...

Bleak House, as we are calling it for the sake of the owners, was an enigma. Part of life, for me, is to be open to things we can't quite understand. Things that may be secreted away in little unassuming corners. Things that can make an inanimate object feel alive. An object, for example, like a house.

The house was certainly old and had clearly been loved generations earlier. Now, though, it was a holiday cottage - only home to people for a matter of a week or a fortnight before it had to adjust again. The uncertainty and change did not suit a once-cherished house.

Nestled into the Yorkshire Dales countryside, the house was in a perfect location. Every morning, I would get up early and walk Orlando (our spaniel) down the track and to the farm at the bottom. We would sometimes wander into the fields that contained a Public Footpath. We would watch the lambs following their mothers, or suckling, with their woolly tails wagging ferociously every time the lamb attached itself to the mother's teats. It was beautiful.

My experience of Bleak House was a bit different from the rest. I had decided that I would wait at the house while my sisters went to fetch Mum and Dad from the station. My plan had been to unpack everything and light the fire so, by the time they got back, it would be our little home for the week.

However, an unplanned detour meant that it was getting dark by the time we arrived. We unloaded the car, and my sisters headed off to Dent station to pick up the parents. I turned all the lights on in the ground floor, and started unpacking what I could for the downstairs.

I had opened the door to the stairs, but with one look at the stone steps, I closed it again. I wasn't going to go up there on my own. I hadn't seen anything suspicious, or heard anything unusual. It was just a feeling - perhaps my imagination, but that can be strong enough to frighten me.

With only a few of the bags unpacked, I went through to the Sitting Room to see if I could light the fire. I had been ages since I had lit a fire, though, and I didn't really know what I was doing. I found firelighters but no matches. I wished I had bought some from the Tesco in Carlisle but thinking back to the busy shop made me realise just how alone I was in this house. Or rather...

It wouldn't have been so unnerving if I had been alone.

I searched around in the room for a while, trying to find the matches, but eventually gave up. If I'm being honest, I could have kept looking as there were places I hadn't investigated yet, but every time I turned my back to the room, I had that feeling.

You know...the feeling that you want to turn around because you're sure that something is there, but you want to remain still in case you don't like what you see.

Every time I turned back to the fireplace, I would be certain that I wasn't on my own. I became sure that there was somebody sitting at the piano, or standing on the steps to the kitchen. But every time I dared turn around, there was nothing. I was...alone?

Enough is enough, I thought to myself. I wanted my family to come back. I knew that, as soon as they did and we were sitting together with a hot drink, it would be fine. All strange sensations would go. But they were taking forever.

It had grown completely dark outside so every time I looked out of the window, all I could see was the reflection of the

room. I didn't look long, however, in case I saw the reflection of whoever else was there.

I made up my mind, and left the room, left the kitchen, and left the house. I stood, not looking at the house, but the complete darkness of the countryside at night. Beautiful in the day, shrouded in the night.

I'm scared of the dark, but that evening, I took my chances with what I perceived as the lesser threat. I stood for a long time, staring out at nothing, but listen to the owls close by and the occasional sound from the sheep at the other side of the valley.

I can't describe the relief I felt when I saw the headlights coming up the track. As I had thought, sitting together, everything began to feel so normal. So ordinary.

I didn't experience anything else out of the ordinary for the rest of the holiday. The others weren't so lucky. They heard footsteps in the attic, paw-pads on the stairs, scratching at the window. But I didn't hear any of that.

Thinking back, trying to find an explanation for it all, I decided that the house or its inhabitants had been testing me on that first evening. When my family had arrived, they gave up their interest in me and moved on to them.

Sceptics will have fun, I'm sure, explaining what they believe is the most rational reason. However, I know what I felt in that house. I know there was something there, even though I didn't hear it, see it, or smell it. I could sense it.

Those Experiences

Judith

When my parents bought the house (which had, centuries earlier, been a farmhouse and adjacent barn), they intended for the largest bedroom to be shared by their two eldest daughters. They needed the space because they fought like cats and dogs, whereas the three younger ones of us were far more likely to get on and so could share the “nursery” between us.

However, one sister didn’t even move into the house and the other ultimately left to go to university and grown-up-type adventures so, although I wasn’t chronologically speaking the next in line, I somehow managed to wrangle having that enormous room to myself.

It would once have been the Master Bedroom of the farmhouse, and there was still a fireplace and grate on the middle of the wall which faced the bed, although it wasn’t used as the room was heated by the fire from downstairs. At either side of the fireplace there were alcoves which were used for storage and, around the walls and on the furniture were my pictures and posters: The Beatles, Charlie Sheen and Johnny Depp were the main ones!

The window looked out onto the street, which would once have been a quiet country road but which somehow had become the main highway for cars and lorries, which would race down the hill at an alarming speed and, more than once, “came a cropper” as they failed to manoeuvre their way down the narrow street. Every night, the outside world

would be shut out behind William Morris curtains, thick and lined so that the heat was kept in. The same curtains covered the neighbouring alcove so, when they were all closed, there was a large expanse of Morris' spectacular artwork in the corner of the room. They were home to those large spiders which love the Lincolnshire landscape and would, when they were feeling particularly bold, creep out of the curtains and begin their journey across the room and towards my bed.

Shudder.

I wish I could remember which week it happened. I know it was somewhere between 2004 and 2006, as it was during the period that I was being taught at home, but I trusted my memory in those days and didn't see the need to keep a diary. Every night for a week, I woke up at the same time to find a little girl perching on the window ledge looking at me.

The window ledges were not deep like the ones in the house we live in now. They were not traditional "window-seats", so she must have been just leaning on the window, or else be trapped in a time when the window ledge had been more accommodating. Every night for a week, she sat there, just sitting, watching and – in my mind as I don't recall ever seeing a face – smiling. It was one of the most non-threatening supernatural experiences you could imagine.

Somehow, though, it seemed scarier in the daytime so, by the end of the week, I adjusted the curtain lining, assuring myself that it must have been the lining I was seeing and not a figure at all. I never saw the girl again and for the remaining time we lived in the house, I told myself that it had obviously

just been the curtain lining as that was the only thing which had changed.

But with ghosts we can't control all the variables. Yes, I had altered the curtain lining, but I had also made it clear to any spirits or trapped memories that I wanted rid of them. Perhaps the girl had waited to reach out until a certain point and, just when she thought she was getting somewhere, I had demonstrated my determination not to be bothered again.

I wonder if she's reached out to anyone else, who can't blame the situation on William Morris.

~*~

Other authors in this book will have relayed this story and others like it, so I apologise if I am repeating what you may already have heard.

Between Barton Upon Humber and Barrow Upon Humber is a very long, very straight road, with one huge bend in the middle where there was a picnic area in a wooded spot just next to the road. I don't think anyone ever had a picnic there in all the ten years we were travelling that way, so I wonder if the land was given in perpetuity on the understanding that it would provide a picnic spot.

I walked along that road twice, both times from Barton going home to Barrow. The first was with my older sister when we were both at the local Secondary School. There had been threats from the Council about withdrawing the bus passes from Barrow pupils attending school in Barton, but they had

soon been quashed by anxious parents. You wouldn't want your eleven-year-old walking along that way on their own as it was an accident hotspot. It was sad but tellingly not unsurprising whenever anyone came to grief along that road. My brother, walking home from the pub one night, had to be escorted by police right past a body lying in the middle of the road when someone had been killed.

The second time I walked it, I was much older. I'd taken the bus back from college but found that my dad couldn't pick me up because he'd taken my little sister to a music exam. I headed home on my own, less bothered by the traffic which hurtled past me than I was about hurrying past the "haunted house" and then not looking behind in case I saw something I didn't want to! There had been a murder there, not just an accident but a real-live murder, in the mid-20th century and, since then, no one had lived in the house and it had been allowed to be largely gobbled up by ivy. Looking from the car was fine, but you wouldn't get away quick enough if you looked when you were walking, and the path took you right along beside it.

It was February 2008 when I saw the ghost. I remember because it was a night or two before my sister got engaged. We were driving back from the Music and Drama Festival in Brigg. We must have taken a funny way back through Barton – usually we would go via Deepdale (which held its own dangers and no doubt hauntings) but for some reason we must have joined the A15. Ringing the changes, maybe.

As we were approaching Barrow, well past the haunted house, a large white figure darted out in front of us before

disappearing into the hedge opposite. A barn owl? No, it was far too large. Whenever I see barn owls, as beautiful and ghostly as they may be, I'm always a bit surprised at just how little they actually are! I had been sitting in the middle seat so, along with my parents had experienced a full view of the apparition, which my sisters at either side of me had missed.

I pretended I hadn't seen anything until Mum asked what she had just seen.

It was my dad's answer which still sends a shiver down my spine, even five hundred miles and over a decade away. My dad: the man who sees science, maths, and explanations in everything.

"It was a woman in white."

~*~

Bleak House – not its real name, but a name that suits it perfectly – was where we chose to holiday in April 2018. It would be the first time we had returned to England for a pure-and-simple Holiday. All the other trips, as lovely as they had been and continue to be, were geographically limited to making sure that we would be able to visit friends and family as much as possible. But Bleak House was our commitment to adventure and exploration in a place we had only visited once two decades earlier.

Driving along the track which took us to Bleak House, you had to hop out of the car and open a farm gate (not unusual for holiday cottages in the Yorkshire Dales as we have since realised!) before going onto such a narrow track that our

wingmirror got forcibly popped in as we passed by the wall. How my sister, who was driving, managed it in the dark for the first time, I have no idea, but I am full of admiration!

We had got lost twice on the journey. It was a disaster. First of all, we went somewhere that we'd probably never be able to find again somewhere in deepest, darkest Cumbria. Then we travelled further and thought we had found it, only to be taken to Appleby-in-Westmoreland. Yes, it was nearer. No, it still wasn't anywhere near where we needed to be! Mum and Dad, having taken the train in the days before we admitted the need for two cars, sat on the platform at Dent station (the highest one in England!) in the dark and wondered what had happened to their daughters.

As soon as we opened the door to Bleak House, we knew something was strange about the place. Winding stone stairs snaked up at the opposite end of the room and, at one side, was a fireplace with the names of previous inhabitants painstakingly preserved around a dead grate stuffed full of pinecones. We didn't even want to open any doors but, after dropping off one sister, one dog and enough luggage to clear another seat in the car, we went to collect our parents from their freezing exile!

Every night, Orlando would wake up at about four o'clock in the morning and bark. He used to sleep in a crate, so someone had to go down and check on him. We went in groups – safety in numbers – and tried to come up with some rational reason for his behaviour. Maybe the people further up the track were commuters? The times were certainly right

for a commute to Birmingham or Edinburgh. But we never heard them coming back the other way at the end of the day.

Orlando didn't like the house generally. He got bitten by something just under his eye and, as the week went on, scratched it until it got really sore and inflamed. Then, halfway through the week, his tail suddenly went floppy and he started walking around the house with it between his legs, almost dragging on the floor sometimes. I was sure there must have been something dreadful wrong with him but, as soon as we left the house, he was absolutely fine and, when our vet checked his eye they were happy with the state of the rest of him!

My sisters and I have an agreement that I get the single room if there's an option. This isn't as selfish as it seems: I'm a terrible snorer so they get a better night's sleep than they would if I was sharing the room! In most places, I definitely get the best end of the bargain, but in Bleak House it went the other way.

My room terrified me. I had a huge double bed, which I slept in the middle of to avoid spiders, and a little window opposite. There was furniture with doors or drawers which were locked, which I'm always a bit spooked by at the best of times. The first thing I do whenever I get into a hotel room is open up every single cupboard to "check for spare pillows" (secretly checking that there's nothing sinister!).

One night, I woke up with a feeling that, if I opened my eyes, I would see something that I really didn't want to. As I lay there awake but with my eyes screwed shut, I could feel the temperature in the room plummeting. It was genuinely

terrifying. All the while, that little voice in my head reminded me not to look, that I wouldn't like what I saw, that once I had seen it I would never be able to unsee it.

It passed eventually and I dared to open my eyes, looking straight into the reassuring and familiar face of the teddy bear that I still take with me when I go on holiday.

Throughout the week, so many unusual things happened that, by the Friday night (the last night we were there), we all refused to even go to the toilet on our own! I went to the downstairs one with Mum, and my sisters went together. Dad didn't seem to mind as much – he would probably have minded more to have one of us there with him!

But that Friday night, nothing happened. We awoke on Saturday morning to feel as though the pressure had lifted, as though the oppressive supernatural presence was just glad that we would be heading back up the road.

Although it was a wonderful holiday, I can't say I have ever been glad – before or since – to leave a holiday cottage like I was with Bleak House!

~*~

The house we live in now was built especially for us: enough rooms for us each to have our own; two bathrooms; a lovely big kitchen for Mum to make wonderful things; a Music Room for my sister to teach her private music tuition pupils; a living room with a fire; and an upstairs Something Room, which triples up as a spare room, toy-room and study (we call

it the Railway Room because it's where Dad has his model railway).

Having lived in many other places, I can honestly say that there's nothing like stepping into a house which was built especially for you. You get that overwhelming sense of being home, even with all your removal boxes around you! You're where you were meant to be, because this is primarily your home.

That was the feeling I was lucky enough to experience when we moved into our current house in December 2009.

The only slightly surprising thing, given what I've said above, was that it had been built some 170 years earlier.

That's a kind of ghostliness, isn't it? That a house could be made for you, that its very spirit could be linked in with your own, before your great-great-great-grandparents had even met each other?

There have been definite "odd" happenings in the house, but it has such a wonderfully companionable feel to it, I wouldn't describe them as "spooky". I remember just after we had moved in, I heard Milly (our cat) exploring in the spare room, which was where we had left all the removal boxes after we had managed to rehome the rest of our things around the house. I went in to collect her, but she must have been well and truly hidden in one of those small spaces which cats are able to defy physics and enter.

Nothing unusual there, although perhaps more unusual to walk downstairs and discover Milly asleep in her basket,

leading to the inescapable conclusion that – whatever had been exploring amongst our boxes of belongings – had not been anyone or anything I could account for.

Another time, I awoke to the sound of a pirate in my room. Not just any pirate, either, but Captain Pugwash of the Black Pig himself!

“Shivering Sharks!” he said, repeatedly.

Someone was pressing the button on my Captain Pugwash toy, which was sitting in the darkest corner of the room, amongst my other soft toys. I grabbed him by the plastic pirate hat and took him downstairs, leaving him in the bathtub where I wouldn't be able to hear him!

His battery had died by the morning, so I can't be certain whether he had just been enjoying his own last hurrah as the battery glitched, or whether something else had been playing with him.

Those Experiences

Susan

Shutting out the Sunlight

I wasn't an unruly teenager, but I had a bit of a temper in those days! This needs to be said to understand what follows.

One glorious high summer day, when the air was still and the flowers were in full bloom, I went with my mother to "do the flowers" in our parish church. There was a rota, and this was Mum's week.

My mother took her flower decorating very seriously. She admired many of the other flower arrangers in the congregation and she thought she never could match their efforts. The truth is that she was better than they were. They sculpted and twisted and snipped until their designs resembled something quite stunning - they just didn't resemble flowers. Mum was never that brutal. Her arrangements offered up her thanks to God for the beauty of the flowers. No matter how she tried, she could not distort or disfigure them.

I was told that I might do a small arrangement in a corner. Fair enough! My arrangement was so simple, so natural, so homely, that it needed improvement - by Mum!

So I asked if I might do another small arrangement in another part of the church. It was clear that my efforts were not in line with what was expected. I bit my lip.

Now, I should tell you here that Mum admired and respected the rector's mother-in-law - who had died the night previously. The rector's mother-in-law was a kindly lady and nobody's fool. She had a fondness for my mother.

Yes, I bit my lip. But it didn't work. From somewhere deep inside me, I felt the flood gates had been opened and out flowed my rejection agony - in a tirade of abuse. In church. Bad language - the lot!

The usual shame at not being able to control my temper made me even more cross - when, to my horror, the massive, tall, broad, heavy, ancient church door swung to and closed. We had left it wide open to let in the beautiful summer's day. The beautiful summer's day had now gone.

At first, I dashed down the aisle and heaved the door open, ran outside and looked to left and right as I was sure it had been the action of a human being.

There was no one in sight.

Mum carried on with her arrangements.

~*~

Making the Connection

Sleep was scarce. I had been worried about the treatment of my daughter at the hands of her school "friends". All I could do was try to work out a solution. The school was not helpful. Bullying was not taken seriously there. She had walked out of school and found her own way home. This frightened me. I knew she did it because she was scared but I was aware of

the dangers when teenagers were prepared to trust strangers in order to get away from a familiar fear.

I lay in bed, under the sloping ceiling, watching the first light of morning in the sky. It seemed to me that I was falling into an unknown deep place with no way out. I simply couldn't find an answer.

Suddenly, I sensed sure arms lifting me - pulling me out. I felt a connection with an era long ago. Slipping through time, I was back with my grandparents. They gave me those completely loving smiles which had made me feel safe so many years before.

We'd solved the problem together. No words. Just love.

We took our daughter out of school and educated her at home. She's now a kind and caring adult with a string of letters after her name.

~*~

For Those Who'll Volunteer to Come

The tale I'm about to tell, still leaves me with unanswered questions. I feel I've missed something. I should have picked up on some reasoning. It frustrates me.

My husband and I were staying at a converted granary in the village where I grew up. The bedroom and shower room were downstairs. The living area was upstairs. There was a door directly into the bedroom from the drive and one in the living area which was accessed by steps on the outside of the building.

The set up was pleasant and comfortable.

I'm not the world's best sleeper, however. I lay awake and felt cold. Eventually I dozed.

I was woken up suddenly, feeling even colder, by a sense of movement to my right - between me and the outside wall of the bedroom. I sensed a grey and dusty fog.

Rising from it, was an emaciated soldier in a red uniform. There was a terrible feeling of despair about him. I'm certain about the red uniform and the despair but I also think, and I stress that I'm less certain about this, that his hair was long and thin, and I don't think he was wearing a hat/cap/bonnet.

I was sure he was trying to tell me something. His despair was so obvious. But I shut him out.

I closed my eyes to shut him out.

I suppose I should have researched the history of the granary, but something told me not to. It seemed that he was wanting me - specifically me - to help him.

But I shut him out.

~*~

No Wedding and a Funeral

We used to live in an old cottage in North Lincolnshire. I miss it - and the garden - but my children, although they loved the garden, were glad to leave the "spooky" old house. I never found it spooky, but I did see things!

I wasn't frightened though.

The house was in two parts. Part of it had been one half of an old farmhouse which dated back to 1725. The other part was a barn built on to the farmhouse around 1816. The farmhouse had been divided into two properties long before we arrived, and the entire barn had been divided into four small houses - also a long time before us. One of the small houses and one half of the farmhouse were joined together to make our home. By a strange trick of fate, the person who had removed one of the two staircases became our son-in-law. He told us that, when he removed it, he found an uncut wedding cake in the cupboard under the stairs.

Our bedroom was above this - the stairs had been in the bedroom cupboard.

The room had a low ceiling and one night I woke up to see a man dressed in an undertaker's black coat and tall hat leaning over my bed.

I don't think he had any connection to me. Although, for a day or so, I did wonder if someone close, or known to me in some way, would pass away!

Well you do, don't you? Wonder, I mean.

~*~

A Pipeful of Baccy

Old houses have always held a fascination for me. I love to think of all the other lives which began there, which developed there - and which ended there. We've moved about quite a bit and most of the houses we've lived in have been old ones - although "Mrs. Fishwick's Pot Shop" had

been well and truly taken apart inside and rebuilt (not by us though) so that it more resembled a house on a modern development.

One of the oldest houses we lived in was a wrecker's cottage on the east side of Orkney. It stood at the end of a dirt track with just one other cottage nearby.

It had power and water and a marvellous view of the water and the power to connect one to the past. The first evening we were there, I looked out to sea and saw a fire. I couldn't make out what it was that was on fire - it certainly wasn't the sunset as I was looking eastwards.

Throughout our time in that lovely old stone cottage, I often caught the smell of pipe tobacco and smoked fish. It was never in the new extension - always in the original house but the pipe tobacco was sometimes in the back hallway, which would, once upon a time, have been the deep doorway to outside. I was there with two small children while the other children and their daddy were thirty miles away in school on the other side of the island. Yet I don't remember being afraid of ghosts.

One evening our son, the eldest of our children, at that time studying for his exams and writing a dissertation, saw an old woman at the end of his bed. She appeared to be bending over something - a cradle perhaps? She was wrapped in a dark shawl.

So, a fire out at sea, fishy smells and tobacco smoke, and an old woman caring for an infant. We learned a great deal from our time in the wrecker's cottage.

~*~

Bleak House (the name has been changed to protect the innocent!!!)

Our Easter holiday in Bleak House, an isolated farmhouse in England, was a bit of an eye-opener for all of us. It became clear the house was haunted. Sometimes the haunting seeps into a person, sometimes it remains external.

Four out of five of us, on that holiday, experienced the haunting of Bleak House.

For my part, I have come to terms with those things which do not appear to be of this world. My ability to forecast events is frustrating as I have never seen sufficient detail to be able to change a course of action. For example, I knew that something significant was going to happen in connection with aircraft on the day of 9/11. But nothing else. There is nothing special about me. I'm simply open and receptive to suggestions from outside this material world. I don't play games with it or engage others in it. It just happens.

We had unpacked our things into drawers and wardrobes, had a bedtime drink - not alcohol - and gone to bed.

The bedroom had wooden shutters over the old windows.

I woke in the night to a bitter-cold and the sound of scratching at the shutters. This went on for a while. I'd taken my little clock with me, and had placed it on the bedside table, so I pressed the button to light up the digital clock face. When I did this, there was a soft beep as there always is. At

this sound, the scratching stopped and there was a different noise - the noise of small feet running above me - from the window wall to the opposite wall.

I take the view that ghosts can't hurt you. They can cause one to harm oneself should one take evasive action. But they can't actually harm us. We are of this world and they are of another world. Careless and bad people can harm you - but not ghosts. I knew that this was not a human being. The shutters were on the inside of the glass. There would have been no glass in this house when the windows were put in - just shutters to keep out the cold. There was no floor above me - just rafters and the roof. This exposure of the roofline was in line with the modern way of converting old country properties.

So my nocturnal visitor was neither of this day nor of this world.

~*~

Driving Home

Imagine a long straight road linking a small town and the next village. It passes through low lying arable land, bounded by hedgerows. There is only one inhabited house on the road. On the other side of the road is an uninhabited house which is in a severe state of disrepair. If you turn off the road and pass the uninhabited house, you come to a small and quite modern farm. In fact, nothing remarkable at all. You drive on without taking the turn. The church tower is in front of you and there is a little mist forming over the dips in the fields. You drive away from the town, towards the village, keeping

the dark shadow of the tower ahead. There is a quiescence to the night. You're glad of the welcoming hearth which awaits you and yet you value this beautiful evening.

Suddenly, out of one of the small pockets of mist, a spiral of the stuff rises quickly to your left. It moves roadwards and, as it passes through the hedgerow, it takes on the shape of a tall, thin woman. She wears a covering of white on her head. She twists sharply towards you. You cannot make out the features. The wraith crosses in front of you and disappears after passing into the hedgerow which borders the inhabited house.

It is well known that the uninhabited house was the scene of a brutal attack in 1969. The man, a recluse, who lived there, died of his injuries. He told police that he had been attacked by three men. They were never found.

But the shape and the movement of what you saw was most definitely that of a woman.

Those Experiences

Virginia

As I sit here in the sunshine, nothing could seem more remote and distant than ghosts. We all have preconceived ideas about ghosts, starting of course, with that incredibly divisive question: do you believe in them? And then, from the point of view of writing this book: does it matter? I would be interested to know how many of our previous shortlisted authors *do* believe in ghosts, but it really doesn't matter. As with all writing, a bit of research and a heap of imagination (or should that be the other way around?) will give you an amazing story.

I've left writing this to the last minute, as I do with most things! But today I got a gentle reminder from someone. Or, more accurately, something. So, this is where we'll begin with the tales. And I swear they will *all* be true. Funny word, that one: truth. We can have truths with no facts at all. Whatever you believe ghosts to be, they sit far more happily in the realm of truth than fact.

I'm an avid – far from professional – bee photographer. I've taken some great shots of the furry critters, and often fully commit to taking them. That's what I was doing today. Crouching down, leaning back slightly, having found the perfect balance point for the picture of this bee. Typically, Orlando, our spaniel, came over and nudged me forward. He can't help himself. When he sees someone kneeling down,

he always assumes it's and invite for play/cuddles/something-very-Orlando-orientated.

Cue: the bee flies off.

There haven't been many bees so far this year. It's only April, so there's plenty of time, but still.

"Grrr, Orlando!"

And then there was that moment. That one which underpins almost all ghost stories. I looked across at where he should be, and there was nothing there. Orlando was watching from the opposite end of the garden, wondering why on earth I'd called his name in such a stropky way.

You'll find, as I tell these very short stories, that I have a combination of human and animal ghost stories. Does this mean I'm more in tune with animals? I don't know. I've probably got an IQ which is not far above them! But I wonder if sometimes apparitions appear, or ethereal matters connect with, those who they feel would mutually benefit one another. Everyone in the family says I have a soporific effect on animals. Perhaps a gentle, calming bond is where the link is.

~*~

The first time I knew I'd seen a ghost was when I was seven. I remember my age because we'd just moved into our new house after having spent two weeks in a rented house. It was, as you'll find from other accounts in this book, a wrecker's cottage, and had much of the ancient and unusual still lingering about it.

That evening, we were unpacking things in the kitchen. The kitchen is always the most important room to get unpacked! There was one window faced out to Copinsay, an island immortalised for us by a song written by our schoolteachers. The other window was very thin and tucked into a tiny corner, past the enormous hearth where the black-leaded stove stood. Through this window, almost like a doorway into the past, there were no houses, or any buildings, visible. Yet somehow, there was a light.

Someone out with a torch maybe. A fearless dogwalker, attempting the Gloup path – and this was before they re-made the paths and fences. But no, it was further out than that. You could just about make out the line which was the edge of the land. Then there was the sea. Then there was the light.

It was orange, not a sickly yellow like boats throw. Boats didn't go that way often, anyway. Not that we knew that then, we'd only just arrived.

It was fire. The sea was on fire. Or something on the sea was.

I don't remember now if we watched it until it faded, or if it just went. But it was a weird feeling, to stand at that window, as others had done more than seven lifetimes before, and watch the ship in peril. Perhaps one of those people had seen that boat the first time it burnt.

Nothing was ever reported in The Orcadian newspaper. No one but us ever mentioned having seen it. But I'm still intrigued to know what and when it was. Perhaps, I more intrigued now than I was then.

~*~

I don't remember ever being scared of that house. I knew it was living. It had a heartbeat, a smell, and there was always a sense of something watching out, made more exaggerated by the fact the original windows stared onto the hallway and utility. Sometimes, I would catch a movement in the corner of my eye, but it could easily have been a reflection or someone in the hallway beyond.

As I'm sure you know if you've read my book, *Caledon*, I have a fascination with dreams. I've had many which provide a strange sense of knowledge, sometimes playing out as déjà vu, sometimes looking backwards to point forward. I suspect most of us have had a dream which featured something which later happened to come true. It may be because we were looking forward to an event, it may be something more.

I had a recurring dream there. I've already mentioned the huge hearth in the kitchen. The living room also had a chimney, but it had been boarded up. Just as well! We had so many books that we needed the wall space for shelves. In my dream, there were steps behind it. A typical child's dream. An opening to exciting adventures. But there was always the same person there, like a gatekeeper, trapped at the bottom of the stairs, hidden behind the boarded-up fireplace. Who was it in that tiny space?

There were strange smells there, too, the house leeching out its history. I know there were so many stories it wanted to share, so many lives lived in such a humble house. I'd love to know more of them. I suppose, with the internet opening so many doors into research, it's all there waiting to be

discovered. But I suspect the inhabitants were not deemed worthy of being recorded, and they continue to try and tell their stories to the current inhabitants.

~*~

Fast forward ten-ish years and a host of life-changing events, and I'm now a young adult. We've lived in two more houses since our wrecker's cottage and I've progressed through that age where poltergeist most commonly appear without a hint of one appearing. I don't believe poltergeist activity is related to what I believe ghosts are. Telekinetic energy is a fascinating topic, and one I'm happy to leave beyond my sphere of knowledge and research.

What really inspires an interest for me is the stories behind ghostly encounters, the people who, for whatever reason, are trapped in a moment or place. One of the most enticing things about it all, is that it creates a level playing field. Of course you have ghostly tales of kings and queens, of hosts like the Roman legion which still marches through York. But most ghosts are people who, without their ethereal appearance, we would never know about. And even with these appearances we often can't find out about them.

So here am I, a passenger in the car, heading home. Home at this point in time, meant a journey along a road of two parts. Apparently, during the enclosures, English parishes were only obliged to provide a road to the parish boundary, there was no need to ensure they joined up with the road in the next parish. In practise, this meant there were two straight roads, joined up by a nasty double bend halfway between the two parishes. Then it was straight once more.

It was a lethal road. While we lived there – over a period of a decade – more than one person was killed along it. So a decision was made by the council to turn the dilapidated path into a cycle track. Great!

There was a slight rise as the road entered into the village, with a sign warning motorists of a roundabout, telling them which way to go for the industrial port and which way to go for the airport. But long before these things existed, this had been a pilgrimage route. The notable existence of the double churches in Barton-upon-Humber speaks of enormous ecclesiastical significance. Following the course of the River Humber, once far less tamed than its muddy churning now suggests, you arrive at Barrow-upon-Humber, the site of this road sign.

Barrow housed the monastery of St Chad, all traces of which had long since disappeared, and the road then travelled onward to Thornton Abbey, whose impressive gatehouse is still visited today by people from all over the world. And Barrow as a name itself suggests a connection with death which probably predated everything which remained above ground in the village.

I must have travelled that road a hundred times and seen nothing out of the ordinary, or at least nothing I couldn't provide a reason for. Even when others in the family had witnessed unexplained happenings there, I hadn't seen them. So, driving along I thought nothing of the individual wandering on. It was a little bit strange, perhaps, that they were walking in the tall grasses rather than on the path. But maybe there was dog poo there which they wanted to avoid.

I can't remember if I pointed this person out, or if I'd only meant to. Sometimes in my head I play over and over things, perhaps trying to rationalise things, and it becomes a bit jumbled whether I spoke aloud what I'd certainly said in my head. But I do clearly remember seeing the person walk beneath the road sign and simply fade as they stepped into the streetlights.

Odd, how something which should reveal things, served to mask them. Here's a thought, one which I have never researched or read about from other people's experiences. If ghosts exist in a plain beyond ours, perhaps there the rule of opposites applies. A person from our plain steps into the light and becomes clearer. A person from the other plain steps into the light, and vanishes. Could this be why dusk and dawn are the times many people are most susceptible to ghosts? Because then we're all in the twilight?

I've imagined this traveller as a pilgrim, still undertaking his pilgrimage. I have no proof of that, only instinct. Something about him must have hinted it, since Barrow has a history stretching before and after the monastery. But if I was the only one who saw him, perhaps I can trust my instinct to be right.

~*~

That house in Barrow was downright creepy, though. I loved it, but there were unexplained noises and movements. I think creepy is the right word, more than frightening. I don't remember ever being frightened but I remember plenty of times when I was unnerved. That opening chapter of *The Owl*

Service by Alan Garner used to frequently be in my head as I lay in bed.

Lincolnshire is full of ghost stories. From its vast fenland, up through the Wolds, Lincoln itself, and up into the far reaches of the Humber bank where we lived. I've heard it said that, had the Danes put up more of a political fight, they may have made Barton into their capital. I'm not sure how true that was, especially as they had already developed York as a substantial northern city, but it does give an idea of how significant that quiet corner had been throughout history.

But, of course, one house may yield as many ghosts as one hundred. Two years ago, we encountered one such house.

It's been pointed out to me that we should be careful naming names where these stories is concerned. It is a holiday home, after all, so we could be jeopardising someone's business by naming the house. So I'll act on the advice given and rename it "Bleak House". And it was bleak.

We arrived at night. By the power of satellite navigation we'd ended up about sixty miles away at a place with the same name. We go on holiday to get into the country, and this house was very definitely out in the country. It took a twisty track, a bridge with no sides – just as thin! – and only one inhabitation beyond it. I'd already decided that this house had to be amazing, to make this motor trauma worthwhile.

The house was quite something.

Dating back hundreds of years, someone had really loved this house. Family names were formed over the range in the

kitchen, and the house had been extended over the dozens of decades it had stood there. Little stone steps in the back of the house led up to the bedrooms and bathroom, with an extra toilet downstairs. Why am I telling you all this about toilets? Well, because by the middle of our week's holiday, no one wanted to use the spider-infested downstairs toilet, but all of us were too nervous to go upstairs by ourselves.

I don't think I'm someone who is easily scared. I jump at things, but I suspect it's part of our human condition to want to be nervous at certain times. After all, we like telling scary stories, and we choose to watch – and pay to watch – scary films, or get an adrenaline rush on ghost trains.

But this house was something else. It was like a series of mind games, the house and its former inhabitants against us.

By the time we'd got settled that first evening, having a bit of a somewhat hysterical laugh about having got lost, we were already starting to feel slightly unwelcome there. But, dismissing it as the disaster of arriving so late and things generally not going according to plan, we all headed off to bed. Orlando had a travel crate which stayed downstairs, he slept in an identical one at home every night. No problem.

Here, he barked. Not surprising, I suppose. It was a new environment to him after all. But he barked at the time the next night too. We tried his crate in different corners of the kitchen. Same thing. It wasn't his angry bark, more like the one he makes when he wants to make sure we've remembered something, usually to give him a treat in the form of food or a walk.

And he woke me up one night when I heard him coming upstairs. The landing floor was lined with wood and it was quite easy to tell those padding feet belonged to a dog and not a human. Weird, though, because I knew we'd fastened him in his crate.

I lay awake, my eyes closed, and listened to those paws. From the soft *da-da-da-da* of the paw pads, to the light *tap-tap* of the claws. Yep, definitely Orlando. Except, Orlando was downstairs. So a more accurate, but horribly frightening, explanation was that it was another dog.

The sound lasted quite a while, but it wasn't going backwards and forwards, it was always going in the same direction. Up the stairs and across the first part of the landing, up the stairs and across the first part of the landing, up the stairs...

You get the picture.

All these wonderful clichés about people who see ghosts being unable to move, breaking into a cold sweat, feeling tingles on their spines, they were all surprisingly true that night. It wasn't the sound which did it, it was that moment of realising there was no way it was Orlando out there.

It took me quite a while, at least it felt like a long time, before I ventured a look. I think the sound had stopped by then anyway. There was nothing there. Probably just as well, as the only cliché missing from that night was the hair-raising scream, and I'm pretty sure I was at the point where I would have made one if I'd seen anything.

We saw out the week, winning the battle against the house, but promised we'd never be going back there again. I'm glad we did stick around, though. It was a bit doubtful at different points in the week. We agreed on the idea of the house wanting to be loved as a home once more, rather than being trapped in a permanent state of transitory inhabitation. Sadly, it is unlikely ever to achieve that. It is owned by someone who owns several houses in the area and lives in none of them.

The eternal curse of those who owned homes in the National Parks before National Parks ever existed.

~*~

We got Orlando as a puppy. A properly cute little critter! The January before we got him in the October, we'd had Milly, our cat, put to sleep because she had kidney failure. We had tried medicines for her, but over those last couple of months nothing had made much of a difference. So, the best part of a year had passed before we started noticing something a little bit strange. Orlando was doing things Milly used to do. He picked up little traits which were far more feline than canine.

After the initial stage of frowning down the garden, we just began to accept that there was a part of Milly which was still around and keeping Orlando in check. She has joined what I suspect is a house full of connection with the past and those who lived here. This house, where we've lived for more than ten years, has taken us in to its story. There have been plenty of occasions here when something inexplicable has

happened, but there isn't the creepiness of our house in Barrow, or the malice of "Bleak House".

The one most memorable was on Boxing Day a few years ago.

We *do* Christmas better than anyone. I suppose everyone thinks that, but I know it! Christmas Day features an enormous Pork Pie Breakfast – utterly deserving of those capital letters! – and Christmas Dinner is shared on Boxing Day. There's a lot more to our Christmas than food, of course, but this is where our ghostly activities take place.

After Christmas Dinner, which tends to amount to a five-course meal, we children (who have a combined age of 100+) wash up and put away all the pots. There had been alcohol imbibed, and we were all a little bit merry, giddy, and perhaps even stupid. Alex, the only boy and the eldest, had gone outside to put some rubbish directly into the bin. The rest of us were all washing, drying, or putting away pots. In front of the kitchen sink is a huge window, about four-foot wide and three-foot tall. It looks out onto shrubs, all bare at that time of year, their long knobbly wands lit up by the light inside.

Looking up from washing the remnants of nutmeg sauce from a bowl, it was to find a pale face staring back at us through the window. There was only a head visible and its eyes were wide and wild. There was a point when I screamed here, we all did, before realising it was Alex. He had decided it would be amusing to go a little bit further than the bins and give us all a fright. That's what brothers are for, right?

He found it hilariously funny that he had managed to make us all jump and, when he came back indoors, was still laughing about it. We were less impressed, but it was all taken in good part and laughed along with him.

Still chuckling away, we continued with the job in hand. It takes a long time to get everything washed and put away after Christmas Dinner. I made sure I kept an eye on the window, determined not to be caught out again. But we were all in the kitchen, and Alex continued to tease us about having made us jump.

All this amusement came abruptly to a white-faced halt.

At the other side of the kitchen there was a tall dresser. It had been in situ for months rather than weeks. But something – I forget now what it was, probably a plate – decided to take a nosedive. We all just looked at it for a moment, each one of us trying to find an explanation for this movement, before the laughter began again. Only, much more nervously this time.

I suspect someone either took exception to Alex's prank, or wanted to join in. It's never happened since.

~*~

There have been a host of other experiences, some of which I've reasoned away, some I've been quite happy to accept as simply not-quite-normal. We are, after all, a not-quite-normal family, in touch with the past and not afraid to share our stories of rubbing shoulders with it. I suspect underneath most of us believe in *something* after death. In my

understanding, ghosts don't have an either/or between heaven and earthly encounters.

As a first round judge in the *Crowvus Christmas Ghost Story Competition*, I'll be reading absolutely every single one of your submissions. My purpose in sharing these encounters is not to read a story which retells one of these, it's to give you an idea of the personal side with which I want to connect with your story. Each of these ghostly encounters has left a profound impact on me, and each one has, in some way, shaped the person I am.

Whatever ghost you choose to write, malevolent/caring, visible/invisible, haunted house/haunted character, I will be looking for a story which demonstrates a personal connection between this plain and theirs. Those which have struck me over the last few years – and as there's a panel of judges and different stages of judging, this includes others whose work never made it into our anthologies – have been the stories of lives profoundly altered by those who had walked their paths years earlier.

Interestingly, as I tot-up the lifespans of the houses I've lived in over the years, I'm zooming back into the middle ages. That level and depth of lives lived puts into perspective how short our time here really is. Perhaps, in two hundred years, I'll be making an appearance in another book of stories like this, but on the other side of the telling.