

BLACK VICARAGE

Miriam's mother, Jo, a part-time solicitor in the nearby town of Barton, turned to her thirteen-year-old daughter, and said: "Why don't you like it here Mim – it's peaceful and beautiful?"

The pink blossom played with the gentle breeze before settling in a pink circle at the base of the cherry tree, which enjoyed a central position on the manicured lawn at the rear of the former vicarage. The Bank Holiday Monday was sunny and warm; white, puffy cumuli floated lazily by as Miriam and her mother sat on deck chairs with a small table between them, which had two empty glasses on it.

"I've told you before mother it's a sorrowful place and there's..."

"Don't start that again!" Jo interrupted. "Your father and I have worked hard to finally buy a place like this."

"Yeah that's why you and especially dad are never here."

"Well that's the way it is young lady you have to work hard for what you want."

Miriam watched a blackbird run across the lawn. "When I grow up I'm not going to treat my kids like this."

"We'll see," said Jo grumpily.

Miriam ran along a golden beach beside a deep, blue sea and laughed as she kicked a multi-coloured ball. The sunlight danced on the little waves as she then fell onto the warm sand.

"Help me!" shouted someone in the distance.

She turned and shielded her eyes from the glare of the sun with a hand and looked out to sea, but could see no one. She turned and looked along the beach, but again there was no one. In fact it had never occurred to her before, but she was alone on the beach.

"Help me!" shouted the faint voice again.

She opened her eyes and gazed around her darkened bedroom "It was only a dream," she told herself with the relief that she would not have to save some one.

"Help me!" shouted the voice, which came through her slightly opened window. She sat up and stared at the window as the curtains waved in the night breeze. The voice had a frail quality that she had never noticed in her dream also there was something else: *yes... there was sadness*, she thought.

Miriam pulled on her housecoat and left her bedroom. She crept along the upper hallway of the sleeping house and then descended the stairs, one step at a time, while keeping a firm hold of the cold banister. The lounge was still warm from when her parents had been sitting watching television. She passed a coffee table with two mugs and empty chocolate biscuit wrappers upon it. Miriam then pulled back a pair of white curtains to reveal large French windows painted white to match the woodwork in the rest of the room. Turning the key, she released the bolt at the bottom of the windows and opened one side. A cool air rushed into the room as she stepped onto the old, paved patio and gazed at the pale moonlight as it caressed the slate roof of the derelict church next-door.

"Help me!" the voice shouted from somewhere deep in the darkened garden.

She could feel the dampness of the grass through her slippers as she passed the cherry tree and headed toward the large hedge, which divided the garden in two. Stopping to gaze at the black, Gothic shape of the hole cut in the hedge to allow passage she felt the sadness of the place.

“Miriam, go through the hedge. I’m on the other side,” said the voice, which was now in her head and was different: more confident, still as pleading, but stronger. She stepped toward the hedge, but again stopped.

“Come on Miriam. I need your help,” the voice said, but now it was not only in her head it came from the plants; it came from the grass; it came from the soil.

“Enter the hedge!”

She was about to take a step forward when a hand grabbed her shoulder from behind.

“Aargh!” she screamed.

“Mim, what are you doing out here?” Bill, her father, asked.

“Dad,” she said softly with tears in her eyes as she fell into his arms. “I heard the voice again.”

“Come on; let’s get back into the house.”

“She’s hearing that voice again Jo; we’re going to need to do something about it,” said Bill as he re-entered his bed after he saw Miriam back to sleep.

“Yeah, she was about to talk about it today. I just didn’t want to hear it.”

“Gives me the creeps!”

“Yeah, me too. I’ll look into it tomorrow.”

The next day, with her husband at work and Miriam off to school, Jo sat at her desk with a large mug of coffee. The solicitor’s practice didn’t need her until the next day; so she decided to use the time to sort out Miriam’s problem.

She had decided to give Miriam the benefit of the doubt and not phone for an appointment with the doctor; instead she looked through the archives of the local weekly paper, the Barton Sketch, on the internet. After a tedious twenty minutes she came across an article from 1970 entitled ‘Church Closes after Vicar Disappears.’

The Rev. Donald Crighton was reported missing by his house keeper on Thursday the 12th of May and, after an extensive search over two days by the local constabulary, no sign of the man was found. The church was then closed with its future uncertain.

The aroma of spaghetti bolognese wafted around the hallway as Bill Black let himself in through the front door.

“Hello?”

Jo appeared from the kitchen and kissed him.

“Welcome home dear.”

“Where’s Mim?”

“She’s in her room doing her homework.”

They walked into the kitchen and Bill looked into the bubbling bolognese pot.

“Smells good.”

“I found out something interesting today.” And Jo went on to tell him of what she had discovered on the computer.

“Yes well. I stopped for a pint at the Feathers, and some old guy told me that there were rumours that the last vicar to serve the parish was taken by fairies that were supposed to be in the garden here; what a lot of rubbish, eh?”

Later that evening Bill yawned and looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. *Half-past twelve; time for bed*, he thought as he finished his whisky and rose up from the settee while turning the television off by remote control.

After climbing the stairs he pushed Miriam’s bedroom door open slightly and peered in. To his astonishment her bed was empty. He rushed to the window and gazed down on the garden, but it too was empty. Bill tried the bathroom door hoping it would be

locked, but it opened on to a darkened room. He then looked in on his wife and was about to awaken her, but decided to leave her for the moment. He then dashed to the stairwell and descended the steps three at a time. In the hallway he snapped the light on then, pulling on his jacket, he went to unlock the front door, but found it slightly open.

Outside, in the damp night air, he looked along both sides of the house, and then remembering where he found her the other night, rushed into the garden and ran through the hole in the hedge and stopped. The dark shapes of bushes and shrubs in the lower garden sent a shiver up his spine, but it too was empty.

He headed back up the garden toward the house contemplating phoning the police when he heard a noise from over the wall. There was someone in the old church!

Small pockets of mist roamed the ancient graveyard as Bill walked quickly up the weed infested path toward the entrance. He pushed open the heavy, wooden outer door and entered the vestibule. The bang of the door closing made him jump. A musty smell filled his nostrils as he opened the swing doors and entered the nave. Pigeons flapped around the rafters, which held up a roof where stars could be seen through large holes. The atmosphere depressed him as he walked over creaking wooden floor boards toward the first line of dusty pews. Suddenly, he saw a ghostly figure through the gloom standing by the dilapidated altar. He moved closer as he realised it was his daughter. He cried out, "Miriam, what are you doing?"

Slowly she turned and stared at him with totally white eyes "Stay where you are," she said in a deep, rasping voice."

Bill stepped back, "But..."

"I have come to regain what was mine."

Slowly, realization dawned on him: his daughter had been possessed by the priest Jo had spoken of. "You...you leave my daughter alone you hear – go back to your fairies!"

"Go back to my fairies!" she thundered. "Do you think I went to them willingly? They're the devil's spawn; I just went to the aid of someone who was asking for help and was captured and held prisoner in a limbo world – between everything and nothing."

There was a rattling at the dirty stained-glass windows.

"They're here!" shouted Miriam. "They're here for me."

There was thumping at the front door.

"This is hallowed ground they can't enter," said Miriam

"What do you hope to achieve?" Bill asked as he nervously looked around.

"I must pray and this is the only way I can do it, here in this child's body, in my church away from these accursed things."

"Why Miriam?"

"Because she was in tune with what happened to me!"

A knock rather than a thump on the front door took Bill's attention.

"Bill, Miriam, are you in there?"

"Jo!" Bill shouted as he made his way toward the vestibule to meet his wife. And as she entered he began to explain what had happened and then suddenly, as he turned back toward the altar, she picked up a broken part of a pew and, with eyes turning totally white, she struck him over the head.

When he came too, Bill jumped up and, while placing a hand on the gash on the side of his head and staggering backwards, gazed in horror at Miriam lying motionless on the altar and Jo about to drive a metal cross into her.

He ran down the aisle and threw himself at Jo knocking her and the cross over the back of the altar. He then gently raised Miriam's head and hugged her.

"I must go from here. I have made a mistake," she said, coming out of a trance. As they headed toward the front door Jo flew over the altar and landed behind them with the cross raised above her head.

Miriam turned and held up a hand. "By the grace of God leave this woman's body – now!"

As Jo slumped to the floor Miriam ran out of the church. Bill then helped his wife up and out into the night.

Miriam felt herself being drawn to the hedge in the garden. Suddenly a shaft of light flowed out of her eyes and then she fell to her knees with her eyes closed. When she opened them again there was another shaft of light shimmering in front of her.

"I'm sorry for what I've done," said the Rev. Donald Crighton, "but I realize now that I must remain with them for eternity. They exert a control over me, but I also exert a control over them, and stop them from picking another victim."

"You could try again, maybe they wouldn't be able to find another victim," said Miriam quietly.

"No. Look what happened. I nearly destroyed a young family. Farewell all will be well if I remain with them."

Bill and Jo hugged their daughter.

"Oh mum, dad, he seems so lonely; so sad."

"Sometimes Miriam, that's just the way it has to be," said Jill gently.

"Come on you two – back to bed," said Bill turning them toward the house while casting a wary glance toward the hedge.