

ONE

BENEATH THE GLASS

Cassandra eyed them sternly across the table, the tip of her index finger hovering over the heart-shaped planchette. Michael was looking at his wife, his eyebrows raised slightly with bemusement. Cass could see what was going on, the same as every other time her sister had wanted to 'play the ouija' as she called it; Michael would snigger and demean the board. Cass wouldn't have it.

Irene hissed at her husband, telling him to be quiet, but her sister was already close to her limit.

"If you're not going to take this seriously..." she threatened.

"I am, Cassie, I promise."

"There are other people who value what I do."

"I'm sure there are," Michael tried to say solemnly, but Cass caught his raised eyebrows again.

She pulled her pointer back across the table as if to leave but Irene stopped her swiftly with a hand across her wrist.

"Take no notice of him, Cass," she pleaded. "He'll be good."

"He has to be more than good," Cassandra instructed her firmly. "He has to be focussed. We

won't achieve anything with him playing the fool."

"You said you'd try this with an open mind," Irene said, turning to look at him.

"I know, I know," he replied, holding his hands up, "but this just seems ridiculous. I mean, how are we supposed to channel wandering spirits or whatever with little wooden letters set out around a tiny card table?"

"As long as there are letters and numbers it doesn't matter what we use," Cassandra was indignant, the planchette held tightly to her breast now as if it was a wounded creature.

Both their eyes were upon him, and eventually he had to relent.

"Okay, I'll try and keep an open mind."

Irene smiled at her sister, and finally Cassandra replaced the pointer gently upon the green felt surface of the card table. She'd made the letters and numbers herself, small wooden tiles carved with intricate precision, personal to her own contact. She had tiles and cards hidden away at home too, some made by spiritualist craftsmen from America and Western Europe, but whenever she was asked to somebody else's house, as was the case this evening with her sister, she liked to bring her own set.

They each placed the tips of their index fingers on the top of the wooden planchette and watched Cassandra as she concentrated on the board in front of her. Her eyes seemed almost to flicker up inside her head, as though she was slipping into some kind of trance, and yet she always kept the appearance of mostly being with them.

As she began to speak her first words, however, a strange kind of chill immediately seemed to circle the room, prickling the hairs across their forearms.

"Is there anybody here with us?" she murmured.

Michael felt the chill more readily now and shuddered perceptibly. Irene shot him a glance but saw his face was like stone, and let him be.

"Is there anybody here?" Cassie asked again.

The room was dimly lit; a couple of candles burning on the side table, the glow from the kitchen coming in through the open door. But now they seemed to visibly dim, as though the table and the three of them sitting around it was slowly descending into a creeping dark void the more Cassandra spoke.

"We need to know who you are."

Michael felt his hair lift off his forehead by an impossible breeze, followed by a compulsion to swallow. In his head, a hundred different words for fear began to conjure themselves. This didn't feel right.

"Tell us your name."

Michael felt a twitch beneath his finger, and he realised that he'd forgotten about the board. His eyes flickered downward to see that the pointer had actually moved to the far side of the table without him even realising. It moved beneath his touch to the letter E, and then the letter N.

"Ben," he heard his sister-in-law murmur, her voice now low and soft.

He had missed the first letter.

He would have to pay more attention.

A sweat had broken, he could feel it cooling rapidly on his forehead, on his top lip. He swallowed hard, the pointer itching beneath his fingertip. This wasn't right at all.

"How old are you, Ben?"

His eyes went wide as he watched the glass move to the number 3 on the table in front of his wife. The cold sweat broke a trickle of ice water across his brow,

and as a second shiver coursed across his body, he snatched his finger back and cried out in terror.

"This is bullshit," he screamed, his voice louder and more hysterical than he'd intended.

His wife stared agog at him but he didn't care. That fucking thing had stopped right in front of her, for Christ's sake.

He could feel his hands shaking, and as much as he didn't want to admit to Cassandra that maybe there was something in this ouija stuff after all, the board had given him the shits.

"Sit down," Irene said to him, but there was no conviction in her voice. She'd never tried playing the ouija before, despite how many times she'd harangued her sister about it, and now it seemed that she didn't like it either. She didn't look as though she was as frightened as he had become, but he could see in her eyes that terror had found its way in, and if this continued for just a few more minutes, she'd be right there with him.

"Sit down, Michael," Cassie hissed at him. "You can't just leave in the middle of this. We've called Ben here. We can't leave him here."

"Fuck him —"

"Michael," she persisted firmly, her eyes focussed hard upon him like steel bearings. "If you want to stop, that's fine, but we have to finish this properly."

He stared at her for a few moments but it was clear that she believed in what she was saying. Very slowly he retook his seat.

"Please put your finger back on the planchette."

"No way," he hissed. "Look, I don't know what's going on, or what you're trying to do, but you're moving that thing yourself."

"We're all touching it."

“No, you take your finger off as well. You too Irene. If this thing’s for real, it should do it itself.”

Cass looked at him, looked at the terror that had taken him over, and finally relented and pulled her hand back into her lap. Irene likewise looked at Michael, before she too removed her hand. Then Cass began to speak again, talking to whatever spirit had entered their home.

“Do you have a message for us?”

All three of them studied the heart-shaped pointer in the middle of the table but it refused to move. The frantic rate that Michael’s heart had been hammering slowed a little at this. So it *was* bullshit, he thought. That wooden thing wasn’t going anywhere.

“Do you have anything to pass on to us?” Cassandra tried again, and once again the glass remained motionless.

Both Irene’s and Michael’s eyes flickered up towards Cassandra, but she stubbornly refused to return their gazes, and instead persisted with the spirit she’d claimed was with them.

“Is there anyone else with you?” she tried.

They stared at the pointer hard, as though their combined will could move that thing, when suddenly it seemed to jog to the side. Michael’s heart turned to ice, and then cracked in two, his stomach slipping like greasy eggs in a frying pan. His forearms were knotted with tension, his fingers shaking and numb. The pointer jogged again, this time a whole sickening inch, across the table towards the end of the alphabet. Cassandra asked her last question again, and Michael hissed at her to stop it, stop it right fucking now. But the question had been asked, and now the spirit wanted to answer.

The pointer suddenly shot across the table, taking

one of the wooden tiles with it as it flew right off the table. Michael stared at it in horror as it hit the floor and skittered into the skirting board with a dull thud.

The three of them sat in stunned and sickened silence for a moment as the wooden pointer slowly spun to a halt. Only then did anyone say anything. It was Cassandra, and all she could utter was a shuddering inhale.

"What's wrong?" Irene asked her, her voice trembling.

"The planchette," Cass stammered. "It left the table before we said goodbye. The spirit wasn't sent away. It's still here. In this room."

Even as she spoke the air seemed to darken even further. An eerie thick chill came swiftly on its back so that their breaths fogged visibly in front of them. The whole house had become deathly silent, and a clammy, almost hand-like weight, seemed to press down upon their shoulders from behind.

Their eyes tracked around the darkness of the room. The candles had gone out, and the only light that illuminated the room now was coming from the kitchen. With his breath still fogging into white clouds in front of him, Michael glanced back down towards the card table and at the wooden tiles still set out around its perimeter in a rectangle. The letter that was missing, the letter that the nervous pointer had ripped right off the board, was the letter Y.

TWO

WHAT CRAWLS BEHIND THE WALLS

Irene tugged on the light cord in the bathroom and stepped in front of the small mirrored cabinet over the sink. Her face was pale, her eyes bloodshot, and her heart hammered beneath her blouse. She wanted to swear repeatedly, but not in front of Michael. They been married less than two years, and although she'd sworn some in her youth, it was a side of her she didn't want him to see, despite how shitty up she felt.

Michael, on the other hand, had seemed flustered at the time, Cassandra's pointer hitting the floor just inches from him, but he'd had a couple of beers from the cooler and that had seemed to recompose him. She hoped it wasn't just her who felt scared. Cass was a veteran at this kind of thing, and she'd left quickly afterwards, blaming her sister and her husband for what she called negative psychic turbulence.

She looked hard at her own reflection in the small oval mirror, and for a moment became aware of just how silent the house had become. She held a breath, her focus drifting into middle distance, listening even for the TV downstairs, but there was nothing but the drumming of her own heartbeat.

She looked back at herself. Her pupils were stark inside her eyes, and brutally sharp. She could make out the flecks around her iris, the veins at the edge of the white, all with unusual clarity. The silence of the house was suffocating now - Michael must have turned the TV off for some reason - all except for the thump-thump-thump inside her chest.

Her head conjured the sight of seeing the heart-shaped pointer whistling across the table, tumbling through the air, before hitting the hard floor. She remembered looking across at her sister and seeing her face aghast, and that had scared her more than the accident. Her expression had been one of terror, as though she'd actually clasped eyes upon one of the ghosts she claimed to communicate with. Irene might almost have sworn to have felt something, not like a hand upon her or anything even as physical as that, but more like a breath, a passing touch of a cold exhale.

Something brushed past her cheek suddenly, a chilling whisper in the still air of the bathroom, and she shuddered away from it, stumbling to the door with a sudden fright as she screamed out her husband's name. She felt stupid even as she cried out, but when he did not reply, she hurried to the top of the stairs and called out to him again.

The house was still in silence; no TV, no fridge opening in the kitchen, nothing.

Irene stood for a moment at the top of the stairs looking down, waiting for him to appear, but there weren't even any footsteps; the house was simply dead.

She called out again, a note of panic creeping into her voice, but his name echoed off the walls like a dull clarion, the sound sucked into a void.

The hairs had risen on her neck now, prickling like nettles. He wouldn't have gone out without telling her, she thought quickly to herself. Where would he go? Cass had already left, angrily too, and Michael wouldn't have gone after her anyway.

A door slammed shut, and her heart skipped a beat, her stomach lurching.

"Michael?" she almost wept his name now, but still he did not reply.

She put a foot on the top step, stooping to try and see through the banisters, praying that he would appear out of the living room with a reassuring smile on his lips.

"Michael?" her voice was quieter now, timid even.

What if something else had heard her. What if there was something loose in the house after all.

Something creaked above her head, from the roof or the attic, and Irene almost stumbled down the stairs as she cowered away from it, her head swivelling to stare up at the ceiling. But there was nothing there, nothing visible anyway. Then came the soft padding of footsteps, thump-thump-thump, as if somebody was treading slowly across the rafters.

Her breath froze in her throat. A cool breeze suddenly lifted her hair delicately off her face. Her skin raised gooseflesh, the hairs on her arms itching. And then came a footstep in the hallway just below her. She shot a glance down through the banisters and saw Michael standing there looking up at her, another beer in his hand. His expression was bemused, and as she stared back at him, she realised that she could hear the TV droning in the background behind him. There was no mistaking it, it was on, and she could hear the theme tune to his favourite show playing too.

"What are you doing sitting on the stairs, hon?"

he asked her, taking a gulp from his beer.

Irene opened her mouth but nothing came out, nothing that made sense anyway.

"Come and watch TV," he went on, half turning, the motion unsettling his balance. It was clear that that was not his third beer in his hand.

"I'll be down in a minute," she murmured, unable to take her eyes off him. "Where did you go?"

"The kitchen."

"No, before that. Did you go outside for something?"

Michael shook his head.

"I've been here all the time."

Irene looked back up at the ceiling. The slow padding had stopped, the upstairs rooms now quiet once more. She suddenly didn't want to go back into the bathroom, and even though she'd left the light on, she hurried downstairs to sit with Michael for a bit. It'd be bedtime soon, she thought crazily to herself, and they could go up together.

The clock on the bedside cabinet ticked steadily in the darkness, but it wasn't that that had woken her. Something was moving in the attic, in the space above their heads.

The rafters creaked gently, and Irene stared wide-eyed up at the ceiling, tracing in the darkness its route by the sounds across the attic floor. Michael made honking noises beside her, submerged in a deep sleep, and Irene did not want to wake him. He'd have thought her crazy about someone walking in an empty attic if she woke him, and only a couple of

years into their marriage, to actually wake him in the middle of the night for so ludicrous a notion would put an unnecessary strain where one didn't need to be. His hours had already become longer and harder than they had been, and he needed his sleep. They'd moved to Hunton for the fresh air of the countryside, thinking that when they raised a family, which Irene hoped was soon, their kids would grow up healthier than if they'd stayed in grimy old London.

The creaking stopped suddenly, and for one horrible moment Irene thought she was being watched, as though whatever had been tramping across the rafters had suddenly stopped and looked down at whatever was watching it.

Her skin ran icy cold, and a shiver scuttled across her flesh; she didn't like it at all.

Her entire body tensed with fear, the feeling of being looked at immense and frightening, and she almost took hold of Michael's arm with the intention of shaking him awake. Almost. But her hands stayed where they were. The creaking started again, continuing in the direction it had been going, fading as it moved away from above their bedroom and out over the landing, sending the house into silence once again.

But the feeling of dread would not leave her. As much as she tried to reason it – noisy pipes, contracting timber – the image of something treading carefully from one rafter to another would not leave her head. She could visualise, in the darkness of the bedroom, a shadowy black figure with thin gaunt legs striding from beam to beam, a large black hat perched on its head, obscuring features she knew would be hideous, ghost-like.

The word ghost screamed out at her. Why had she

used it? It made the whole cottage feel haunted, possessed, and the shiver of fear shot rapidly through her body, chilling her bones utterly. Oh how she wanted Michael to snort himself awake. She would hug him then, under the pretence of passion. She never felt afraid when she was with him. Terror only came to her when she was alone. Perhaps she thought that he would always protect her, no matter what might face them. Perhaps it was just someone else to share the fear with her, halving it, who knows? Perhaps that was why she felt so terrified now. With Michael snoring beside her, it felt as though she was alone, with no one to protect her from whatever was creeping about in the attic.

Something whispered behind her ear and Irene shook violently. It was only a few words, enough to make her think afterwards that perhaps she had heard nothing at all, but tears welled quickly, her pulse thudding a sudden furious beat. She clutched at her husband now, her fingers clenching his pyjamas inside the ball of her fist, but he didn't wake. He snorted loudly as he rolled halfway over, but then slid back into his former rhythm of wheezing breaths.

Irene's eyes were white in the blackness of the room. Her hands were shaking, her icy skin prickled with gooseflesh, and her breathing had become insanely ragged. The whispering did not come again, but she lay in a horrible silence for at least an hour, unable to move in case this thing should see her awake, unable to breath in case it should hear her.

What she saw next was sunlight illuminating the room. Her eyes flickered open to see Michael creeping out of the room. She spoke his name, wanting him to stay with her, at least for a while, and he stopped and looked back at her with a warming smile on his lips.

"I didn't mean to wake you," he said to her, his voice still hushed.

"I'm glad you did."

"Are you okay? You look pale."

"I didn't sleep well."

He came to the edge of the bed and perched on it, pressing the palm of his hand against her brow.

"You don't have a temperature."

"Nothing high anyway."

Michael's brow furrowed.

"Doesn't matter," Irene said, taking his hand and holding it firmly in hers. "What time is it?"

"Six."

"Do you have to go so early?"

"The cattle won't look after themselves."

Irene pursed her lips. She knew this new life would be so much healthier for them, but the hours were crippling. They'd not been here a month, but she could see the tiredness at the edges of Michael's eyes already in the darkness that circled them. He'd not complained, although the work was hard, but she suspected that he wouldn't quit even if he wanted to. They'd made the decision to stay, for the benefit of raising a good family. What kind of living could London offer their kids? Here they would have fields and woods to play in and explore, while the city could only offer dirty streets full of speeding cars and criminals. There was no question really.

Her eyes went past him to the ceiling, but it was just as it should be, the thin shaft of golden sunlight breaking through the gap in the curtains and painting itself through its centre like a long magician's staff. There were no noises now either, no creaking of rafters, and as much as she wanted to tell her husband about what she had heard during the night, she did

not want to upset him. It was an old cottage, a forester's cottage. It was supposed to make noises. It was just that last night -

"I'll see you lunchtime," Michael said, bending to kiss her.

He ruffled her hair with his hand, stroking it away from her face with his long delicate fingers, the skin of his fingertips roughened from honest manual labour. It felt nice to have his touch upon her, the abrasiveness of his skin, and she could only help but think that it would have been nicer to have had it during the night.

"I'll make you something nice," she said, taking his hand in hers and kissing it tenderly.

He got up to leave, smiling before making his way to the door.

"I'll look forward to it," he said, and went to close the door after him.

"Leave it open," she said, a little more loudly and abruptly than she'd intended.

His face appeared back round it.

"I need to get up in a minute anyway," she added.

"Sleep some more, honey," he said to her. "There's no need to get up so soon if you had trouble sleeping."

"No, it's okay. I think some fresh air would do me more good."

"Sure?"

Irene nodded.

"Yes. I'm sure."

THREE

INFLUENCE OF THE TREES

Michael came home at one o'clock, his work clothes dappled with green. Irene greeted him warmly as he came in the back, his muddied boots left outside by the step, craning her neck to plant a kiss upon his lips so that she didn't dirty her apron.

"I've made you a pie," she told him excitedly, almost skipping back to the log-burning oven, "from those apples you got from the orchard."

"I haven't had a home-made apple pie in years."

"I know," she said with a grin. "I only hope it tastes okay."

"And why wouldn't it," he said, siding over to her and laying a kiss upon the back of her neck.

Irene curled from the contact, the sensation tickling the hairs at her nape, and turned swiftly to take hold of him, forgetting the greenery that covered most of his front.

"You shouldn't have done that," Michael said to her, kissing her anyway. "This stuff is a swine to get off."

Irene backed away a little to examine it.

"What is it?"

"Just greenery off the trees. I've been doing some pruning up at the copse on the hill."

"And it won't brush off?"

She wanted to have a go, but didn't want a kitchen full of dirt with her pie almost ready to come out.

"Mostly," he said, glancing down at his chest. He lifted a hand but Irene stopped him.

"Not in here."

"Sorry," he said with a grin, and turned to go back outside.

"What's that?" she asked, stepping after him.

"What's what?"

"That, on your arm."

Michael raised both his arms and cast an eye over them both, but Irene had already taken hold of the one she had seen and was manoeuvring it towards the light.

"It's just a twig of something stuck to the skin," Michael said dismissively, waiting to take his arm back. But Irene wasn't about to let it go so easily. She put her face nearer to it, lifting the sprouting stem gently with her fingers.

"That's not stuck," she said quietly, as she scrutinised it further. "It's like it's growing out of you."

"That's ridiculous," he said. "It's just something that's got snagged, that's all."

"No, look," she said adamantly. "It's sprouting out of your arm."

Michael looked closer now, to humour his wife if nothing else, but to his amazement, the twig did indeed seem to be growing out of his flesh. He pulled it a little but it was in there alright.

"Just what sort of trees are you pruning up there?" Irene wanted to know now. "Are they dangerous?"

"There's no such thing as a dangerous tree," Michael said to her, pinching the stem between his thumb and index finger, teasing it out.

"I think you ought to ask Mr Oates."

"I'm not wasting his time with something this silly."

The roots were firm inside the flesh of his arm, but Michael continued to ease it out. He winced in pain as the growth refused to let go of whatever it had adhered itself to, but with a thin snapping sound the twig came free and Michael went over to the kitchen bin to drop it inside.

"There," he said, with a kind of uneasy flourish. "It's gone now."

Irene regarded him with an uncertain expression. It was clear that she wasn't convinced.

"You should tell Mr Oates anyway," she said to him.

Michael went over to her and kissed her forehead.

"It's gone now, honey," he said with a smile. "Now, how about a slice of that pie?"

Irene turned and went back to the oven, hooking open the heavy metal door and peering inside. A wave of dry but sweet-smelling heat parched her face, but she could see that the pastry had turned the colour of caramel. Reaching up for her oven glove and a spatula, she guided the metal dish off the shelf and out onto the counter. Steam plumed around her like mist on a rolling moor, and she closed the oven door to find Michael standing over her, inhaling the steam with closed eyes.

"I'm going to have to pay the orchard another visit," he said dreamily.

"I take it you still want a slice?"

"And make it a big one."

"There's something else I've been thinking about, Michael," she said, pulling a knife from the cutlery

drawer. "It gets a bit lonely with you all out all day, so what would you think about getting a pet?"

Michael looked at her.

"What sort of pet?"

"A cat or a dog or something."

Michael stared at her as she balanced a large slice of pie out of the dish and set it onto one of her dessert plates. Handing him a fork, she added:

"It'd keep me company."

Michael pondered the notion as he picked up his plate.

"I don't see any reason why not," he said at last, lifting the pie up to his nose and smelling it with half-lidded eyes of bliss.

"And it would get plenty of exercise, living out here."

"You can be sure of that."

"So what do you think?"

Michael separated a chunk of pie with the edge of the fork, the apple steaming madly, but he left it to cool a few moments more.

"A dog might be a bit of a bind, you know?"

"A cat then?"

Michael smiled, and then finally nodded.

"Sure," he said. "Why not."

Irene grinned with happiness and then prompted him to try the pie. She watched him keenly as he picked up the chunk of pie before blowing on it and slipping it into his mouth.

"Well?" she wanted to know eagerly.

"Good," he stammered, the word coming out on a cushion of steam. "And hot."