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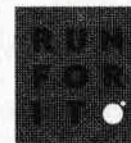
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BY DAISY PEARCE

Something in the Walls
Dark Is When the Devil Comes

DAISY PEARCE

**SOMETHING
IN THE
WALLS**



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ONE

Friday, June 16, 1989

I walk into the pharmacy on Union Street for two things: my photographs and a pregnancy test. As I stand at the counter I feel lightheaded and thirsty. Nerves, I suppose. Or the heat. There was a piece on the radio this morning about a hosepipe ban and water rationing, and Oscar leaned forward in his chair, pushing his glasses up his nose.

“You hear that, Mina?” he said, cutting his toast carefully. “You’ll be grateful I put that water butt in the garden last winter now, won’t you?”

The temperature on the big digital clock hanging outside the chemist reads 35°C and already the armpits of my T-shirt are dark with sweat. I take my package and walk quickly to the public toilets with my head down and sunglasses on, panting like a dog by the time I duck inside. The toilets are dingy and smell

of urine and cigarette smoke, the metal tang of cold tiles. The light that punches through the grimy windows is the color of nicotine. I open the test with shaking fingers and hover over the seat, trying to hold the flimsy cardboard stick steady between my legs.

The insert tells me it will take ten minutes to see a result. I sit with my hands neatly folded in my lap and wonder what I will tell Oscar, how he will take the news. He'll be surprised, I think. He's normally so careful.

Last night, we passed a roadblock at the site of a traffic accident. The blue lights of the police cars pulsed in the growing darkness. I craned my head around to see the wreckage. An ambulance rolled past; no siren, slow moving. A funeral pace. Oscar inched the car forward, frowning.

"Car accident," he said, nodding toward the scene. Glass chips glittering. Hot, bent chrome. He fanned himself with the road map, one elbow hooked out the window. "Looks bad."

"That corner's a death trap," I replied. My skin was sticking to the leather seats. God, it was so hot, still.

"It's not the road, it's the driver." Oscar was frowning. "I've told you that."

I looked at him sideways.

"You don't know that. Maybe a dog ran out into the road, or a child. Maybe the driver fainted. You don't *know* what happened."

He snorted, shaking his head. I knew what was coming. I steeled myself.

"If you're careful, you're safe," he said firmly.

Six minutes have passed, by my watch. I drum my fingers. *If you're careful, you're safe*. Well, on that last night of the holiday,

we hadn't been safe, had we? We had one too many ouzos and now here I am, sitting in the cubicle of a stinking public toilet with my head in my hands waiting for the little stick to tell me whether I'm to be a mother. I look down at my engagement ring, wondering where the thrill of excitement is. My mother told me that stuff was for storybooks and young lovers in movies.

"*In real life you just want someone who can remember to descale the kettle, pet,*" she said, giving me a knowing look. "*If you want excitement, take up skydiving.*"

I glance down at my bag, remembering the photographs I collected. I'd taken a roll of film to be developed a couple of days ago, mostly pictures from our holiday to Crete and the tour we took to see the Palace of Knossos. Now I pull them out and flick through them, marveling at the blue depth of the sky against the whitewashed houses, the umber-colored alleyways.

I feel something then, an unexpected warmth between my legs, that heavy, sinking sensation low down in me and I know, I just *know*. After all, hadn't I felt that deep cramping in my stomach as I got out of the shower that morning? I wipe myself anyway, surprised but not disappointed to see the smear of dark blood on the tissue. I don't even need to look at the pregnancy test now to know that it is a negative. I snatch up the pictures and cram them back into the envelope, suddenly desperate to be away from this cramped cubicle and the grim fluorescent lighting, cursing as a photo slips from my fingers and slides over the tiled floor. I pick it up and turn it over. It's a photograph Oscar took of me one night in a restaurant high up in the hills. I'm wearing a pale yellow dress, looking beyond the camera to where the swifts were nesting in the rafters of an old barn. A little way behind my right shoulder, partly shadowed, a young man is standing and looking directly at me. His face is slightly

blurred, as though he was in the process of turning away as the flash went off, turning his retinas into blank silver pennies. Something sinks in my stomach, as cold and solid as a stone.

“Oh my God,” I whisper, brushing my thumb over the figure in the picture. “Oh my God.”

TWO

“Did you look at it?”

Oscar doesn't lift his head. He bends over his crossword, long fingers pressing the newspaper flat. His face is hard and angular and built from strong lines; long straight nose, cheekbones like knife blades. He sighs loudly.

“Yes.”

“Well?”

A beat. My heart quickens.

“It's him, isn't it?”

“I think you know the answer to that.”

He moves as if to write something, counting the boxes with the nib of his pen. Then he sighs again, loudly. It's a tricky clue, five across. *Frighten, as a horse (5)*. I snuck a look at the crossword

this morning, before he got out of bed and came down for breakfast. I push the photograph over the table again, forcefully.

“Have a proper look. That’s Eddie. I’d know him anywhere.”

Oscar looks up at me. I haven’t told him about the pregnancy scare or the unmistakable relief I felt when I saw the tissue spotted with blood. He wouldn’t understand.

“Mina, that’s not—”

“Are you looking properly?” The pitch of my voice rises higher, anxiously. “I can’t believe you don’t see it!”

“This is irrational. *You* are being irrational. He’s been dead six years, Mina—I mean, what do you expect me to say?”

Something hard in my throat. I swallow against it.

“I *know* he’s dead. I just mean—”

“What? What do you mean? Please explain it to me because I’m struggling to understand.” He removes his glasses and stares at me in that way he does, amber eyes unflinching. I roll my hands into fists, frustrated because I get it, I do. I *know* Eddie is dead. But. *But*.

“It’s ‘spook,’” I snap instead, nodding toward his crossword.

“Five across, ‘Frighten, as a horse.’ Spook.”

I snatch the photograph away from him as hot, frustrated tears prick my eyes. Oscar sighs.

“Listen. I’m trying to be kind when I say this—” He reaches for me and I stiffen, but don’t pull away. My hands are trembling. “It might be time for you to go back to the group, Mina.”

It’s been six months since I walked into the church hall on Newham Road with its familiar smells of furniture polish and curdled milk, the flickering light over the doorway which draws all the moths in the dark winter months. Oscar had directed me

to it a year ago, after I’d had a spate of bad dreams in which Eddie appeared under a shelf of thick blue ice, screaming and hammering against it as bubbles floated out of his mouth. “*You need to go and talk to other people like you,*” Oscar had told me, handing me a leaflet with a printed heart at the top and below, the image of two hands reaching toward each other. *Hope and Hands Bereavement Support*, it had read. *Let go of loss, not love.*

The group was small back then. Just nine of us sitting in a semicircle on hard plastic chairs, drinking tea out of clumsy, mismatched mugs. Sometimes people spoke and sometimes they didn’t, and although I can’t say that it helped me much, the bad dreams stopped coming and for a while, it was okay. I met widowers and orphans, victims of tragedies far greater than my own, astonished at their ability to keep going, to persevere. Everyone spoke of empty beds and unworn clothes, the totems left behind by the deceased. We laughed and got angry and rubbed each other’s backs when we cried. We fluctuated; the people who joined, left, and rejoined were like the ebb and flow of the sea. That’s how Horace, the man who led the group, referred to grief. Sometimes small and quiet and shallow, sometimes a tsunami, cold and frightening. But inevitable, just like the tide. I like Horace. He lost his wife and son in a house fire at the beginning of the decade, still wore the burn scars up his arms, his skin brown and stippled like the bark of a gnarled tree. Even though Eddie had been dead five years by that point, Horace treated me with sympathy and understanding, urging me to pull up a chair with the others and handing me a mug of tea with what I would come to understand was his usual greeting, “You’re always welcome here.”

As I walk into the room that evening, Horace greets me with a big smile and open arms, my name ringing in his mouth like

a bell—*Mina!* A hug, the flat clap of his open palm on my back, his smile so wide it reveals the pink of his gums. He hands me a mug of tea, unsweetened, and I wince slightly at the taste, which makes Horace laugh again. There is a cluster of others here tonight, a few who I recognize but most I don't, new faces all with the same expressions; pinched and haunted, shocked hollow. As I take a seat I see a man hovering in the kitchen doorway, neither in nor out, his face tight with indecision. He is tall and long limbed with dark upward tilted eyes and a scrubby beard, holding a piece of paper in one tightly clenched hand. Our eyes meet briefly and then Horace is touching my arm and saying, "Why don't you tell everyone about Eddie, Mina?" and I'm nodding and saying okay and what I tell them is this:

It was cold the winter my brother had died. Chrome skies and snowstorms which buried the windowpanes and masked the sound of his labored breathing. They said that's what probably finished him off in the end, that cold. As though it had somehow seeped into the hollows of his bones and turned his blood to ice. Eddie had always been sickly, my mother had told me, even as a baby. Later, after the funeral, I would realize she had been in denial about just how sick he had been—her and my father both. His immune system hadn't formed right, couldn't fight off illness. They never talked about it, but they must have known, both of them. They must have.

I settled on the bed beside him, taking his hand in my own. His skin was as heavy and cold and pale as milk. Eddie opened his eyes and smiled at me, weakly.

"I've been thinking about the end," he whispered. He squeezed my hand, just once. "You'll make sure they play the right music won't you, Meens? I don't want Mum screwing it up and putting on her stuff. Not if there's a load of girls from

my school there. I don't want to be carried out to Rod fucking Stewart."

I laughed, even though I felt the swell of tears suffocating me, burning the backs of my eyes. The choke hold of his illness, sinking him, shrinking him. He was only fourteen. It wasn't *fair*.

"Of course."

"Iron Maiden or nothing."

"Sure thing, Eddie."

There had been a twinkle about him that day. After days of lethargy he'd developed a flush in his sunken cheeks that hadn't been there in a long time. Of course, afterward, I learned that this is known as "terminal lucidity" and is common in end-of-life patients. A surge of energy prior to the body's shutdown. I took his hand and the silence enfolded us gently, like a soft blanket. His voice was trembling and whispery and I needed to lean in closer just to hear it.

"If there's anything out there, I'll come back and tell you, Meens."

When I finish talking, there is an ache in my chest like something is being crushed, my eyes brimming with unshed tears. I've told this story in this room dozens of times because each telling is a panacea. I don't subscribe to a lot of what Oscar refers to as "new age nonsense" but the idea that grief gets heavier the longer you carry it alone is one that has helped me.

Horace smiles as I excuse myself to go and get a glass of water. In the kitchen, that tall man is still hovering, standing beside the sink with that piece of paper in his hand, a lit cigarette smoldering between his lips. The window is open, the night outside still and humid and pricked with stars.

"I'm sorry about your brother," he says to me, this man. I notice his long fingers. Piano player's fingers, my mum would have called them. I wonder if he is a musician. "It sounds like it happened very fast."

"It did." I pull a glass from the draining board. "It took us all by surprise."

"Your parents must have been heartbroken."

"Yeah," I tell him. Truth is, my mum switched off completely after Eddie died. Staring out the window with nightshade shadows beneath her eyes, fingers worrying at the loose skin of her neck. I was sixteen years old, just scraping through my exams and getting through college by the skin of my teeth. Her withdrawal was abrupt and immediate, and I felt it like a punch to the throat. The day I left home for university, she looked right through me, her face a rictus, holding my gaze long enough to say, "*He should still be with us, Mina.*" My dad, on the other hand, found God. It was a rock in a storm, he said. He became fervent and heated when he prayed, started hanging crucifixes around the house. I don't blame him. I don't blame either of them. But I find it hard to be around them, even now. Prayers and paralysis. Old wounds.

The man dips his head. Under the fluorescent lights, I can see glints of red in his hair. I glance down at the crumpled piece of paper he is holding. It is covered in scrawls and loops, scrappy-looking, like something a child has done.

"You should come in and sit down. Everyone is very friendly. You don't have to talk if you don't want to."

"My daughter's name was Maggie. She was seven years old and mad as a hatter. She had hair the color of autumn leaves. I loved her so much."

His voice snags slightly, eyes soft and liquid. I touch his arm, feeling his skin smooth and warm beneath my hand.

"Do you have a photo of her?"

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his wallet, flipping it open so I can see inside. There, behind the small plastic screen, is a photo of a gap-toothed little girl grinning up at the camera. She is wearing a paper crown, which is slipping slightly over her red hair. Sometimes I wonder how our many-chambered hearts can stand the loss all these years, why it doesn't simply stop beating. I wonder how the grief can still twist inside you like a stitch in your side when you least expect it. The man clears his throat and swipes at his eyes.

"That picture was taken on her seventh birthday. Me and my wife—*ex-wife* now—we made her a Snoopy cake. She loved that stupid dog."

"It's so unfair. I'm sorry. Listen, I'm going to make a cup of tea. Do you want one, uh—?"

"Sam. I don't suppose you've got anything cold, have you?"

"There's juice in the fridge."

"I was hoping for something stronger."

"Like a beer?"

"Vodka. Tequila maybe. My mum used to keep a bottle of brandy under the sink."

I laugh, pulling the mugs down from the cupboard in front of me.

"I think that would be unwise. They have AA meetings here."

"Oh. Tea, then. Thanks."

I fill the kettle and put it on to boil. When he speaks next, his voice is soft and so quiet I could almost have believed I'd imagined it.

"What you just said in there, about your brother—did he—did he ever come back?"

I stand very still. I hadn't told the group about the photograph, the image of Eddie with those unsettling silvery eyes turned toward the camera because the rational side of me knows that it isn't my brother. It *can't* be. It's just some trick of the light, a smear on the camera lens. I know this and yet I cycle back to Eddie's words that day—"If there's anything out there, I'll come back and tell you, Meens"—and I wonder. I wonder. Sam clears his throat.

"I went to see a psychic, you see. To try to make contact with Maggie."

"Did it work?"

"You tell me."

He hands me the piece of paper he has been holding. It has been scribbled all over, crumpled and folded from endless handling. Through the looping coils of script some words seem to float to the surface. *Teeth. Heavy. Rust.*

"It's illegible."

"The woman who wrote it claims it's the work of spirits. 'Psychography,' it's called. 'Automatic writing.' She went into a trance right in front of me. It cost me a hundred pounds. She must have seen me coming, right?"

Loops and curlicues, like hieroglyphs. A smear on a camera lens. The dead, walking among us. "*We don't fool anyone harder than we fool ourselves,*" as Oscar is fond of saying. Heat flares in me like a stirred ember.

"I paid in cash. She told me I had to give her something of Maggie's to be able to make contact—a toy or a piece of clothing—so I went up to the attic and I dug through all her old things, all the boxes we couldn't bring ourselves to give away, to find that fucking Snoopy T-shirt she always wore. I was up there half the day. It tore me up to do it, but to take my money on top of that? It's criminal."

I reach for Sam and slide an arm around him. His eyes are gleaming.

"At her funeral—God, the tiny coffin, as light as a feather and the size of a toy but still I don't know where I found the strength to lift it—I told Maggie I would come and find her. I was worried that she would be lonely. That she wouldn't be able to find her way home. You see, I get it. Your brother, that weight you're carrying? I understand."

Something catches in my throat. "*If there's anything out there, I'll come back and tell you, Meens.*" Sam and I, orbiting a void, a life suspended just waiting for a sign.

"The worst thing about it is that I basically expose these kinds of people for a living," Sam continues, voice strained and angry sounding, "grifters and con men and frauds. I learned to cold-read before I could fucking talk and I still fell for this crap."

He screws up the piece of paper into his fist and shoves it clumsily into the swing bin beneath the counter.

"You cold-read for a job?"

"I'm a journalist. Figuring people out by what they're purposely not telling me is all part of it, yeah. It's an art form when it's done well."

I laugh. I can't help it. Sam shoots me a sharp look.

"You think I'm exaggerating? Let me tell you what I've learned about you, then. You take sugar in your tea even though you're trying to cut down. You're newly engaged—congratulations, by the way—to a safe, practical man who is quite traditional. He's well-off, and you like to think that your future children will have your looks and his brains. Then there's the *Dracula* connection. Which one is it? Your mum or your dad?"

"How do you—?"

"Mina Harker. The 'light of all lights.'"