

Lisa nodded. 'Sure. It was all a dream – you didn't go to the toilet and you weren't outside our door at midnight so you don't know what time we went to sleep, right?'

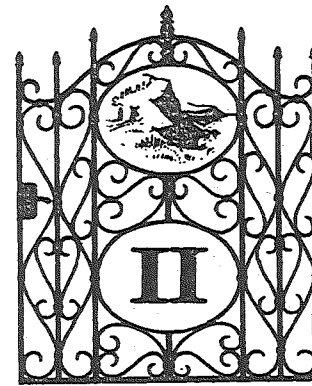
'Right. Except –'

'Except what, Fliss? What is it?'

'After the toilet, I dreamed I washed my hands, right? And it was one of those spurty taps where the water comes all at once and goes everywhere. Some went on the floor. Quite a lot, in fact. There didn't seem to be anything to mop it up with, and anyway I was too scared to hang about so I left it.'

Lisa shrugged. 'Dream water in a dream bathroom. So what?'

Fliss looked at her friend. 'It was still there this morning,' she said.



They spent an hour in Staithes, but nobody saw the ghost. They saw crab pots piled by cottage doors and boats tied up in the creek. They stared at the dangerous cliff and tried to imagine what it would be like to be walking along quite normally one second, and to have no head the next. They bought sweets and ice-lollies and stood among their knapsacks and shoulder-bags, chatting and watching the waves while the teachers had a cup of tea. At eleven o'clock they picked up their bags and moved out, leaving the village by way of a steep, winding footpath which led to the clifftop and on out of sight. Mr Hepworth said, 'This is part of the Cleveland Way, and it will take us to Runswick Bay. It's a three-mile walk, more or less. About halfway, we'll stop and eat our lunches. There's no tearing hurry, but do try to keep up – the path runs very close to the cliff edge in places, and if there are stragglers it becomes

difficult to keep an eye on everybody. Are you listening, John Phelan?’

‘Yessir.’

‘Good. Off we go, then.’

The sun was a fuzzy ball above the sea. Little white clouds sailed inland on the breeze, their shadows racing across a rolling landscape of wheat field and meadow. Strung out in twos and threes along the track, the children walked and chattered. Gulls wheeled and soared, or floated like scraps of paper on the water far below. A jet, miles high, drew a thin white line across the sky.

Lisa flung out her arms and laughed. ‘Lovely!’ she cried. ‘Don’t you think it’s lovely, Fliss – the smells? All this space?’

Fliss nodded. ‘I was just thinking about the others, stuck in school having boring lessons, and us here enjoying ourselves.’ She looked at her watch. ‘We’d be in French now.’

‘Did you have to mention that?’ scowled Lisa. ‘Trying to spoil my day, I know.’

‘No, I’m not. I think it makes it better, thinking about where you’d be if you weren’t here. It makes you appreciate it more.’

‘Yeah, well, I can appreciate it without having to think about French, thank you very much. Are you still bothered about that dream, by the way?’

Fliss looked at her friend. ‘Now who’s trying to

spoil whose day?’ She thought for a while. ‘No, I’m not worried. Not at the moment. Not here. It’s like I told you – in broad daylight all that sort of stuff seems daft. You say to yourself, it was just a dream, and you believe it. It’s when you’re in bed at night and everything’s quiet that you start wondering. Anyway, I don’t want to think about it now. What kind of bird’s that?’ She pointed. ‘The black one with a grey head. I’ve seen a few of them today.’

Lisa shrugged. ‘I don’t know. I’m no good at birds. Ask Mrs Evans.’

Fliss looked behind. ‘Where is Mrs Evans – I thought she was walking at the back?’

‘She was. We must be going too fast for her or something. Either that or she’s fallen off the cliff. Anyway, you could ask Mrs Marriott instead – she’s just up there.’

Fliss giggled. ‘You mean it doesn’t matter if Mrs Evans has fallen into the sea, because she’s not the only one who can identify birds?’

‘No, you div – I never said that. Anyway, she won’t have fallen, will she? We’ve left her behind, that’s all. She hasn’t kept up like old Hepworth said – I wonder if he’ll make her write an apology?’

‘Will he heck! D’you think we should tell somebody?’

'Can if you want. Mrs Marriott's just up there.'
Fliss put on a spurt, swerved past Helen Smith and Robert Field, and touched the teacher's shoulder.

'Miss.'

Mrs Marriott turned her head. 'What is it, Felicity?'

'We can't see Mrs Evans, Miss. She was at the back, and now she's disappeared. We thought we should mention it, Miss.'

'Hmm.' Mrs Marriott looked back over the quarter mile or so of track which was visible from where they were standing. Children passed them, leaving the path to do so. 'Thank you, Felicity. D'you think you could catch up with Mr Hepworth – tell him I sent you and ask him to stop the walk? She's probably just fallen behind, but I think perhaps we ought to wait for her.'

'Yes, Miss.'

She set off along the track, weaving in and out among her classmates. One or two called after her, demanding to know where she thought she was going or what the rush was about but she ignored them, going at a steady jog and keeping her eyes on Mr Hepworth.

She was still a couple of hundred metres behind him when he stopped and looked back. She waved and shouted, 'Sir – Sir!' and to her relief he raised

his hand, halting the column, and stood watching her approach.

'What is it, Felicity?' he asked, as she came panting up to him. She told him and he shaded his eyes with his hand, peering back the way they'd come.

'Hmm. Well. She's nowhere in sight – probably twisted an ankle or something and fallen behind. We'll wait here a minute or two, and if she doesn't show up I'll go back and have a look.'

The line shortened, as those further back caught up and stopped. The children milled about, wondering what was happening, and a girl called out, 'Is this where we eat our lunch, Sir?'

Mr Hepworth shook his head. 'No, Samantha Varley, it is not. We're waiting for Mrs Evans, who has fallen behind a bit.' He said something quietly to Mrs Marriott, who came along the line counting heads.

'One missing,' she called. 'Is it Ellie-May? I don't think I've seen her.'

'It is, Miss,' said Haley Denton. 'I saw her dropping back, ages ago.'

'That's probably it, then,' said Mr Hepworth. 'Ellie-May fell behind and Mrs Evans is walking with her. I thought she wasn't looking too bright, back at the hotel.' He looked at his watch. 'We'll give them five minutes, then I'll set off back. Take

your packs off and sit down – we might as well take a breather while we can.’

Fliss went back to sit with Lisa, but she hadn’t been sitting for more than a minute when one of the boys yelled, ‘They’re coming, Sir!’

Everybody watched as the two figures approached. When they reached the place where Fliss and Lisa were sitting, Mrs Evans said, ‘Now then, Ellie-May. You sit with Felicity and Lisa. They’ll look after you.’ She smiled, putting Ellie-May’s knapsack, which she’d been carrying, on the grass. ‘Ellie-May’s not feeling very well, girls. You’ll look after her, won’t you?’

‘Yes, Miss.’

‘I knew you would.’ She smiled again and moved on, murmuring, ‘Sensible girls. Nice, sensible girls.’

Ellie-May looked awful. Her cheeks were white and there were dark smudges, like bruises, under her eyes. She sat down. ‘I couldn’t keep up,’ she growled. ‘I tried, but I went all dizzy. Silly Mrs Evans made me sit with my head between my knees for a bit and I had to drink tea from her flask. It tasted awful. As soon as I felt a bit better we set off after you at about fifty miles an hour, and now I feel rotten again.’

‘Mrs Evans is nice,’ said Lisa. ‘She carried your pack, didn’t she? What’s the matter with you

anyway – tummy bug or something?’

Ellie-May scowled. ‘I don’t know, do I, fat-head? Why do you ask such stupid questions?’

‘Hey, Sunderland!’ A group of boys was sitting nearby. One of them, David Trotter, grinned across at Ellie-May. ‘If you didn’t go creeping about in the middle of the night, we wouldn’t have to hang around waiting for you when we’re supposed to be out walking.’

Ellie-May shook her head. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t creep around. I was asleep all night.’

‘Ooh, you lying so-and-so! I saw you. Half-past two, it was. You’d been to the top floor. You came down on to our landing and disappeared down the stairs. I was watching you from the bathroom.’

‘No, you weren’t, you spaz. You couldn’t. I never left the room, so there!’

‘Blue pyjamas with rabbits on, right?’

‘Shut up. I don’t know what you’re on about.’

‘I’m on about your pyjamas. You’ve got blue ones with rabbits on, haven’t you?’

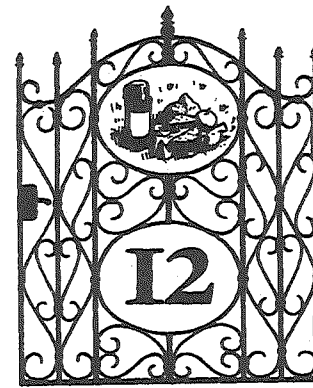
‘So what?’

‘So how would I know that if I didn’t see you?’

‘I dunno. Maybe you were on the stairs or something when I was getting ready for bed. Maybe it’s you that creeps about in the night.’

Fliss sat chewing on a grass stalk, gazing out to sea. She was thinking about last night. The noises from the cupboard. The footsteps. Lisa had said it was a dream and she'd tried to believe it was, but there was the water on the bathroom floor, and now this. She'd heard footsteps in the small hours, and Ellie-May had been seen coming down the stairs in pyjamas. Pyjamas with rabbits on them. So maybe it wasn't a dream, but if it wasn't a dream what was it? Had Ellie-May been in the cupboard last night? Was that possible? It was where the noises had come from, but then what about the number? If the noises were real so was the number, yet it wasn't there this morning. And anyway, why would anyone be in a cupboard at two in the morning? The whole thing was crazy. Unless –

She shivered.



'Right – this'll do nicely,' said Mr Hepworth. They'd reached a grassy hollow where the land ran down in a gentle slope to a cliff which was neither sheer nor high. The grass was very green and quite short, and the children sat down on it and took out their lunch-packs. Friends sat together, and the three teachers found a spot near the top of the slope from which they could see what everybody was doing.

Fliss grabbed Lisa's elbow and steered her away from the group she'd been about to join. 'I've got to talk to you,' she hissed. Ellie-May stood, wondering whether to go with them or stay with the group. Fliss turned and called, 'See you in a bit, Ellie-May – OK?'

Ellie-May nodded. 'Sure.' She sat down between Haley and Bobby Tuke. If people didn't want her around she wasn't going to worry about it.

'What's up?' said Lisa, when they'd got settled.

Fliss swallowed a mouthful of fishpaste sandwich. 'You heard what Trotter said back there. About her?' She nodded towards Ellie-May, who was sitting with her back to them.

Lisa nodded. 'I think he made it up. He's like that.'

Fliss shook her head. 'I don't. I heard footsteps, didn't I? I think it was Ellie-May, and I think she was in that cupboard when I went to the bathroom.'

Her friend looked at her. 'Don't be silly, Fliss! It was a dream. Why would Ellie-May sit in a cupboard in the middle of the night, making funny noises? Why would anybody? And how could a door have a number on it at midnight, and none in the morning? You're barmy.'

'No, I'm not. What about the water on the bathroom floor?'

'Anybody could have squirted water on the floor. People do it on purpose, don't they?'

'Well, what about Ellie-May, then - what d'you think's wrong with her?'

Lisa shrugged. 'I dunno. I'm not a doctor, am I? Maybe she's got food-poisoning, which we all will after these rotten sandwiches.' She pulled a face, chewing. 'Why - what do you think's wrong, Doctor Morgan?'

'I think something happened to her in that

cupboard. I wasn't dreaming at all. I know that now. I'm off over to talk to Trot.'

She got up and went over to where David Trotter was sitting with a group of his friends. The boys stopped talking at her approach and squinted up at her, shielding their eyes with their hands. 'What do you want, mong-features?' asked Gary Bazzard, through a mouthful of something pink. Fliss ignored him. 'Can I have a word please, Trot?'

'Trot!' whooped Richard Varley. 'What is she, Trot - your girlfriend or something?'

Trotter blushed. 'Is she heck.' He scowled up at Fliss. 'What about?'

'I'll tell you over there.' She nodded towards a vacant spot on the slope. The others laughed. 'Watch her, Trot,' said Bazzard, 'she's after you.'

The red-faced boy scrambled to his feet. 'Come on then,' he growled. 'And it better be important or I'll chuck you off the cliff.'

They moved away from the others, and Fliss told him what she'd seen and heard in the night, linking it with what he'd seen and with Ellie-May's present condition. The boy glanced across at Ellie-May once or twice while she was speaking, and when she'd finished he nodded. 'OK. It all fits, and she looks rough, no doubt about that. But what I don't get is, why would she go up two

floors and into a cupboard in the first place, and if she did, and something happened to her there – something bad – why hasn't she told one of the teachers?

Fliss shrugged. 'I don't know, Trot, but there's something funny going on, isn't there?'

'Maybe. But what d'you want me to do about it?'

'I don't want you to do anything. Not by yourself. I'm thinking of keeping watch tonight to see if Ellie-May goes walkabout again. I think Lisa will join me. Will you?'

'I dunno. It seems daft to me. I mean, a cupboard. I ask you – what could there be in a cupboard, Felicity?'

'Fliss.'

'What?'

'Fliss. Call me Fliss.'

'Oh, I see. What could be in a cupboard, Fliss?'

'Who knows?' She chuckled. 'The point is, dare you keep watch with us and find out?'

'How d'you mean, dare I? D'you think I'm scared or something?'

'Could be.'

'Well, I'm not, I can tell you that.'

'Prove it. Watch with us.'

'OK, if Gary can come too.'

'How d'you know he wants to?'

'I don't, yet. He doesn't know anything about it, but he'll want to be in on it when he does. Can I tell him?'

Fliss sighed. 'I suppose so. But get him by himself, right? We don't want the whole flipping class stampeding around in the middle of the night, or nothing will happen at all.'

The boy smiled. 'I don't think it will anyway.'

'Well, we'll see, won't we?' said Fliss.

