

The Haunting Of AVELINE JONES



For Alison, who loved spooky things.

First published in the UK in 2020 by Usborne Publishing Ltd., Usborne House,
83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England, usborne.com

Text copyright © Phil Hickes, 2020
The right of Phil Hickes to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Illustrations copyright © Usborne Publishing Ltd., 2020
Illustrations by Keith Robinson.
Cover typography by Sarah J Coleman/inkymole.com

The name Usborne and the devices are Trade Marks of Usborne Publishing Ltd.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher.
This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

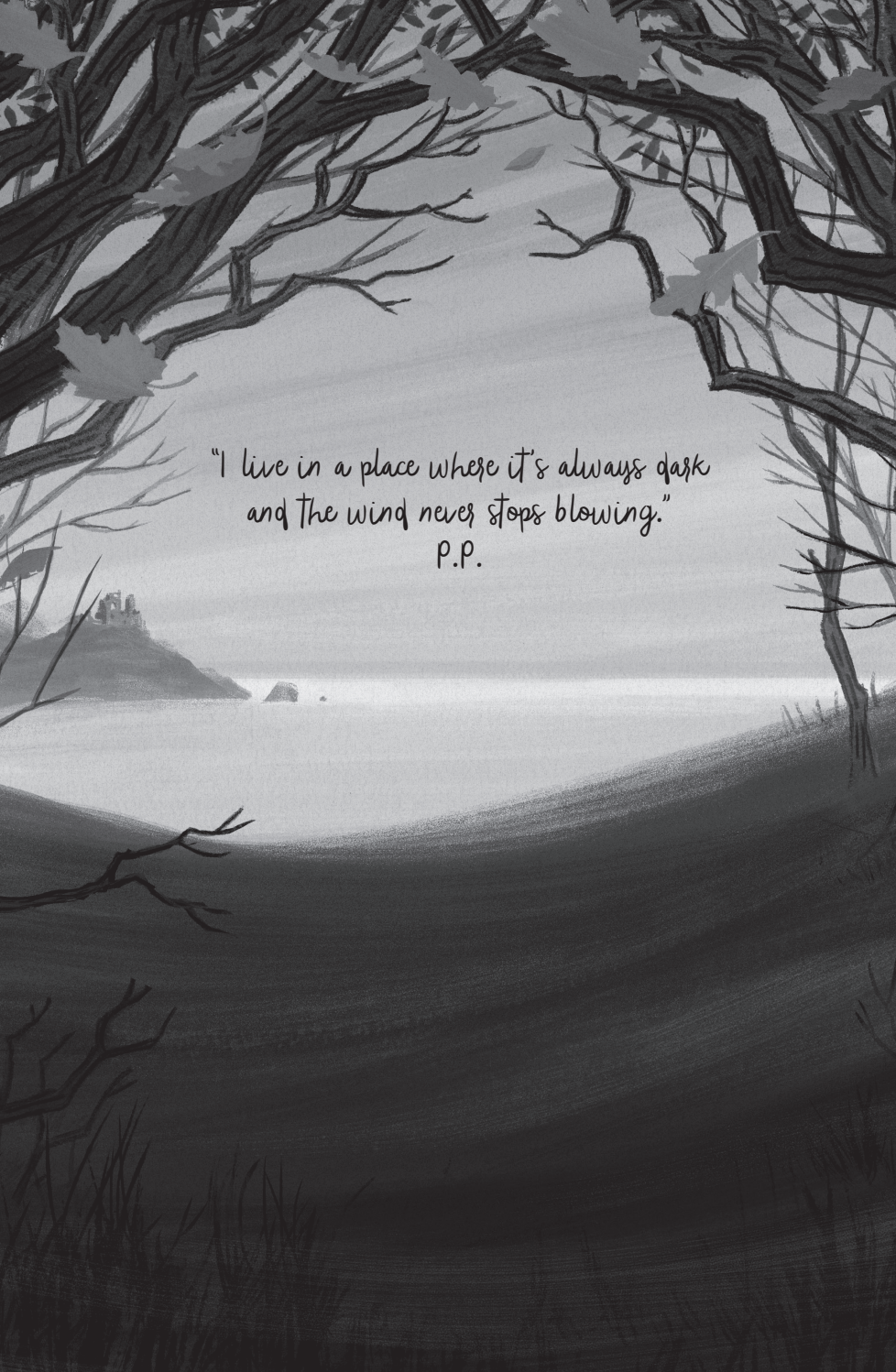
JFMAMJ ASOND/20 ISBN 9781474972147 05657/1
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



The Haunting Of Aveline Jones

Phil Hickes




"I live in a place where it's always dark
and the wind never stops blowing."
P.P.



Chapter 1

A Chill in the Air

It had been the coldest October for years. Nobody could escape the wind's icy breath, which somehow managed to squeeze through even the thickest of scarves. Puddles froze. Pipes burst. People wobbled around on frosty pavements with their arms stuck out as if pretending to be aeroplanes. Schools closed early for half-term and children cheered.

Aveline Jones sat in her mum's car and heaved a sigh that said more about her melancholy mood than words ever could. While a few days off school would normally have been cause for a major celebration, her plans for doing a lot of *not-a-lot* had been scuppered. And now fate was taking her to a different place altogether. A place that

threatened to be even colder than the frozen city she'd left behind.

Malmouth.

Her mum had told her that it could get bitterly cold by the sea, and Aunt Lilian's house was apparently so close to the shore that the windows were crusted with salt. The thought made Aveline wince. That's why her suitcase groaned under the weight of scarves, coats, bobble hats, woolly jumpers, thermal fleeces, thick socks, boots and gloves. She'd even brought her zebra onesie, which didn't normally make an appearance until December.

Aveline stared gloomily out of the car window as the countryside passed by in a bleak blur. They must be getting close to Malmouth by now, she thought, though seeing the weary expression on her mum's face, she resisted the temptation to ask how much further they had to go.

The journey down from Bristol had been long and miserable. Aveline had tried listening to her music for a while, but the songs sounded forced and out-of-place on such a dreary day and so she'd given up. The countryside appeared to have given up, too. With most of their leaves having been blown away, the trees resembled plucked chickens, their trunks black and shiny with slime.



The skinny hedgerows looked similarly hungry and ill, all the colour having been sucked out of them by the vampire weather. The only living things to be seen were the rooks that sat hunched in the branches, hurling their angry curses across the empty countryside.

"I saw the sea, the sea saw me, I saw it first, tee-hee-hee," Aveline's mum said, in a voice that sounded like laughing was the last thing on her mind.

Aveline turned to squint between the manic windscreen wipers. Barely visible on the horizon stretched a thin greyish-blue band of ocean, the wind slicing the tops off the waves as if they were boiled eggs.

"Is that Malmouth?"

"Certainly is. Won't take long now."

Snakes wriggled in Aveline's stomach. Her mum was off to visit Aveline's granny, who lay ill in a hospital in Scotland. The trip would be too far and too upsetting for Aveline, her mum had decided, and so Aunt Lilian had

offered to put Aveline up over half-term until her mum returned.

Aunt Lilian remained something of a puzzle. Nice but cold, like ice cream. She'd been a teacher at a posh boarding school but had moved to the Cornish coast a few months ago to work as a private tutor. Aveline hadn't spent much time with her aunt before now, mainly because Aunt Lilian used to live in Scotland, too, which was a little far away for regular visits. But on the few occasions she'd met her, Aveline always felt a little intimidated. Her aunt ran her life – and house – in the manner of a boot camp, where the "do not"s far outnumbered the "do"s. Sometimes Aveline wondered if her aunt wouldn't be better employed as a prison guard. Now she faced the daunting prospect of being alone with her until early November.

The thought gave her the chills.

Like many coastal towns, Malmouth's streets were narrow and winding, so that every time a car came in the opposite direction, they were forced to slow almost to a complete stop before inching carefully past.

"It's a bit empty, isn't it?" Aveline said, as they began the steep descent into the town.

"Well, we are in the middle of a terrible cold spell,

love," her mum said, nudging the car forward. "All these places along the coast tend to quieten down once the tourists leave. Don't worry, I'm sure there'll still be lots to do."

Despite it being only late afternoon, the sky looked ominously dark. Back home, the city centre where Aveline met her friends would still be teeming with shoppers. Here, the streets were practically deserted. They drove past terraced houses in silence, the town's desolate atmosphere creeping into the car. An old man walking his dog stopped to glare at them as they passed, an annoyed scowl on his face, almost as if their car had *HELLO, WE'RE STRANGERS* spray-painted on the side.

"I wonder…if Malmouth has any ghosts?" Aveline said, doing her best to sound casual.

Her mum sighed.

"Aveline, we've barely arrived and you're already talking about ghosts?"

"But it looks creepy."

"Everywhere looks creepy if all you ever read about is ghosts. Honestly, Aveline, I do wish you'd broaden your interests a little more, because all you're going to do is give yourself nightmares."

They'd had the same conversation many times before

and Aveline knew her mum thought her tastes very odd, but she couldn't help it. Ever since she'd found a book about ghosts in her local library, she'd been fascinated by the idea of people coming back after they died. Over time it had morphed into something of an obsession. After all, if the books were to be believed then England was jam-packed with spooky beings: headless horsemen, ladies in grey, spectral monks and nuns, demon dogs with blazing red eyes and slavering jowls – they were everywhere. So Aveline always kept an eye out, just in case.

And Malmouth appeared to have all the right ingredients for a haunting. Stormy weather. Old houses. The eerie grey swell of the sea. But, most of all, that uncanny emptiness that ghosts liked best. She was sure that was why they were always found on windswept moors, in ruined abbeys and crumbling castles. But for the sake of keeping the peace, Aveline decided to keep her thoughts to herself – and her eyes peeled.

Moments later, they emerged into the centre of the town. Twinkling lights outside The George Hotel added some cheer, though Aveline couldn't help but notice that inside a bored-looking barman watched the flat-screen TV on his own. The fish-and-chip shop was doing marginally better business, although there were still more

seagulls than customers. A boy with floppy black hair sat on a bench outside, reading a book with one hand while using the other to stuff his mouth with chips. Glancing up, he noticed Aveline looking at him and paused, one chip held halfway to his mouth. Reddening, Aveline quickly glanced away. At least now she knew there was one other person her own age in the town.

"Here we go, Lilian lives just along here," Aveline's mum said, swinging the car around a roundabout and onto a road that ran parallel to the beach.

To their left, waves crashed down onto the pebbled beach in angry explosions of foam. A little further on, the concrete harbour wall curved out into the sea like a giant stone tentacle, beside which anchored fishing boats bobbed around in the sheltered bay. To their right ran a line of cosy-looking fishing cottages, all painted different pastel colours. Many were decorated with bunches of antique buoys, hung on the gates and doorways like giant plastic grapes. The windows glowed a welcoming orange and gold and, for the first time since setting off, Aveline wondered if Malmouth might turn out to be better than she'd expected.

Up ahead, outside the cottage at the end of the row, somebody watched them approach. It appeared to be

another boy. He leaned against the garden wall at an awkward angle, as if he'd fallen against it but was unable to pull himself back up. He was odd-looking – his skin appeared too pale, his hair too dry and frizzy, a combination that suggested he might be suffering from some dreadful sickness.

"Is he okay, do you think?" Aveline's mum said.

Aveline didn't reply. She sensed something wasn't quite right, the back of her neck growing cold. It was a feeling she got sometimes, when she walked past abandoned houses with boarded-up windows or lay in bed at night reading something spooky. It told her that all was not well. That perhaps, somewhere in the shadows, something otherworldly lurked.

As they drew closer, the boy still hadn't moved. Their car slowed. Like a pair of inquisitive owls, the two of them turned their heads to peer at the strangely rigid figure.

Dead eyes stared back at them.

A clown mouth curved upwards in a cruel smirk.

The figure's head was made from a grubby white buoy, with eyes, nose and mouth scrawled on in blood-red paint. Its limbs were stiff because they'd been pulled from an old shop-dummy. It wore a black woollen hat on

top of a garish ginger wig and had been dressed in charity-shop clothes – a tatty oversized jacket hung past its knees, underneath which were paint-splattered trousers.

Aveline screwed up her face.

"Ugh, I can't believe we thought that was real. What's it supposed to be?"

Her mum shrugged her shoulders. "Some kind of Halloween decoration, I suppose, but I certainly wouldn't want one in *my* garden. It'd give me the creeps."

Mystery solved, they drove on, though Aveline couldn't help but stare back over her shoulder at the awful dummy. Maybe it'd been made for some local competition. If that was the case, Aveline doubted it would win any prizes. Unless they had one for Ugliest Scarecrow Ever.

Aunt Lilian's house lay a little further on, one street back from the seafront. The house was pretty old by the looks of it, but had been modernized in places, giving it a curious blend of old and new. Its walls were whitewashed and the window frames were ocean-blue, although the paint had faded and peeled. Smoke curled out of the chimney before being snatched away by the wind. A small dog yapped angrily at them through a gap between the curtains.

They knocked on the door. A few seconds later Aunt Lilian opened it, her silhouette a black cross in the doorway. Behind her legs, the terrier dog continued to bark.

"Oh, do be quiet, Charlie, they come in peace," Aunt Lilian hissed at the dog. "I was wondering what had happened to you two. Didn't we agree you'd be here by three?" she said, glancing at her watch to emphasize the inconvenience.

Aveline felt like she was late for class.

"Sorry, Lilian, we got caught up in some roadworks outside Bristol," Aveline's mum explained. "And the weather didn't help much, you know how the rain slows everything down."

The two sisters embraced, similar in looks but not in physique – Aunt Lilian all bones and hard edges with her hair yanked back from her face into a tight bun, while Aveline's mum was softer, her hair falling in bouncy curls. Hard and soft. Much like their characters, Aveline thought, wondering how the two of them managed to be both alike and unalike all at once.

"Ah, Aveline, how are you?" Aunt Lilian said.

"Fine, thanks," Aveline mumbled.

"Well? Come and give me a hug."

It was like wrapping her arms around one of the trees she'd seen on the journey down, all twigs and knots. Then Aunt Lilian held her out at arm's length and studied her, squeezing her shoulders as if Aveline were a grapefruit in the supermarket.

"You've grown," Aunt Lilian said.

Aveline wasn't sure if that was true. Still one of the shortest in her class, she felt like a garden gnome compared to some of her taller, more athletic classmates. But she still liked hearing Aunt Lilian say it. That was another of her aunt's unusual characteristics, Aveline decided. With just a few words she could either make you feel on top of the world, or like something she'd found stuck to the bottom of her shoe.

"Hurry up and bring your things in then, it's not a day to be leaving the door open."

The air smelled fresh and briny. They unpacked the car to the sound of gulls crying and waves crashing, before making their way into Aunt Lilian's home. The kitchen had a flagstone floor with a large Aga oven dominating the room. Charlie's basket lay in front of it and, having satisfied himself that Aveline and her mum didn't work for the Post Office, he settled down in it. The kitchen led through into the living room, which reflected Aunt

Lilian's abnormally tidy approach to home decor, looking as though everything from the lamps to the cushions on the sofa had been lined up with a measuring tape.

Aunt Lilian led the way upstairs, her long, thin body casting strange shadows on the white plaster walls. Behind her, Aveline hauled her bulging suitcase up the narrow stairs.

"Your first time here, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, you should know that the cottage was built sometime in the late eighteenth century," Aunt Lilian said, sounding like a tour guide taking visitors around a medieval castle. "And because of its age there are a few quirks you'll need to get used to, one of which is the heating. It can be very unpredictable, so I've put an electric heater in your room in case you get cold, though please use it sparingly. Blankets are, of course, the more cost-effective option, and you'll find plenty of them in the wardrobe. I'll leave you to unpack – socks and underwear go in the top drawer, tops in the middle and bottoms in the bottom. All outerwear and footwear goes in the wardrobe, though dirty shoes and boots are to be left at the kitchen door. Come down when you're ready."

Aveline was tempted to ask what time morning inspection would begin but held her tongue. While she'd

known her aunt was strict, she couldn't believe that she'd already been given instructions on how to unpack, but she dutifully sorted her clothes into the correct drawers. What an odd beginning to her seaside visit, Aveline thought. She wasn't sure if she would be able to stand being ordered around for the next few days.

Resisting the urge to scream "Help!" out of the bedroom window, she joined her mum and aunt downstairs. They ate some lasagne that Aunt Lilian served in mathematically exact chunks, before settling down in the front room. As the two sisters caught up on their news, and with no TV or internet to entertain herself, Aveline attempted to text a friend, but the signal was so weak that she gave up. She did notice with some relief that Aunt Lilian had a computer set up on a desk at the back of the living room. Aveline wouldn't have been surprised if her aunt still communicated via telegram. Time dragged and Aveline found herself yawning uncontrollably. Tomorrow, she would have to find herself something to do, otherwise she'd go mad.

"I see the sea air's got to you, Aveline," her aunt said. "Better than hot chocolate or camomile tea. Do you know, since I moved here, I've never had a bad night's sleep? I don't know how you manage to get any rest in that noisy

city with the traffic roaring about all hours of the night."

Behind Aunt Lilian's back, Aveline's mum rolled her eyes. Aveline grinned, although it reminded her that tomorrow her mum would be setting off to see Granny and she'd be left here on her own.

"Okay, I'm off to bed, night then," Aveline said, deciding that if she was going to be doing nothing, then she might as well be doing nothing in a warm bed.

"Goodnight, Aveline," Aunt Lilian said, before adding, "Oh, and don't worry if you hear any strange noises in the night, it's just the old house being cranky."

"Or it might be me snoring," Aveline's mum said. "Bedtime for me, too, Lilian, I'm having trouble keeping my eyes open."

"I'll make up a bed for you down here in front of the fire," Aunt Lilian said.

"Night, Mum," Aveline said.

"Night, love, see you in the morning before I leave."

Before I leave.

Aveline trudged upstairs, suddenly feeling very alone. Outside the wind keened, the little house trembling beneath its gusts. Aveline brushed her teeth quickly, the bathroom approximately the same temperature as an igloo, before scuttling across the landing and into her

bedroom. Jumping into bed, she wrapped the sheets and blankets tightly around her and closed her eyes.

Despite what Aunt Lilian said, Aveline found it much noisier by the coast. While it was true that back home in Bristol you could hear the traffic at night, she found that oddly comforting – simply people going about their business. Here it was different. The crashing waves. The howling winds. Salt water spitting at the windows. No human noises at all and everything so wild. It made her feel very small and vulnerable.

Just as she was nodding off, Aveline heard laughter. A mocking, childlike chortle, far off in the night. Raising her head off the pillow, she strained to listen, remembering the creepy scarecrow they'd seen in the garden. What if it came alive at midnight? Was it dragging itself towards the house at this very moment? She hadn't forgotten the eerie sensation that had rippled through her earlier, but told herself she was just being stupid. Her mum already thought she read too many scary books. Besides, scarecrows didn't really come alive. Nothing could hurt her. She was safe.

Shivering, she lay back down and pulled the covers up as far as they could go without actually covering her head.

Silly.

Probably just a seagull, or some squeaky pipes – her aunt had warned her.

Then sleep washed over her, like a wave drifting up over the pebbles.

