The Girl, the Ghost and the Lost NAME



For my family – the one I was born into,
and the one I found along the way.



First published in the UK in 2022 by Usborne Publishing Ltd., Usborne House, 83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England. usborne.com

Usborne Verlag, Usborne Publishing Ltd., Prüfeninger Str. 20, 93049 Regensburg, Deutschland, VK Nr. 17560

Text copyright © Reece Carter 2022

Illustrations by Eleonora Asparuhova © Usborne Publishing, 2022

Typography by Sarah Coleman © Usborne Publishing, 2022

Author photo © Simon Fitzpatrick

The right of Reece Carter to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

The name Usborne and the Balloon logo 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 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.

ISBN 9781803700724 7777/1 JFMAMJJ SND/22

Printed and bound using 100% renewable electricity at CPI Group (UK) Ltd CR0 4YY.

MIX
Paper from responsible sources
FSC® C171272

The Girl, the Ghost and the Lost Name

REECE CARTER

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ELEONORA ASPARUHOVA

USBORNE


ELSTON-FRIGHT
THE MANOR
N
W
E
S
ELSTON-FRIGHT
ANGLER ROCKS
THE CEMETERY
THE LIGHTHOUSE
WRECKING HAZARD
Do not approach
Rock-That-Doesn't-exist



Zero

If my hair looks like bright green seaweed, it's because that's exactly what it is. My eyes, a pair of abalone shells, polished blue by sand. Teeth, two rows of pebbles.

And my skin is made of wax.

I spent a very long time collecting the wax, I'll have you know, from *their* burning candles. And it was an extremely hard thing to do, too. I had to steal it, drip by drip, whenever *they* weren't watching. In the darkest parts of the night, I would whisk the wax away, little by little. And if one of them had ever bothered to glance up, they might very well have seen the glistening

droplets that I was beckoning dance on the air, slip over rotting beams and disappear through a gap in the iron ceiling. But nobody ever looked up. Nobody noticed.

I made sure of that.

It took years to shape the wax into my sort-of-odd-looking head. My skinny neck and awkward shoulders. Arms and legs, which if I'm honest, are kind of knobbly.

Fine…so I'm not perfect looking.

But as skinny and awkward and knobbly as my wax body might be, it's still a million times better than having no body at all. That was the absolute worst. Maybe *some* ghosts enjoy walking through walls and being invisible – not me. I never wanted any of that.

I never asked to be a kid ghost.

I mean, I guess nobody really *asks* to be a ghost, do they? Nobody asks to wake up dead. Just like nobody asks to be snatched by Witches and taken from their families.

Wait…I didn't mention there are Witches, did I?

Well, there are.

But before you go and flip out, just remember that these particular Witches live far away from you, inside

a rickety old shack built from rotting stilts and decaying scrap metal. A shack that is tucked deep inside the cave of an elephant-shaped rock.

And that rock is surrounded by sea.

If you were to ask most people – most *living* people, I mean – they would probably tell you that the rock I'm talking about doesn't even exist. I'm not saying that it's invisible, exactly. It's more like you forget that you've seen it the moment you stop looking at it. One minute it's there, clear as day. But as soon as your eyes slide past, it's like somebody has taken to your brain with a sponge. All that you remember is cold and empty ocean.

The rock-that-doesn't-exist sits off the coast from a town, nestled among trees, that nobody ever visits. Summer tourists don't register the little fishing village, or the empty lighthouse that looms over it, preferring instead the glitzy resorts and white-sand beaches up the way. Nobody stops to bother with the town, its people or its secrets. And even *I've* forgotten the town's name. But don't worry; I'm certain that it's nowhere near you.

Well…not *certain*, obviously.

I mean it has to be somewhere, doesn't it?

What I should say then is that it's *probably* nowhere near you – depending, I suppose, on exactly where it is that you are. But if you *do* happen to be somewhere near the town-that-nobody-visits, my advice would be to get out of there as quickly as you can. I'd tell you to grab your family and your friends and whatever else you care about, and run.

I'd tell you to keep running. Then run some more.

Because if where you are – where you are right this very second – is close to the town-that-nobody-visits, that would mean you're near the rock-that-doesn't-exist, too.

With its damp cave and its rickety shack. And its Witches.

Not that you'd know it, of course.



Chapter 1

I should probably introduce myself. I'm Corpse.

Obviously it's not the name I was born with. I forgot *that* one as soon as I died. If I've counted right, that means I forgot my name nearly thirteen years ago to the day. And if I had to guess, I'd say that's about the same number of years that I was alive, too.

Give or take.

I couldn't bring my name with me when I died, just like I couldn't bring any of my memories. When you become a ghost, every trace of your life vanishes. The faces of your family. The house where you lived. You even forget how it is that you died.

All of it just slips away, as if taken by the tides, and by the time your very last memory is gone, you can't help but wonder whether you might have just always been a ghost.

Every single memory from your life disappears…

…and all you're left with is questions.

That's why I call myself Corpse, I guess. Because I have no idea whether I was an Alice or an Annabelle. A Sophie or a Sarah. A Poppy or a Prudence.

Or anything else like that.

"What do you think of these?" I ask Simon now, holding a pair of periwinkles for him to see. I turn them this way and that, letting them catch the afternoon's silver light.

Click-click-click, he says.

"Hmm…maybe you're right."

I fling the periwinkles out to sea, where they disappear beneath the glassy surface. "But it's hard to find a pair that are *exactly* the same size, you know."

Click-click.

"I think you're being a bit fussy today, Simon."

Simon is a spider, by the way. A huntsman spider, to be exact.

He's got grey-brown fuzz, and eight wriggly legs that tickle my wax skin whenever he crawls across it. Right now, though, he's sitting on my shoulder.

"Come on then," I say. "Let's keep looking."

(Yes, I can talk to animals. All ghosts can.)

I hurry ahead, scampering over the tide pools that fringe the rock-that-doesn't-exist. And as I go, I scan underfoot for something that might work as a new set of ears. A pair of limpets, maybe? Matching ram's horns? A couple of dead jellyfish? Anything has got to be better than the sea squirts I've been using lately. They keep falling off. Every now and again I collect something, hold it up to the side of my head and ask Simon for his honest opinion. And every single time – *click-click-click-click!* – he suggests that we keep looking.

"Fine," I tell him. "But you're being *very* picky today."

I mean…it's not like I need ears, exactly. Not in the way that a fleshie does, anyway. Fleshies are what I call

people who haven't died yet, and obviously *they* need ears.

(You know, to hear and stuff.)

Us ghosts, on the other hand, can hear perfectly fine without them. Just like how we can see without eyes and smell without noses. Still, I like having all those things.

Having them makes me feel less dead.

I guess it's lucky, then, that I discovered I'm different to other ghosts. I can do something that most others can't. In fact, there have been heaps of other kid ghosts who have come and gone from the rock-that-doesn't-exist, but I've never met any who were able to pour themselves into a body like I can. Not a single one. And being able to Possess this body…

…well, it's about as close to being alive as a ghost can be.

This body lets me touch stuff and remember what things feel like. I can pick things up. Move them around. But more important than any of that, having this body helps me stick around. It helps keep away the thing that comes *after* you turn into a ghost.

It helps keep me out of Death Proper's clutches.

"What about these?" I ask Simon now.

(This time, I'm holding a pair of violet snails.)

…*click*.

"No need to be rude," I grumble. "A simple 'no' would do."

And with a sigh, I toss the snails into the ocean.

Then, I hurry ahead.

I probably wouldn't admit it to him while he's being like this, but I'm glad that Simon comes on these beachcombing missions with me. Normally, spiders are very easily scared creatures, even though you wouldn't think it. They don't like to leave home much if they can help it. Not Simon, though. He's pretty brave for a spider.

"*URGH!*"

Shuddering, I pull my foot away from the soft and squishy something that I just stepped on. Even before I look down, I know what I'm going to find.

Yep…three dead cormorants.

Yuck.

The Witches did it. No doubt about that. I've seen

them do the spell a thousand times before. To leave the rock-that-doesn't-exist and cross the water to the town-that-nobody-visits, each of the three Witches first needs to steal the shape of a creature that can swim or fly. But this particular spell comes with a price, and today it's the cormorants who paid it.

"I really do *hate* the Witches," I say to Simon.

C*lick-click-click*, he agrees.

I scan the skies, just in case, but there's nothing to see except steely and polished clouds. Further out to sea, the sky is beginning to grow inky and dangerous. The first signs of a coming storm dance on the air. But nope…there's no sign of the Witches.

(Still, I know they'll be back soon.)

"It's been hours since they left," I say.

C*lick-click*.

"They've been away so much lately."

C*lick-click-click*.

I only ever dare to step outside when the Witches are away from the rock-that-doesn't-exist because, somehow, they've never worked out that I haunt the roof above their shack. They have no clue that a ghost

made of wax shares this place with them. And I can't *ever* let them find out that I do. I don't want to think about what would happen if they did.

C*lick-click-click*, Simon says.

I nod. "Maybe a *little* bit longer."

Darting forwards, and accidentally startling a family of rock crabs as I go, I come to a stop beside a glassy pool, where I watch an octopus tuck himself into a crack. He's just finished disguising himself to look like a rock when I spot something pretty resting beside him.

"What about this?" I say.

I plunge my hand into the icy water and retrieve it. A chunk of amber sea glass. Running a thumb over it, I smile at how smooth and cool and hard it feels beneath my touch.

(Kind of like a jewel or something.)

"Yes, I *do* realize I would need two of them," I tell Simon, before he gets a chance to say something about needing more than one ear. "But it doesn't have to be an ear. Maybe it could be a nose! I haven't had a new nose in ages. What do you think?"

Click.

"Good," I say, and pocket the sea glass in my overalls. They're tatty and don't fit me properly, but I like them for my own reasons. "That's something, at least."

CLICK!

"What?"

CLICK-CLICK-CLICK!

Simon jabs one long and crooked leg back in the direction of the rock that houses the Witches' shack. In its shadow, an unfamiliar figure is shuffling towards us. Hunched over and slow, the figure is all invisible creases and blurred colours and shifting outlines. Another ghost, appeared as if from nowhere.

Only this ghost doesn't have a body. This ghost isn't like me. He's just a regular ghost. As he shuffles closer, a swooping gull passes right through him.

"Is that…is that an *old man ghost*?"

Hurrying to tuck myself behind a boulder sort-of-thing, I crouch down and peek around the side of it to get a better look. Only I still don't believe what I'm seeing.

"Why would an old man ghost be out here?"

Click-click? Simon suggests.

I shake my head. "No. The Witches didn't snatch him."

They only ever snatch kids, because when it comes to doing their most horrible magics and brewing their most disgusting concoctions, only kids are of any use to them.

He must have died at sea, then, or found some other way here.

Except that there *is* no other way here. No way on or off the rock-that-doesn't-exist. If there was, I would have found it by now. I've been looking for one since I got here.

"Wait…where is he?" I whisper.

I only looked away for a second, but now the old ghost is gone.

Something strange fizzes over my wax skin, dancing along the place where my spine should be, then wriggling up my neck. *Danger*, it seems to be warning me.

"Simon, did you see wh—"

"There you are."

The voice, grumbling and gruff, is coming from right behind me. I spin around to find that the old ghost isn't gone at all. My whole body turns rigid.

He takes a lumbering step forwards.

"Found you," he growls.

I jump up. "Go away."

All that fizzing energy rushes to my legs, making them feel like loaded springs. Every part of my body is tense and ready for action. Whoever this ghost is…

…he can't be good news.



Chapter 2

"Don't come any closer!" I warn him.

"Calm down, kid," the old ghost grumbles. "I'm a friend."

I feel myself frown.

A…*friend*?

Doubtful.

Up close he looks like a sack of potatoes. And he smells funny too – like wet wool and mouldy straw and stale tobacco. When he smiles, it's wide and crooked and mostly toothless. It's not a mean smile, or a scary one. It's not exactly friendly, either.

(I don't know what it is, but I *do* know that I don't trust it.)

"You *are* Corpse, aren't you?" he says.

I take another step away from him, tilt my head back and peer up at him. "Maybe. Depends on who's asking. Who are *you*?"

The old ghost shrugs. "Haven't got the foggiest, have I?"

I guess I should have expected that. Of course he doesn't remember who he is or what his name is because *no* ghost remembers who they are or what their name is. "Your friend calls me Old Man." He shrugs again. "Guess you can too…if you'd like."

There's that word again.

"I don't have any friends," I say automatically.

Click? Simon reminds me.

"Well yes," I whisper. "Obviously *you're* my friend."

The ghost who calls himself Old Man gives Simon a funny look but doesn't comment. I think maybe I see him smirk. "You have another friend too," he says to me. "And she asked me to bring you this message. Or…I suppose it's more of a warning, really." He turns around. Begins to shuffle away.

She?

"We don't have very long, though," he adds.

(But I don't follow him. No way.)

"Quickly now," Old Man says.

I don't take even a single step forwards. I just stand there. There's a familiar tickling sensation as Simon climbs his way up and into my hair. *Click-click?*

"Of course I'm not scared," I whisper back to him.

Click?

"I'm *not*."

And it's true. I'm not scared. Not really.

Fine. I guess I was a little bit surprised when Old Man appeared out of nowhere, but who wouldn't be? Anyway, being surprised and being scared are *not* the same thing.

It would be different if it was the Witches who found me out here. With a single spell, they could blast this wax body of mine to pieces, or else melt it into a big, sticky puddle. But Old Man is just another ghost. He can't hurt me. And so no, I'm not scared.

(Still…that doesn't mean I'm following him *anywhere*.)

"No," I call after him.

Old Man stops. Turns around.

"…No?"

"*No*," I repeat, crossing my arms. "I'm not following you. I don't even know who you are! If some stranger turned up on your rock, would you follow them?"

Old Man frowns. "Not sure I have a rock."

"I'm not going anywhere until you tell me how you got here. Because I've haunted the rock-that-doesn't-exist for my entire death, I'll have you know." I uncross my arms just long enough to wave them around. "There's no way on or off it."

I expect him to argue…

…but instead, he chuckles.

"She didn't tell me you would be so stubborn," he says. And then he starts hobbling away in the other direction again, shaking his head as he goes. "Come on."

I still don't move. "*Who* didn't tell you?"

Then, I add, "What are you even talking about?"

He says over his shoulder, "Got a lot of big questions bouncing around that wax head of yours, don't you, kid? Questions that want answers."

Something wriggles where my stomach should be.

Answers?

Old Man keeps walking. "Well, if it's answers that you want, I might as well tell you that I know where to find 'em. But you'll need to follow me."

I can't help myself. I chase after him. "Wait up!"

I reach Old Man easily in just a few quick strides. He doesn't move very quickly. I keep up with him without even trying. "What *kind* of answers?"

I try to make it sound like I don't care.

(Even though I definitely do.)

"The type that matter," he replies simply.

Something warm flutters behind the place where my belly button should be. And at the same time, old and familiar questions push their way into my not-brain. They start multiplying, buzzing about like insects. Questions about my name. Questions about my family.

"How do you know about all that?" I ask.

"She told me."

"*Who* did?

"Your fr—"

Old Man stops in his tracks. He lifts a hand in front of his face as if to inspect it, and I notice with a strange jolt that it's beginning to turn more see-through.

Actually…

…*all* of him is beginning to turn more see-through.

As we stand there, Old Man grows more transparent. His edges become all smudged. I've seen this happen before, but it never gets easier to watch. This is what happens right before a ghost dies their second death. Right before they slip away into Death Proper.

"You're going…already?"

Old Man nods. "Got less time than I thought."

He leans closer, and when he speaks again his words come out all urgent-sounding. "Don't reckon I can put off second death very much longer," he says. "So, listen up, will you? Those Witches, they're up to something." A pause. "We need to get you off this rock."

I shake my head. "O*ff* the rock-that-doesn't-exist? That's not even—"

"—possible?" he finishes for me.

And I nod.

"Course it is," he says. "I'll show you."

"I don't understand what any of this has to do with me."

According to Old Man, the reason that the Witches have been away from the rock-that-doesn't-exist so much lately is that they're hunting for some sort of treasure.

"What *kind* of treasure?" I ask as I follow him across the tide pools and rock flats.

"One that wasn't theirs to take in the first place," Old Man says, with something like a scowl. It's not exactly an answer. "Them Witches stole it years ago, then traded it with someone in that town." He points towards the town-that-nobody-visits. "Someone they call *the Merchant*."

"So…this Merchant person has the treasure?"

Old Man shakes his head. "The Merchant sold it. When the Witches went to take it back, the Merchant told 'em it was gone. Taken some place far away."

"Where is it now then?"

"Missing." He comes to a stop.

It's only now that I realize exactly where Old Man has brought me. We've come to a part of the rock-

that-doesn't-exist that I *never* visit – not any more, anyway.

It's a place where the rock folds in on itself, carving out a jagged chasm sort-of-thing, with walls that soar overhead, casting the entire space in shadow. At high tide, rising waters form a pool along the bottom. Then when the waters rush back out, they leave behind big piles of sand and seaweed. Right now, the tide is growing higher and the water level rising.

Old Man steps down into the pool without making so much as a ripple. It's as if the bottoms of his legs vanish. What's left of him above the water is fading fast. The whole walk here, Death Proper's grip has been growing tighter on him. There's not much left now. Still, for a moment I think about just turning around and leaving him out here.

Because this place…I hate it.

This place reminds me of *her*.

"Come on," Old Man says. "Hurry up, kid."

I could easily outrun him. I could race back to my roof above the Witches' shack and seal it up tight. I could forget about this whole strange thing. But when I glance back over my shoulder, I see the abandoned lighthouse in the distance. And beside it, the cemetery. From there, I gaze across the dark and huddled trees, towards the town with its fishing wharf and its winding roads and its little houses. The town-that-nobody-visits.



I must have lived there once, back before the Witches snatched me. I'm certain it's where my family must be waiting. Maybe they're even inside one of those little houses right this very moment.

Got a lot of big questions bouncing around that wax head of yours, don't you, kid?

Yeah, I do.

I turn back towards where Old Man is waiting for me, trying to forget the last time I was standing here.

And I step into the pool.

Water reaches all the way up to my knees, soaking my overalls. The cold stings against my wax skin. But I wade forwards anyway, following Old Man deeper into the water.

(And deeper into shadow too.)

He keeps squinting into each corner and muttering to himself. "Where is it?" he grumbles over and over. "She said it would be right here."

"What are we looking for?"

He points ahead of him. "That!"

All I can see is some shaggy mass piled up against the rock wall. It's a giant mound of seaweed – and to

be honest it looks *exactly* like the ones either side of it.

"There's nothing there," I tell him.

"Wrong. Look closer."

A squirmy excitement springs to life when I realize that he's right. There *is* something there. A crescent of white like bones peeks from under the weed.

Without stopping to think, I dart forwards. I yank two armfuls of seaweed from the whatever-it-is. It breaks away in my grip, but I toss it to one side and hurry to grab more. Then more.

More and more.

Whatever it is that's buried beneath the seaweed, it's curved and made of timber that has begun to rot. It must have been here a while and turned soft with time. My wax fingers get peppered with little splinters as I work, but I don't stop until the thing is uncovered.

And once it is, I step back to take a better look.

It's a dinghy.

Barely big enough for two people, the boat must have washed up here during high tide and then become stuck.

"This is how you'll leave the rock and track down

that Merchant," Old Man says from behind me. "Then you can find the treasure and take it back."

That last part catches me off guard.

"What do you mean 'take it *back*'?"

I turn around to face Old Man just as he takes a step closer. For the first time since arriving on the rock-that-doesn't-exist, something like softness crosses his face.

Maybe even something like…*sadness*?

I finally realize what all this has to do with me.

"It's mine, isn't it?" I ask him. "The treasure is mine."

Old Man nods. "Told you earlier that the Witches *stole* this so-called treasure of theirs before they traded it with the Merchant. But what I didn't tell you is that the person they stole it from – the *kid* they stole it from – was someone they snatched."

He pauses. And the moment feels heavy.

"That someone was you," he finishes. "Find the thing the Witches call a treasure and you'll get back all those memories you're missing."

What kind of treasure can hold *actual* memories? I picture a crown that fills its wearer with wisdom, or

maybe some golden conch shell that whispers secrets that sound like a sighing ocean.

"But what is it?" I ask him. "What *exactly*?"

Old Man still doesn't answer me. If anything, he looks like he wishes he'd never mentioned it at all. Or at the very least, like he didn't have to say this next part.

"What *is* it?" I repeat.

He sighs. "All right, kid."

And what he tells me next makes a chill pass up and over my wax skin. The cold seeps right through me. It reaches all the way to my not-chest, where it freezes over.

"They took…?" I begin.

Only, I can't say it. "They took…*that*?"

Old Man nods. "Twisted a theft as they come."

It feels like the air forgets that it's meant to be growing stormy. Everything turns still and silent. That's when I notice with a lurching feeling that Old Man has started to look like an ink drawing that somebody has spilled water all over. Right in front of me, his features are starting to lose their shape and bleed into one another. Simon must notice it too, because he chooses this moment to scuttle out from

my hair, back to his place on my shoulder.

Click-click-click, he says to Old Man.

The old and fading ghost smirks again. Or maybe he just smiles. Maybe it's even kind. I can't tell. Either way, he says to Simon, "Take care of her, little spider."

Click-click, Simon promises.

"But…can't you come with me?" I ask.

Old Man shakes his head. "You know I can't do that. Already stayed longer than I should have." He pauses. "Just long enough to do one bit of good after a rotten life."

And then his eyes slip out of focus.

They turn all foggy and distant.

When he speaks again, his voice has become all staticky. Each word crackles and crunches. "Now there are two more things I need to say before I go. Firstly, I may not remember much from life, but there is one thing I know to be absolutely true, and that is that there's nothing more powerful or more terrifying than a kid acting with their whole heart."

I throw my hands up in the air. "That doesn't even make sense. *Stay*."

I know it's pointless, though. You can't stop second death.

Old Man's voice comes unstuck from the ghostly figure in front of me. It rustles all around me, like a breeze moving through tree leaves. "Secondly, the Witches have spread a sickness over that town. It's dangerous…but you won't be alone…she'll be…"

His voice fades to nothing before he can finish.

Silence floods in to take its place.

A few tiny crinkles mark the air, right at the place where he was standing only a few seconds ago. And as I watch, they lose their shape and vanish too.

Old Man is gone.

"Come back!" I shout – even though it's hopeless. I've seen enough ghosts slip away to know that they never come back. The old ghost who appeared on my rock as if from nowhere has vanished just as quickly now. And so, I don't really expect him to answer me. He does though. The sky swirls around me. Whispers one last word.

"*Go*," it seems to say.