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Opening extract from

Midnight for Charlie Bone

Written by

Jenny Nimmo

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Another one for Myfanwy,
with love

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Prologue

Long, long ago a king arrived in the north. They called him the Red King for he wore a scarlet cloak and his shield was emblazoned with a burning sun. It was said that he came out of Africa. This king was also a marvellous magician and each of his ten children inherited a small part of his power. But when the king's wife died, five of his children turned to wickedness and the other five, seeking to escape the corruption that surrounded their evil siblings, left their father's castle forever.

Broken-hearted, the Red King vanished into the forests that covered the kingdoms of the north. He did not go alone, however, for he was followed by his three faithful cats; leopards to be precise. We must never



forget the cats!

The manifold and fabulous powers of the Red King were passed down through his descendants, often turning up quite unexpectedly, in someone who had no idea where they came from. This is what happened to Charlie Bone, and to some of the children he met behind the grim, grey walls of Bloor's Academy.

Charlie hears voices

On a Thursday afternoon, just after tea, Charlie Bone saw smoke. He happened to be looking out of his window when a dark cloud lifted above the autumn trees. The wind blew it south and it moved through the sky like a great, floating whale.

Somewhere, on the other side of the city, there was a fire. Charlie could hear a fire-engine racing towards it. He had no idea that in mysterious and unexpected ways he was connected to it, and would soon be drawn to the place where it had begun.

Charlie slept well, got up next morning and went to school. After school, Charlie and his friend, Benjamin Brown, walked home together, as usual. The cloud of



smoke had gone, but the sky was stormy and dark. A fierce wind sent red and gold leaves bowling down Filbert Street.

Benjamin crossed the road to number twelve, while Charlie stopped at number nine. Most of the people who lived at number nine complained about the large chestnut tree in front of it; how dark it made their rooms, how damp and creaky it was, and how it would probably fall on the roof one day and kill them all in their beds. Needless to say, no one at number nine did anything about it. Complaining to each other was as far as they went. They were that sort of family. Or, rather, those sorts of families.

As Charlie ran up the steps to his front door, the tree sighed and rained a handful of conkers on to his head. Luckily his thick, springy hair softened the blows. Thick hair had its uses, though not many. Charlie was always being told to smarten himself up, an impossible task for someone with hair like a hedge.

'Hullo, Grandmas!' Charlie called as he stepped into the hall.

There were two grandmas at number nine: Grandma Jones was Charlie's mother's mother, and Grandma Bone was Charlie's father's mother. Grandma Jones was round and cheerful and bossy, while Grandma Bone only spoke



to complain. She rarely smiled and nothing made her laugh. Her hair was thick and white, and she wore long, stiff garments in shades of black, grey or brown (never pink, which was Maisie's favourite colour). Grandma Jones liked to be called Maisie, but Charlie wouldn't have dared to call Grandma Bone by her first name, which was Grizelda. She liked to remind people that, before she had married Mr Bone, she had been a Yewbeam. The Yewbeams were an ancient family, their history littered with artistic people, and others who had more unusual talents, such as hypnotism, thought-reading, and bewitchery.

Charlie knew he had disappointed Grandma Bone by being ordinary. Even worse, in her eyes, he was quite happy to be ordinary.

When Charlie came home from school it was always Maisie who plonked a wet kiss on his cheek and pushed a plate of something under his nose. Today Maisie had a large bump on her forehead. 'Ruddy conker,' she told Charlie.

Grandma Bone was always sitting in a rocker by the stove, criticising Maisie's cooking or the state of Charlie's hair. Today the rocker was empty. That was the first unusual thing.

It was Benjamin's tenth birthday on Saturday and



Charlie had decided to make him a birthday card instead of buying one. He'd taken a photo of Benjamin's dog, Runner Bean, smiling or, to be more precise, showing his long, incredibly yellow teeth.

Charlie had asked his mother to get the photo enlarged at Kwik Foto on her way home from work. He intended to stick a balloon saying 'Happy Birthday, Benjamin!' above Runner Bean's head.

The second unusual thing was about to happen.

At five minutes past four, Charlie's mother came in with a box of over-ripe apples and rhubarb. 'They'll make a lovely crumble,' she said, dumping the box beside Charlie's plate and kissing his shaggy head. Amy Bone worked part-time in a greengrocer's shop, so there was always plenty of fruit and vegetables at number nine.

Charlie leaned away from the rotting fruit. 'Have you got my photo, Mum?' he asked.

Amy Bone rustled about in her shopping bag and found a large orange envelope. She put it on the other side of Charlie's plate.

Charlie opened the envelope and revealed – not Runner Bean – nothing like Runner Bean.

It was at this moment that Grandma Bone appeared. She hovered in the doorway, fingering her neck, touching her silver-white hair and pulling at her stiff



black skirt. She looked somehow as though she was on the brink of fulfilling her destiny. And in a way she was, though, at sixty-five, you could be forgiven for thinking it was a bit late.

The photograph that Charlie now held showed a man cradling a baby. The man sat on an upright chair. He had thinning, greyish hair and a long, mournful face. His crumpled suit was black and his thick pebble glasses gave his pale grey eyes a lost, marble-like stare.

Instead of pushing the photograph back into the envelope, Charlie continued to gaze at it. In fact, he couldn't tear his eyes away from it. He began to feel dizzy and his ears were filled with mysterious sounds, like the hiss and swish of voices on the radio, when you can't pin them to the right frequency.

'Oh,' he said. 'Er, what . . .?' His own voice seemed far away, trapped behind a kind of fog.

'What's wrong, Charlie?' asked his mother.

'Is something happening?' Grandma Bone crept forward. 'Aunt Eustacia rang me. She had one of her premonitions. Are you a proper Yewbeam, after all?'

Maisie glared at Grandma Bone, while Charlie pulled his ears and shook his head. If only the horrible muffled buzzing would go. He had to shout in order to hear himself. 'They've made a mistake at the shop. Where's



Runner Bean?'

'There's no need to shout, Charlie.' His mother looked over his shoulder. 'My goodness, that's certainly not a dog.'

'Ow!' wailed Charlie. But suddenly the mumbling voices broke free of the buzz and made themselves clear.

First came a woman's voice, soft and unfamiliar: *I wish you wouldn't do this, Mostyn.*

Her mother's gone. I don't have a choice. This voice was definitely male.

Of course you do.

Will you take her, then? said the man's voice.

You know I can't, replied the woman.

Charlie looked at his mother. 'Who said that?'

She looked puzzled. 'Who said what, Charlie?'

'Is there a man in here?' he asked.

Maisie giggled. 'Only you, Charlie.'

Charlie felt claw-like fingers sink into his shoulder. Grandma Bone leaned over him. 'Tell me what you hear,' she demanded.

'Voices,' said Charlie. 'I know it sounds silly, but they seem to be coming from this photograph.'

Grandma Bone nodded. 'What do they say?'

'For goodness sake, Grandma Bone, don't be ridiculous,' said Maisie.



Grandma Bone gave Maisie a withering look. 'I am not being ridiculous.'

Charlie noticed that his mother had gone very quiet. She drew out a chair and sat down, looking pale and anxious.

Maisie began to bang saucepans about, muttering, 'You shouldn't encourage it. It's all rubbish. I won't have it . . .'

'Ssssh!' hissed Charlie. He could hear the baby crying.

The strange woman spoke again. *You've upset her. Look at the camera, Mostyn. And please try to smile. You look so dismal.*

What d'you expect? said the man.

A camera shutter clicked.

There. Shall I take another?

Do what you want.

You'll thank me, one day, said the woman behind the camera. *If you really intend to go through with this, it's the only thing you'll have to remember her by.*

Hm.

Charlie noticed that a cat peeped from behind the man's chair. It was an extraordinary colour; deep copper, like a flame.

From far away Charlie heard his mother's voice. 'Shall I take the photo back, Charlie?'



'No,' murmured Charlie, 'not yet.'

But it seemed that the photograph had nothing more to say. The baby grizzled for a moment, and then was quiet. The gloomy man stared silently at the camera, and the cat . . .? Was that a purr? Maisie was making such a noise with the saucepans it was difficult to hear anything else.

'Hush!' commanded Grandma Bone. 'Charlie can't hear.'

'It's all nonsense,' Maisie grumbled. 'I don't know how you can just sit there, Amy, and let your potty mother-in-law get away with it. Poor Charlie. He's just a boy. He's got nothing to do with those crazy Yewbeams.'

'He's got their blood,' said Charlie's mother, quietly. 'You can't get away from that.'

Maisie couldn't. She closed her mouth in a tight little line.

Charlie was very bewildered. In the morning he had been an ordinary boy. He hadn't been touched by a magic wand, or banged his head. He hadn't had an electric shock or fallen off a bus, or, as far as he knew, eaten a poisoned apple. And yet, here he was, hearing voices from a piece of photographic paper.

To set his mother's mind at rest, Charlie said, 'I don't think it was anything, really. I just imagined it.'



Grandma Bone leaned even closer and breathed into his ear, 'Listen tonight. Things work better after midnight.'

'He'll be asleep by then, I'll have you know,' said Maisie, who had ears as sharp as a rabbit's. 'It's all rubbish.'

'Huh!' retorted Grandma Bone. 'Just you wait!' She wafted away, leaving a scent of mothballs and mint drifting round the kitchen.

'I didn't hear anything,' Charlie said when she had gone.

'Are you sure?' his mother said anxiously.

'Honest. I was just doing it to tease Grandma Bone.' He was trying to convince himself as well as his mother.

'Charlie, you're a wicked boy,' Maisie said happily as she banged a meat cleaver into a meaty bone.

Charlie's mother looked relieved and opened the evening paper. Charlie slipped the photograph back into its envelope. He felt exhausted. Perhaps a bit of TV would help him to relax. But before he could escape, the doorbell rang and Grandma Bone could be heard saying, 'It's Benjamin Brown, isn't it? Charlie's in the kitchen. And you can leave that mangy Baked Bean outside.'

'It's Runner, not baked,' said Benjamin's voice, 'and I can't leave him outside. It's nasty weather.'



'Dogs like nasty weather,' said Grandma Bone.

Benjamin and his dog appeared in the kitchen. Benjamin was a small, pale-faced boy with hair the colour of damp hay. Runner Bean was a large, long-nosed dog also with hair the colour of damp hay. For some reason Benjamin was always being picked on by other boys. People stole things from him, tripped him up, laughed at him. Charlie tried to help his friend but, sometimes, Benjamin was beyond help. Sometimes, in fact, Charlie thought that Benjamin didn't even notice that he was a victim. He lived in a world of his own.

Runner Bean, smelling the meaty bone, rushed straight to Maisie and began to lick her ankles.

'Get off!' she yelled, swiping him on the nose.

'You are coming to my party, aren't you?' Benjamin asked Charlie.

''Course I am,' said Charlie, immediately feeling guilty about the birthday card.

'Good, because I'm getting a game that needs two people to play it.'

Charlie realised that no one else would be at Benjamin's party. This made him feel even more guilty. Runner Bean began to whine, almost as if he'd guessed that he wouldn't be appearing on Benjamin's birthday card.



'I'll be there,' said Charlie cheerfully. He hadn't bought a present yet. He would have to rush out to the shops before he began his quest. But what quest was that? Something seemed to be hijacking Charlie's thoughts.

'Want to come for a walk with Runner?' Benjamin asked hopefully.

'OK.'

Maisie shouted something about supper as Charlie and Benjamin left the house, but the wind howled round their heads, and a clap of thunder drowned her words. Runner Bean yelped as a conker hit his nose, and Benjamin managed to smile at last.

As the two boys and the dog ran into the wind, leaves flew in their faces and stuck to fur and clothes. Charlie felt better in the open air. Perhaps it really had been a trick of his imagination. He hadn't heard voices at all, it was just some silly nonsense that he'd made himself believe, and Grandma Bone had encouraged him, just to annoy Maisie and upset his mother.

'Yes,' Charlie cried happily. 'It's all rubbish.'

'And leaves,' said Benjamin, who thought Charlie meant the litter being blown down the street.

'And leaves,' sang Charlie. He saw a newspaper flying towards him and stuck his foot out to catch it. But the



paper lifted in a sudden gust and wrapped itself round his waist. As he pulled it away from him, a picture on the front page caught his eye.

A mean-looking boy stood on the steps of a grey building. He had a long, narrow face and a whispy moustache grew above his thin upper lip. His dark hair, parted in the centre, had been drawn back into a ponytail.

'What's that?' asked Benjamin.

'Just a boy,' said Charlie, and yet he had the suspicion that this wasn't just any boy.

Benjamin leaned over Charlie's arm and read, 'Manfred Bloor, aged seventeen was rescued from a fire at Bloor's Academy yesterday. Manfred said he was lucky to be alive.'

'No, he didn't,' said Charlie breathlessly.

'What d'you mean, he didn't?' said Benjamin.

'He didn't say that,' Charlie murmured, and he suddenly sat on the ground, with his back to the wall. He held the paper at arm's length, dismayed by the words that were creeping out of the picture.

Someone's going to pay for this.

'How'd you . . .?' Benjamin began.

'Shut up, Ben,' cried Charlie. 'I'm listening.'

'What to?'

'Shush!'



As Charlie stared at Manfred Bloor there came a jumble of shouts and then a woman's voice broke through the others, *Are you accusing someone, Manfred?*

Too right I am, said a husky voice.

Why d'you think it wasn't an accident?

The husky voice again, *I'm not stupid, that's why.*

A man said, *The fire service told us a candle was probably blown over. Don't you believe this?*

ENOUGH! Whoever said this had such a deep and chilling voice, Charlie dropped the paper. It whirled away and flopped into the gutter.

'Charlie, what's going on?' asked Benjamin.

Charlie gave a deep sigh. 'I'm hearing voices,' he said.

'Oh, no.' Benjamin sat beside him, and Runner Bean crouched beside Benjamin. 'What sort of voices?'

Benjamin never ever said 'That's rubbish'. He took life seriously, which wasn't always a bad thing.

Charlie told Benjamin about the photograph of Runner Bean that had got mixed up with a man and a baby. 'It was going to be a surprise birthday card for you,' said Charlie, 'and now it won't be. I'm sorry.'

'Doesn't matter,' said Benjamin. 'Go on about the photograph.'

Charlie explained that he'd heard voices when he looked at the man and the baby. He'd even heard the



baby cry, and perhaps a cat purring.

'Weird,' breathed Benjamin.

'I made myself believe I'd just imagined it,' said Charlie, 'but when I saw the newspaper, it happened again. I could hear reporters talking to that boy on the front page. I could hear his voice, too. He sounded kind of mean and sly. And then someone said, "Enough!" and that was the worst voice I ever heard, in my whole life.'

Benjamin shivered and Runner Bean whined in sympathy.

The boys sat, side by side, on the damp pavement, not knowing quite what to do. The wind flung leaves at them, and thunder grumbled in the distance.

It began to rain. Runner Bean nudged Benjamin and whined. He hated getting wet. And then, during a particularly loud clap of thunder, a man appeared in front of the boys. He was wearing a dark raincoat and his wet hair was plastered over his forehead in wide, black bands.

'It's raining,' the man announced. 'Had you not noticed?'

Charlie looked up. 'Uncle Paton,' he said in surprise.

Uncle Paton was Grandma Bone's brother. He was twenty years younger than she was and they didn't get on. Paton led a secret life, even eating apart from the



others. He never went out in daylight.

'You're wanted at home,' Uncle Paton told Charlie.

Charlie and Benjamin stood up and shook their cramped legs. This was the third unusual thing to happen today. It wasn't nearly dark enough for Uncle Paton to venture out.

Charlie wondered what could possibly have happened to cause such drastic action.