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Nevermore

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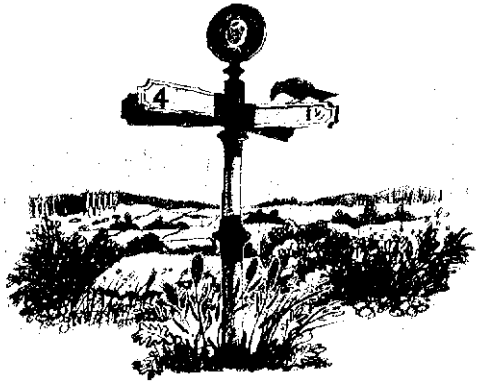
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1
The House on the Hillside



'We might as well live in this van,' Tizzie complained. 'We spend our whole life in it.'

'Oh, do cheer up.' Tizzie's mum didn't sound too cheerful herself. 'I told you, it'll be different this time.' She leaned forward, peering at the lane ahead through the *wish, wish* of windscreen wipers.

'It won't be different.' Tizzie was slumped in the passenger seat, clutching her new furry pencil-case. 'It'll be the same as always. I'll just start to get used to it, then you'll want to move again.' Shrugged into moodiness, she wore it like a coat, even though part of her wanted to wriggle out of it and stamp it to the floor.

Mum halted at a crossroads, and frowned at the signpost, an old-fashioned one with white arms pointing in four directions.

'Why does it have to rain?' Tizzie grumbled.

'Because it does. It might stop soon.'

'I suppose we're lost now,' said Tizzie, wiping the side window with her sleeve. There was nothing in any direction but rainswept fields and hedges. They were on high level ground, though she'd lost all sense of direction since they'd left the motorway. 'I thought you knew the way?'

'I do, but it looks different in the mist. Sleet. That's what I'm looking for. Why doesn't it say Sleet?'

'What, Sleet's the name of a *place*?'

'The nearest village to where we're going.'

Mum edged the van forward and turned right into a lane which soon plunged downhill between high walls; and now here was a village. Stone houses and cottages were pressed tightly together on both sides of the narrow street. No one was around. It looked as wet and dismal as everywhere else they'd passed through. There wasn't even a pavement, and water flowed in a dark torrent down both sides of the road.

'Oh! We're here. This *is* Sleet,' said Mum. Ahead, at a T-junction, was a small shop, with the name *Sleet Village Store* above the window, and a red Post Office sign. *Closed*, said the sign on the door.

A Post-It note with directions written on it was stuck to the dashboard, but Mum didn't glance at it as

she slowed for the junction, then turned left by a church. 'Got it now,' she muttered.

'Hey, this looks exciting.' Tizzie looked out at wet stone and dripping foliage. 'It's really great we've come to live in a place called Sleet, in the middle of nowhere. With one manky shop that's not even open.'

'Stop it, Tizzie! You're not helping. You'll see Roven Mere in a minute.'

'Can't wait,' said Tizzie, in the flat, dull voice that seemed to speak *for* her. Once it started, she couldn't shut it up. And, really, she *was* curious about Roven Mere. The name. The way her Mum had described it.

'You'll like it,' Mum had told her, after announcing that they'd be moving yet again. 'It's like nowhere else. Huge. Old. And right out in the country.'

Tizzie didn't know Country. She was used to London. She knew Hoxton and Eltham and Penge, Catford and Brent and Tooting, the bits they'd lived in. Before those, before she could remember, there had been others. Flats, streets, shops, were what she knew, and sometimes a park, and the cafés and small restaurants her mum had worked in. There had been schools, too many different ones to count: the playgrounds and the classrooms and the teachers whose names she could never remember. And all the faces: friendly or hostile, curious or uninterested.

There'd be no getting away from that, just because this was Country. She'd catch the bus to school with other children from the village, Mum had told her; she'd soon make friends. 'What's the point?' Tizzie

retorted. 'Every time I get a friend, you decide we're moving again. You do it on purpose.'

This time, it was Kamila she was leaving behind. Kamila had promised to text every day, and had given her the tiger pencil-case as a leaving present. But texting wouldn't be the same as having someone to be with nearly every day, someone to talk and giggle with.

'It'll be different this time,' Mum had promised.

Tizzie didn't know why she kept saying that. Why *should* it be different? Mum never stayed anywhere for long.

'Here,' Mum said now, slowing for a bend. 'See, down there.'

Below them, a valley opened out. Rain-lashed fields and woods dropped down to a stream, climbing steeply again on the far side. She could see only one house: a many-chimneyed stone mansion tucked against the hillside, roofed in slate that gleamed purple-grey in the wet. A single turret rose against the backdrop of trees.

'What – you mean that's it?'

Mum nodded. 'That's where we're going. That's Roven Mere.' She pressed her lips together in a tight, determined smile. Expert at reading her mother's moods, Tizzie knew that this putting-the-best-face-on-it could easily shatter into bad temper and shouting. Perhaps Mum already knew she'd made a mistake.

'What does it mean?' Tizzie asked. 'Roven Mere?'

Mum shrugged. 'Mere? It's a kind of lake, isn't it? I told you there's a lake.'

'And Roven? What's that? *Raven* Mere would make more sense.'

'How should I know?' Mum threw her a glance. 'Maybe someone just made it up. Liked the sound of it.'

So Tizzie said no more as her mother steered the van round a bend, the house now disappearing from view behind woodland. Beyond the trees they stopped at a big entrance with gates of black wrought-iron. A signboard said ROVEN MERE. PRIVATE PROPERTY. STRICTLY NO ENTRANCE WITHOUT PERMISSION. A small house, built of stone with a wooden porch, stood alongside.

'That's just the lodge,' said Mum. 'Get out and open the gates! Don't just sit there.'

'But it says No Entrance,' Tizzie pointed out.

'Don't be silly. They're expecting us.'

'So why didn't they leave the gates open?'

Mum's eyes rolled. 'Just do it, will you?'

Tizzie unfastened her seat-belt, pushed back the door and slid down. She'd forgotten about the furry tiger pencil-case on her lap; it flumped to the ground. Cold rain beat into her face and ears as she bent to pick it up; luckily it had fallen on wet gravel, not into a muddy puddle. She stroked the tiger's damp fur as she replaced it on her seat. Mum saw, of course, and said, 'You'll ruin that if you keep throwing it about. You ought to look after your things.'

'What do *you* care?' Tizzie shouted. 'What do you care about anything?' Her eyes blurred as she turned

to the gates; she had to blink away angry tears before she could see what to do. There was a heavy latch to slide back, then she had to push the gates open one at a time. The hinges made a grating screech; then the tyres of the van crunched on gravel as Mum drove through and waited for her to close the gates behind.

Tizzie would rather have walked, getting soaked through to make her point, but she got back in, dripping. She didn't complain, but just as if she had, Mum said, 'We'll get wetter than that, unloading.'

The driveway now turned sharp right along the hillside, below the line of trees that now reared above. Tizzie felt herself shrinking in the passenger seat as the house, tall and forbidding with many shuttered windows, loomed ahead. It had a grand entrance, with pillars on each side, and a big wooden door that looked very firmly shut.

I can't live in a place like this – I just can't! she thought. *I don't know how to!*



2
The Puddled Courtyard



'Finnigan,' said Mum. 'That's who we've got to find. We can't get in till we find him.'

Tizzie pulled up her hood. 'Who's Finnigan?'

'He's in charge here,' said Mum, jangling the van keys in her hand. 'I told you.'

Tizzie was quite sure Mum *hadn't* told her, but didn't say so. They were standing in a puddled courtyard, with stables on two sides, garages on another, and two archways: one leading in, the other out, continuing the driveway they'd come in on.

'*Mr* Finnigan?' Tizzie asked. 'Or is he Lord Finnigan, or something like that? Does he own this place, then?'

She felt silly, not knowing these things. They'd had plenty of time on the journey from London; why hadn't Mum told her? But Mum was never very talkative, and didn't like being questioned. 'Oh, don't go *on*, Tizzie!' she'd say, with an irritable swish of her pony-tail. Tizzie had learned that there were sometimes other ways of finding out what she wanted to know. And sometimes there weren't.

'Finnigan, that's all,' Mum answered, not really listening. She was looking back along the driveway, and Tizzie saw that someone was coming. Or, rather, a large black umbrella was advancing towards them, its spike tilted forward like a weapon. All Tizzie could see was the bottom half of a pink raincoat, and a pair of feet. This couldn't be Finnigan, as the hem of a skirt was visible below the raincoat, as well as plump pale ankles. The feet, in stout lace-up shoes, walked briskly, swerving around the puddles.

The umbrella marched all the way to the van before swinging upright to reveal a square, reddish face, with small eyes and a straight mouth. On top, grey hair sprang up and back, lacquered into stiff waves like a hair-helmet.

'You can't park here,' said the mouth. 'It's private property. The house isn't open to visitors.'

'Who are you?' Mum said rudely. 'I'm looking for Finnigan.'

'And you are?'

'Morag Furlong.' Mum spoke in the *what's-it-to-you?* way that Tizzie sometimes got told off for when

she tried it at school.

'Oh yes, our new cook.' The small eyes fixed on Tizzie. 'And you are—?'

'Tizzie,' said Tizzie. 'Tizzie Furlong.'

Rather alarmingly, the mouth spread itself into a smile, showing big square teeth. 'Oh, I like that. Tizzie! I used to have an old Aunt Tizzie.' The eyes softened. 'Short for Thirza, that was. You're welcome here, lovey, very very welcome. Both of you.'

Lovey! Tizzie stifled a giggle.

'It's short for Elizabeth,' said Mum shortly. 'Not Thirza.'

'Well, I'm pleased to meet you both. I hope you'll be happy here.' A hand thrust itself at Tizzie, and she realised she was expected to shake it; then the gesture was repeated with Mum.

Tizzie knew, though this woman couldn't be expected to know, how much Mum disliked touching people. Instead of doing proper shaking, she made the briefest possible contact with the soft ringed hand before dropping it; then she wiped her own hand several times on her wet jeans.

'I'm Mrs Crump,' said the older woman. 'Elsa, but Finnigan calls me Mrs Crump. You'll be meeting my son and grandson.'

Mum looked bored. 'Where *is* Finnigan?'

'He's usually busy, this time of day. Best get yourselves settled in. You're in Cloud Cottage, next to the orchard.'

'I know,' said Mum. 'Finnigan told me when he gave me the job.'

Tizzie huffed, but no one noticed. Why hadn't Mum *said?* Tizzie had imagined them living in that vast mansion, somewhere along a dark corridor. Instead, Cloud Cottage! She liked the name. She imagined it as a tree-house, balanced in swaying branches, up in the rain.

'Down through the arch,' Mrs Crump went on. 'You can't miss it. You've got your own parking place down there. Key's in the door and everything ready for you. Come over to the house when you're ready. I'll have tea made.'

Tea! Tizzie pictured a large table spread with sandwiches and cake. Her stomach was hollow; it seemed an age since they'd eaten the plastic-wrapped sandwiches bought from a service station.

'Then you can get settled into your kitchen,' Mrs Crump added to Mum.

It was funny about Mum and food. She never bothered much about food for herself and Tizzie, but she loved cooking. She loved cooking as she loved nothing else, it seemed to Tizzie. Cooking was her job, so at least she was happy when she was working. She cooked like an angel, everyone said. Which was a strange thing to say, Tizzie always thought – did angels *do* cooking? You never saw them eating, so why would they? Besides, anyone less like an angel than Mum she could hardly imagine. Angels, in Tizzie's experience, were pale gauzy creatures on top of Christmas trees, or translucent in stained glass; Mum was fierce and scowly. Not much

like a Mum, either. Not like other people's Mums.

'Don't stand there daydreaming!' she was saying. 'Get back in.'

And, turning her back on Mrs Crump, she climbed into the driver's seat, while Tizzie went round to the passenger side. Mum hadn't put on her coat; her jeans and striped sweatshirt were dark with rain, her hair lank and wet in its pony-tail. She rarely worried about things like mere comfort. Tizzie, shivering inside her jacket, was colder than she'd have thought possible at the beginning of June. Was this what it was like, out in the country? But she felt cheered by the prospect of tea, and a welcome. And Mrs Crump had a son and a grandson, so there were other people here. Well, of course there were – Mum was going to cook for them. Tizzie tried to imagine who might live in a place like this. What did they *do* all day?

'Where's this orchard then?' Mum said, turning on the ignition.

Tizzie pointed through the archway to a field of low trees. 'Don't you know the way? I thought you told Mrs Crump you'd seen the cottage.'

'No,' said Mum, looking round as she backed the van. 'Finnigan offered to take me down there, but I was in a hurry.'

Too much of a hurry to see where you're going to live? Tizzie nearly retorted, but said instead, 'She was nice, wasn't she? Mrs Crump?'

Mum only grunted in reply. She drove slowly along the track – a muddy, puddly one, not gravelled like

the main driveway – towards a small white cottage that stood on its own behind a paling fence. 'Now Tizz, you're not to go making yourself a nuisance. I know what you're like.'

But, Tizzie thought as Mum pulled up outside the cottage, *do* you? Do you really know what I'm like? Or do you only know what you *think* I'm like?

An odder thought struck her. Do *I* really know what I'm like? Is this just the Me that other people think they know – the Me that other people have made? And how can I tell which bits of me are the *real* Me?

'Any chance of a hand with these bags?' Mum was already round at the back. 'Or do I have to do everything myself?'

3
The Window-Seat



Cloud Cottage had oddly-shaped rooms and twisty stairs. It had a fireplace and flowered curtains, and small windows with diamond-shaped panes. It had a blue-painted front door with a horse-shoe knocker. It made Tizzie think of the gingerbread house in Hansel and Gretel – except that no witch lived in this cottage, nor, apparently, anyone else.

Tizzie put down her bag at the bottom of the stairs. 'What, is all this for us? Or are we sharing with someone?'

'No, just us. It's a bit twee, but it'll do.'

'A whole house!' Stretching out both arms, Tizzie

twirled round in the unaccustomed space. 'A whole little house, all to ourselves! Luxury!'

'I wouldn't get too excited. It's nothing special.'

'It *is* special!' Tizzie retorted, eager to explore.

The ground floor consisted of the sitting-room with its cushiony sofa and chair facing the fireplace, and a tiny kitchen behind. Mum sniffed at that, then led the way up to the first floor. Here there was one bedroom, next to the bathroom, and another up its own flight of stairs. Tizzie ran up to look. Immediately she wanted this attic room for herself.

'You can have it,' said Mum. 'I'm not running up and down two lots of stairs.'

'A room each!' Tizzie was amazed; she and Mum usually had to share, or, once or twice when she did have a room to herself, it had been half-full of junk. But this! She loved it – roof-shaped, up in the eaves. A small window, with a cushioned seat for a window-sill, looked over the orchard, where the stumpy trees stood in lines, holding out their branches to the rain. Everything was hazed in soft green, the distances blurred into mist. Tizzie ran over to perch sideways on the window-seat, her nose to the cold, rain-streaked glass. 'I wonder who gave the cottage its name? It feels like sitting in a cloud,' she remarked. But Mum's feet were already clumping back down the stairs; she hadn't heard.

Tizzie got up and had a good look round her room. The bed had iron railings at head and foot, and someone had made it up, with plumped pillows and a