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Opening extract from

Billy Bones

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Part 1

LIVING IN DARKNESS

In darkness all the lies lay hid
Upon them you can put a lid
But fear this: at some future time
They'll be exposed to light divine

1

THE SECRETS CLOSET

Shadows upon shadows – that's what greeted Billy when he opened his eyes. It was another dark morning. Mornings, afternoons, and evenings were always dark where Billy lived. He whisked back his spiderweb curtain and hopped out of the old chest that served as his bed.

Clickety-thunk. His bony feet hit the creaky floor. Billy's mum looked up with a warm smile. Smiles were common in the Bones family, as common as a kettle in any other family.

'You're looking thin and pale,' Mrs Bones observed, 'even for a skeleton. Someday we'll get you outside to play.'

'Someday,' sighed his dad, shaking his head.

Mr Bones sat just behind his wife with an old pipe jammed in his mouth. He rumpled his newspaper and

continued reading – the same newspaper he had been reading all week. Not much changed in the Boneses' world.

Their residence was a dark and tightly locked closet, filled with jumbled piles of family secrets. Billy and his parents lived among boxed-up lies, hidden misfortunes and horrid half-truths, the kind no family would ever want aired in public. The closet was locked away in High Manners Manor, a monstrous hilltop estate belonging to the Biglum family, a proud family held in the highest esteem by their well-to-do neighbours.

Billy was as tall as a ten-year-old and wasn't angular and mean like many closet skeletons. He was a dreamer and liked a good hug. His eyes were the palest blue and had a softness about them. Contrary to popular opinion, skeletons, particularly secrets-closet skeletons, have light-filled, luminous eyes – not empty eye sockets. They also wear clothes, although Billy's were in a dreadful state of tatters. Mrs Bones tried her best, but clothes from the Afterlife were in such short supply. Billy's shirt had been surrendered to the rag pile years earlier. Most days he dressed in only a pair of ragged shorts and socks.

Mrs Bones wore a shawl, a bonnet and not much more,

except a gentle smile. Mr Bones's wardrobe was a herringbone vest and, occasionally, a cap.

Billy's parents, Lars and Decette Bones, doted on him as much as they could, locked away in their stuffy closet home.

Skeletons don't need much to survive. As you can imagine, eating is out of the question. Breathing? Not necessary. Nor is bathing. Really all that a skeleton needs to survive is a simple secrets closet and maybe a family member or two.

But Billy's desires ran in another direction. He often dreamed of a life of adventure, like the Biglum's great-great-great-great-grandfather, Old Glass-Eyed Pete. Billy couldn't help loving sea tales, because the trunk that he slept in used to contain Old Glass-Eyed Pete's treasure. And the stories of his adventures still stirred inside like whispers. He'd sailed at least six of the seven seas, pirating chestfuls of doubloons, jewels and other booty. To a lonely skeleton boy trapped in a closet, no life looked so fair as a pirate's!

Billy imagined himself boarding a ship with his pirate crew. He'd swing from the highest yardarm, dagger grinding between his teeth, and land on the deck to claim the treasure for his fearsome crew. Then he'd wake with his sword

arm thrust in the air, shouting, 'Plunder the treasure and scuttle the ship, boys!'

At first his parents were concerned about these blood-thirsty outbursts, but soon put it down to an active imagination and acute boredom. Billy had asked about the swashbuckling figure in his dreams a number of times. His parents told him that Glass-Eyed Pete was the founder of the Biglum family and he had seen more strange lands and had more adventures than any three people they had ever met. But they seemed reluctant to say much more. Billy was sure there were dark secrets attached to the tales.

A small current of air wafted Billy's spiderweb curtains and he was reminded of the ratlines and shrouds on a tall ship. He climbed the nearest stack of trunks and cried, 'Into the rigging, me lads! And cast yer eyes for sails on the horizon.'

As Billy clattered up the trunks, Mr Bones lowered his paper. It crinkled like the frown on his forehead. 'Decette, I think it's time to give our boy some lessons in secret keeping.'

The comment caught Mrs Bones by surprise. She dropped her darning and blinked two luminous eyes. 'But

young skeletons are supposed to receive sanctioned training at Miss Spinetip's School for Secret-Keeping Skeletons, and you know that's out of the question, considering Billy's situation.'

'Still and all, my dear, we can't have him caterwauling about forever, pretending he's a pirate. A bit of training will give him some purpose, I should think, even if we can't send him back to the Afterlife for schooling.'

'I suppose . . . well, he'll be quite excited when you tell him, there's no doubt about that.'

Billy, who hadn't listened to a word, scrambled around on top of the trunks a bit longer, harred a few more 'Har, maties!' and then thumped to the floor. He'd just spotted a glossy black beetle over by his sleeping trunk. It was Scamp, the closest thing he had to a friend. Billy had found him years before, scurrying under the floorboards.

Scamp enjoyed telling Billy the comings and goings in the rest of the house. He knew where the best piles of garbage were, where a comfortable sock had been left on the floor, and who had the loudest snores. Even these scraps of household intelligence captured Billy's interest.

Scamp's field report for today: more activity in the house

than usual, mostly near the old playroom in the attic. Possibly someone new was visiting.

Indeed, someone was. The new arrival was Millicent Hues, but it would be some time before she and Billy met. And there was more to arrive, besides. Bound for the closet was a fresh shipment of secret trunks in need of careful storage. The close-knit Bones family was about to knit even closer.

2
PRAIRIE STORM

Miss Hester Primly, the Biglums' housekeeper, had a face one would never describe as attractive. 'Wrinkled' and 'dry' were words that fit nicely. At this particular moment, her eyes bulged with a mixture of shock and contempt; her eyebrows looked ready to fly off her face; and one nostril flicked in and out as all six feet of her bony figure glared down at a smashed teacup on the floor. Miss Primly swooped out of the parlour and into the grand hallway, leaving the Biglum ancestral portraits to stare in disgust.

In her high-collared black dress, she swished past rows of saluting armour and walls plastered high with Biglum portraiture. Apple-green ferns and potted palms were the only soft touches in the hardwood hall.

The house, for all its greatness, was never kept much

brighter than the Boneses' closet – unless the Biglums were entertaining. Even outside on a sunny day, the manor cast a shadow of relentless pride that would have made the tallest man feel like a simpering shortcake. The house was a towering dedication to haughty airs.

Miss Primly moved past a score of maids polishing the floor. The smell of lemon deepened the crinkles in her nose. Each maid bent lower as the Primly storm gusted through to the end of the hallway and moved up the grand staircase. Most people would have needed a rest by then, but not Miss Primly. Sterner stuff, that's what she was made of, with some vinegar, cod liver oil and bitters thrown in for good measure.

Finally, Miss Primly slowed and entered the library.

The library was as grand as any other part of the Manor. Leather-bound books packed shelves that raced to the ceiling, and a brass-railed walkway cut the height of the book stacks in two. Rolling ladders stretched from the floor to the walkway and from the walkway to the skylight, high above.

Busts of philosophers and literary notables circled the room, eyeing Miss Primly with suspicion. A grandfather

clock chimed the quarter hour and the fireplace washed the room with dancing light.

Standing opposite the fireside, a man examined a pile of blueprints. He was squat as a barrel and looked mean as a mallet. The man, whose plump fingers drummed nervously, was Sir Barkley Braggety Biglum the Sixth, head of the house, lord of the manor, and general all-around big cheese.

Lost in thought, Sir Biglum stroked his coal-shovel jaw. His eyes skulked in the shadow of his bulky brow. Some men shared chummy nicknames like 'Monty' for 'Montgomery' or 'Algie' for 'Algernon.' But the warmest, chummiest name one could think of for Sir Barkley Braggety Biglum the Sixth was 'Sir.'

He was dressed informally in a cravat and smoking jacket. Smoke drifted up from his jacket and caressed his bald head, twisting off into the darkness. One could not be sure if the source of smoke was his cigar or his devilish heart.

A tiny 'ahem' from Miss Primly secured his attention.

'PRIMLY, what is it?' gruffed Sir Biglum. Because of his short stature, Sir Biglum had developed a habit of bouncing up on his toes to emphasize certain words. 'You know I HATE being disturbed when I'm working on my PLANS.'

She did know. He'd been labouring over these blueprints for months. Miss Primly went a full shade paler. Sir Biglum was the one person who gave her the shivers.

'It's a teacup, sir—' Miss Primly started.

'A teacup!' Sir Biglum cut her off. 'I should be interrupted from my BIGGEST plans to date . . . plans that will increase my fortune to the point where banks will join forces to build vaults big enough . . . just to hear about a TEACUP?' His eyes screwed into Miss Primly's.

She stepped half a heel click back. 'There's a bit more, sir. For weeks, objects have been out of place, even broken. This started after the arrival of your niece, Millicent. I thought I should inform you.'

'If she doesn't know how to behave herself PROPERLY,' said Sir Biglum, his eyelids low with malice, 'see to it that she LEARNS . . . particularly before this year's ball. Her pitiful story will be FABULOUS for showcasing my generous nature.' He sniffed and then slammed his fists on the table. 'But you'd better be sure she doesn't EMBARRASS me, or I'll have you BOTH thrown out like gutter rats.' He grabbed his plans with a *smack* and turned his back.

Miss Primly glided out of the room. Oh, I'll take care of her, all right, she thought. I'll take care of her!

The flame in Sir Biglum's eyes cooled a few degrees. The girl had been a minor annoyance until now. In fact, he had forgotten that she had even come to stay at the manor.

Years rolled off Sir Biglum's face as he remembered his sister Julia. It had been a long time since he had anything that you could call 'good' feelings. Greed was his constant companion now.

Yet he could almost feel a summer's breeze blowing from the memories of his childhood. He had spent so much time together with his brother and sister up in the playroom, since his father hadn't allowed the children to have friends. 'Riff-raff and ticky-tack children aren't for the likes of my fine family,' the Fifth would say.

Sir Biglum flushed as he remembered Julia leaving the manor years later, marrying Artemis Hues, a man far beneath the family. And it had been only days before the event of the century, the one the family scheduled every two years, the bi-quadrennial Biglum Ball! *Just when the family was supposed to be at its most splendid. Her notable absence*

was an unforgivable embarrassment. Her name was never mentioned in the household again.

An arranged marriage could have meant a welcome addition to the Biglum fortune. But running away to a life among the city's artists, musicians and intellectuals wouldn't put one penny into anyone's pocket. *Certainly not MINE!* (Sir Biglum often rose on his toes even when he was thinking).

Then his headstrong sister had to go and get herself killed. *The potential for humiliation! It could have cost this family EVERYTHING!* Greed tickled the nape of Sir Biglum's neck. As he reached back to scratch, he remembered the drawings. He dismissed the past, settled back in the present, and considered his visions of the future.

3
TWO GHOSTLY VISITORS

It's not every little girl who balances on tiptoes in the middle of a room and has her hair stroked by a floating hairbrush. If you were to stand quietly in a corner, you'd notice other peculiarities as well. Like a chest opening and closing of its own accord – different dresses hovering for a quick approval – or what appeared to be a three-way conversation with only one person present.

The little girl was Millicent, and judging by her smile, the goings-on were as welcome as carols at Christmas.

If you could then move from the corner and watch through Millicent's eyes, you'd see her parents, who had been killed in an accident. Their heads bent at an unnatural angle, to the right. When they stood next to one another, they seemed to be contemplating the same idea at the same

time. Their amber hair and clothes billowed slowly, as if they were underwater. (Local police had dredged them from the River Ire. Millicent's parents had been out in the country, painting on a boat. If she hadn't been staying with her best friend, Vanessa, they would have found all three Hueses floating that day, just five weeks before.) Now, her parents' touch was colder than a mackerel, and Millicent missed their warmth. But their translucent forms were filled with a beautiful gauzy light. Millicent was happy to have them around.

Her days had been long and lonely since her parents departed to the other side and she was always glad when they came back. 'Why can't you come visit more often?' Millicent had asked them.

'Red tape, long lines at the way stations and mutton-headed government officals,' was their reply. But when they *could* visit, Millicent caught them up on the explores she'd had in the attic of the giant house, certain she'd been in rooms that people hadn't breathed in for generations.

What Millicent loved most was exploring and solving mysteries. What's behind that door? she would ask herself. What's in that box or under that hat?

So far, several hallway doors had defied Millicent's snoop-

ing. She had asked her parents if they could walk through the walls and open them from the other side. But just like parents anywhere, they told her those rooms were locked for a reason.

Soon she was in bed, arms wrapped tightly around her knees, watching her mother, Julia. She was hovering just above the bed, and Millicent was reminded of the golden tumble of perfume during nightly tuck-ins – in her old featherbed, in her old life.

Her father, Artemis, bobbing gently, fluffed her pillow. The cold fog of his ghost arm brushed by her, and she remembered when he was full of life and colour. He'd sit for hours over his canvases until his paintings glowed with beauty. When Millicent burst into his studio, he would stop, wipe his hands, and greet her like she'd just returned from a year-long sea cruise.

Millicent's parents had always made her feel special, and were still doing a fine job for two people nearly not there. Even now, in their translucent forms, they were generous with praise.

'Julia, my dear,' Millicent's father said, 'you're looking particularly lovely this evening – your glow is even more

glow-y than last night. The Afterlife agrees with you.' Millicent's father always made the best of things, no matter which side of the grave.

'Artemis, if I could, you'd have me blushing,' her mother replied, reaching for his hand.

Love didn't appear to fade in the Afterlife.

'But, look at how pretty Millicent is, and how big she's getting.' Millicent was fully capable of blushing, and she did.

Millicent was someday going to be a 'looker', according to her father. Now she was a thin and wispy girl of eleven with rust-brown hair as independent as she was and a long nose that sometimes embarrassed her.

As for her room in the Biglum manor, it was empty as a poor man's pocket. It held only six items: a small bed, her trunk of clothing, a cracked washing bowl with an equally cracked pitcher, a bedside candlestick and a small box of matches.

The highlight of the room was a small window. It had no curtains, of course, but Millicent could look out on the lush countryside to the village of Houndstooth-on-Codswattle.

It was summer, and nature lounged gloriously beyond the

manor's shadow. Millicent wanted to hike in the warm fields, raise her face, close her eyes and see the red glow of the sun through her eyelids; or maybe dip a few toes in the nearby river. But Miss Primly had been lurking too close each time Millicent tried to escape.

The thought of Miss Primly caused Millicent's lip to push out in a grump as her parents prepared to leave. Her mother was the first to see it, and tousled Millicent's hair.

She leaned forward, dissolving into mist, and whispered, 'You'll be all right.' And was gone.

Millicent struggled with sleep. She pulled the sheet to her face between balled-up fists and remembered her first meeting with Miss Primly. 'What an odious little girl,' were the housekeeper's first words. 'Understand this: you are to stay completely out of the way up in the attic. You are not to bother the staff in any way. And most certainly, you will never, ever disturb Sir Barkley Braggety Biglum the Sixth, because if you do, you little leech . . .' Miss Primly drew her index finger across her neck.

'I'm sure I should thank my uncle in person. It's the right thing to do,' Millicent said bravely. 'And what about

schooling? My mother was helping me read the classics, and my father was teaching me music and art.'

Miss Primly's face twisted as she huffed a dry laugh. 'Schooling? Here's your first lesson, and it's written on the back of my hand!'

She raised her hand to strike, but Millicent was a quick study and was already on her way up to the attic.

Millicent had found her way up the endless stairs to the bleak room where she had slept since. Now, she tossed a few more tosses, turned a few more turns, and missed her parents a bit more. She missed her best friend Vanessa too, and their secret trips to the roof to gaze at the city. Millicent even missed the musky fumes that drifted from the alleyways behind the brownstones, and the constant clip-clopping and rumble of wagons.

Each memory drifted by, like a solemn funeral procession. Finally sleep was kind enough to shake loose a dream, and Millicent gratefully sank into slumber.