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The Fourth Horseman

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Extract

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1

When the place filled up with sirens and flashing blue lights I hardly noticed at first. It was just more of the same: chaos upon chaos. I know that what happened took place in broad daylight, but I remember it in darkness. Perhaps I was looking in towards the deep shade beneath the trees. Perhaps it is the other kind of darkness that blackens my memory. We should have been afraid, I suppose, when all those emergency colours came charging in: the blue and red and white. The three of us, anyway: Javed and Alex and I. The 'juveniles'. We could have left Dad to the ambulance crew and made a run for it, vanishing in among the trees. It wouldn't have worked, of course. They would have had the place surrounded and there would have been nowhere for us to go. But none of us even thought of it. We just stood there in an exhausted daze. I suppose it didn't occur to us to feel guilty. We didn't think of what we had done as a crime.

They were upon us within seconds of arriving: two policemen first, then three more, then two sprinting paramedics. I wanted to watch what they did with Dad, but one of the cops was shouting at me.

'Is there anyone in the building?'

I shook my head.

'Are you sure?'

'Positive,' I said.

He turned and called out the information to the others, one of whom was gently but firmly pulling Alex away from Dad so the ambulance crew could work on him. Two others were edging Javed away, out of earshot of the rest of us. We were being quietly separated from each other but it didn't seem important. The horsemen had gone. That was what mattered.

'What happened here?' said the policeman. We were standing beneath the scrubby trees, both of us watching the ambulance crew attending to Dad. I wanted to answer but I didn't know where to start. That was when the first little chemical twinge of anxiety arose. We weren't criminals, we were heroes. It had taken all our courage to do what we did and it was the only thing we could have done, given the circumstances. But how could I even begin to explain?

The policeman moved in front of me, blocking my view of Dad. 'Hmm?' he said. 'What happened?'

That small anxiety became a hot charge of fear. There was no way anyone, let alone the authorities, was going to believe me if I told them the truth about what I had lived through that morning. My silence lengthened, and I knew that the longer it lasted the guiltier I appeared. The policeman was about to speak again, when a red squirrel dropped from a branch above him and landed on his shoulder. He flinched violently and swiped at it with his opposite hand. It

dodged the blow and took refuge beneath his arm. As he stood, panic-stricken, trying to work out where it was, I stepped forward and took it off him.

'What the hell . . . ?' he said.

I held the squirrel against my chest and stroked her neck. She nuzzled gratefully against me, glad to be back in human hands following her brief glimpse of the free world with its deep dark woods and its huge white sky. She had answered my question and I was about to open my mouth and tell the policeman that this was what it was all about. Little red squirrels. But that wasn't the truth. Not the whole truth, anyway. The whole truth hit me like a furnace blast, and I was suddenly crying, holding the little creature against my neck and face, wetting her shiny red coat with my tears.

2

Lately I have found myself wondering how many, out of all the millions of people out there, have secrets. I don't mean the normal, run-of-the-mill family kind of stuff. I'm sure most people have that kind of secret. What I'm wondering about is the weirder stuff; things that people see or hear but can't tell anyone about because there's no point. No one would believe them. Things from other worlds, other times, other dimensions. Maybe everybody sees things and nobody dares to tell anyone for fear of being ridiculed, so everyone lives a kind of double life, one part private and the other one public. I don't know. But I saw things that I couldn't tell people about. Not many people, anyway, and certainly not the police.

My father saw them too.

He's James McAllister, a well-respected expert on viruses. He studied at various universities until he got his PhD, and then he got a grant from the government to do research at the University of Birmingham on the problem of the New Zealand flatworm.

I know. Everyone laughs when they hear that. But at the time my dad got the project grant it looked as though the New Zealand flatworm was going to become a very serious problem indeed. It arrived in the root balls of imported plants and before very long it

was multiplying in the fields and gardens of England. It's a nasty piece of work, the New Zealand flatworm. Dad took me and Alex into the lab to see some of them. They're kind of purply-red and slimy – they look like long strips of liver. The problem with them, and the reason Dad got a grant to try and get rid of them, is that they eat earthworms. They wrap them up and squeeze them, and digest them outside their bodies, then drink up the juice with their sucker mouth. It's pretty gruesome. The problem, as any gardener will tell you, is that earthworms are vital to the health and fertility of the soil, so there was a bad scare when the flatworms were found to be spreading, because there was a danger that they would make the whole countryside barren and useless for growing anything in.

Dad's job was to create a virus that would kill them but wouldn't harm any of the common varieties of earthworm. Dad was certain that it could be done and he wasn't far from creating a preliminary, experimental virus when the money ran out. The New Zealand flatworm suddenly ceased to be an issue. It was still there, still spreading, still dissolving our earthworms, but it hadn't had the rapid, devastating effect that the horticulturists had feared. There were new issues, new scares, and no money left for Dad's project.

He was gutted. The university gave him as much teaching as he wanted, but teaching would never satisfy

Dad. His mind was hungry for research. He wanted to go beyond the explored world and into the unknown. Mum said that he had a pioneering nature, and that it was his best and his worst characteristic. He would never be satisfied with small challenges. He always had to go for the big ones.

My father saw what I saw, though he would never admit to anyone that he did. Being a scientist, he always taught us not to believe anything that couldn't be tested and proved. He said that life was full of rumours and conjectures and wild theories. He said the human race didn't have the mental capacity to grasp the truly miraculous nature of the universe they inhabited, so they invented all kinds of wacky theories to explain it to themselves. He taught us to think straight and work out problems according to the basic principles of science. It's been useful and I'll always be grateful to him, but sometimes thinking straight isn't what's needed. Sometimes you have to think around corners.

Luckily for everyone, just in the nick of time, one of us did.

3

Someone must have told the police what we had done. Dad? He was sitting up now, his head between his knees. A spotless white blanket was around his shoulders, and one of the paramedics was swabbing at the hair on the back of his head. I doubted whether he would have said anything. I doubted whether he even knew what was happening.

Javed must have told them then, or Alex, who was standing watching the paramedic. There was a police constable beside him, watching him carefully. Whoever let it slip, the result was the same. The man who was with me turned and talked to another officer – his senior, I presumed – who had just come over from looking at the building. When he turned back to me his attitude had changed completely. He was no longer embarrassed by my tears, which were drying up now in any case, and he was no longer treading carefully. He was all business, and I was clearly in trouble.

He asked me my name and address and I gave them to him. Then he said: 'You do not have to say anything unless you wish to do so, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention, when questioned, something you may later rely on in court. Anything you say may be given in evidence. Do you understand?'

'In court?' I said. 'Are you arresting me?'

'Do you understand the caution I just gave you?' said the policeman.

'Yes, but you can't arrest me. I've just—'

'Just what?' he said.

Another officer, a woman, appeared at his side. I decided it was probably best not to say anything else. I needed to get things clear in my own mind before I could begin to explain them to anyone else.

'Are we taking her in?' asked the woman.

'That's what I'm told,' said the man. 'I've cautioned her and she says she understands.'

'What are you doing with that?' she asked me, looking at the squirrel.

'Damn thing jumped on me,' said the policeman. 'Gave me the fright of my life.' Turning back to me, he went on: 'You can put it down now. Come on.'

I didn't mind going with them but I didn't want to put the squirrel down. If I let her go again she might not survive. I wished I had thought about that before I turned them all loose.

'Why is it so tame?' asked the female officer. 'Is it a pet?'

I shook my head. 'Not a pet.'

'What then?'

I looked back at the burning building. The wind was blowing the smoke away from us. A great black river of it flowed across the cloudy sky. 'Do you know what went on in there?'

She shook her head and waited, but I wasn't ready to start talking yet.

'Come on,' said the policeman. 'Let's go. Put the squirrel down.'

I put her up instead of down, back on the branch she had jumped from. She scooted away, tail in the air, and disappeared among the shadows. I fought back a fresh crop of tears and sent a little pulse of hope after her. A prayer, I suppose most people would call it.

'Just empty your pockets for me now,' said the woman.

I hesitated, hardly able to believe this was happening. It should have been all over. I was angry and humiliated and frightened. I was sure that my face must be red; shining like a new cricket ball. Reluctantly I emptied my pockets and handed the contents to the officer.

Funny, the things that come into your head; the automatic priorities of the unconscious mind. *Not a tampon* is what I was thinking. *Please let there not be any tampons in my pockets.*

There weren't. What was in there was worse. As I handed each thing to her she examined it then dropped it into the evidence bag her colleague was holding open. A handful of tiny ear tags. The entry card to the lab. A cigarette lighter.

All the proof they needed to convict me.

4

So Dad lost his job and, as far as he was concerned anyway, his career was going down the drain. But ironically, a few months later, Mum's took off. She's a sports physiotherapist, which means she treats all the bumps and breaks and sprains and strains that happen to sports people. She was a great cricketer in her younger days. Before we came along she had played for the England women's team for a couple of seasons, so when the Worcestershire County Cricket Club needed a new physio she was an obvious choice for the job. It suited everyone. Mum was happy because she enjoyed the job. We were happy, because she was nearly always at home when we got back from school. The club was happy because she was very good indeed at what she she did. Which is why, when a sudden vacancy occurred for a physio to work with the England squad, Mum was offered the job. It was a fantastic opportunity for her; a once-in-a-lifetime chance. She wanted it.

But Dad wasn't so keen. They had a big flare-up one night, the worst ever, I think. I couldn't hear what was said, but I could hear the raised voices, the chairs scraping and doors banging, the ominous silences between rounds. Alex came to my bedroom and we rode it out together, listening to music and reading

junk magazines and pretending nothing was happening. In the end the row blew itself out, and in the morning Mum was bright and breezy. Dad was a bit more subdued, but they told us with a unified front that Mum was going to be taking the job with the England squad, and that Dad was going to arrange his teaching schedule around our school hours.

'We don't need baby-sitting,' Alex said.

I agreed. 'We can take care of ourselves.' I had my arm in a sling at the time, which made that statement slightly unconvincing, but it was, in fact, quite true. Alex and I were extremely independent. We rode our bikes everywhere and we were well able to cook and clean up after ourselves.

'It's a done deal,' said Dad. 'For the time being, anyway. It's not a problem.'

'If your Dad gets a new research project we might have to rethink,' Mum said, 'but for the moment he'll be holding the fort.'

Dad crossed his eyes and grinned and looked down the barrel of the frying pan. 'Meanwhile, champagne tonight!' He raised an empty hand. 'Here's to your mum's new job!'

It was all a bit sudden, really. There must have been a crisis in the England squad because they wanted Mum yesterday. The Worcester management were very understanding about it. They didn't hold her to her

contract with them, and within a week she was gone, off to her new life. We were left slightly dazed, wandering around the empty space that she had left behind her. None of us had realized just how enormous it was going to be.

Dad did his best. There's no doubt about that. While my arm was still in plaster he collected us from school every day, and even when I was able to cycle again he was nearly always there when we got home. If he couldn't be he always let us know and made sure we were organized. He did all his usual absent-minded scientist things, like wearing different-coloured socks and picking us up from school one rainy afternoon in his dressing gown. He used to help us with our homework, and once, when he had been writing out a load of magic formulas to help me with my physics classes, he took them into college instead of his latest lecture notes. At the weekends he took us shopping, or to the cinema, or he bowled a few overs with us at home. Whatever happened he put a brave face on it, but underneath it he was deeply unhappy. I could tell.

There was one particular morning I remember. I was in a miserable mood because I had a sore throat and didn't want to go to school. We had all got up late, and Dad was loading the dishwasher because no one had got around to doing it the night before. Our dog, Randall, was whining for a walk which, that morning at least, he wasn't going to get, and Alex was

complaining that his school shirts hadn't been ironed. As Dad straightened up from the dishwasher the spray arm caught in his shirt cuff and the top tray got dislodged. There was an almighty crash of crockery and cutlery, and Dad stood staring at it in disbelief.

'I wasn't born for this,' he said.

'What were you born for then?' said Alex, tactlessly, I thought.

Dad, recovering his sense of humour somehow, laughed, slightly manically. 'Great things, boy,' he said. 'Monumental discoveries.' With sudden and surprising strength he wrenched the dishwasher tray free and plonked it noisily on the worktop. 'I was born to rattle the world in its cage,' he said melodramatically. 'I was born to tilt it on its axis! I was born to stride it like a colossus! The mind' – he pointed to his temple – 'it's all in there.'

We left the havoc in the kitchen and piled into the car, and Dad was in great humour as he drove us to school. But those words of his would return, later, to haunt me.

5

I stared, without focus, into the trees. Specks of soot and flakes of ash were sailing through all the open spaces and coming to rest silently on the rough ground. I watched them as the female officer counted the ear tags she had taken from my pocket.

'Eleven,' she said to the other constable, and then, to me: 'What are these things, anyway?'

'Ear tags,' I said.

'Ear tags,' she repeated. 'For what?'

'Squirrels,' I said.

'Squirrels,' she repeated.

There wasn't going to be any point in lying about that. But how much more would I tell them, that was the question. Javed would know. If they took us in together I would let him do the talking. I looked across to where he too was being searched. As if he had been waiting for me to do that, he caught my eye and held it for a moment. He lifted his hand to his mouth, as though to cover a cough, and then, inconspicuously, altered the shape of it until he had one finger clearly placed across his lips in an ancient and universal sign. Say nothing. I gave a tiny nod, just as inconspicuous, I hoped. He turned his attention back to the officers and their search. They wouldn't find anything incriminating on him, I was pretty sure.