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Ghost Girl

Helena McEwen

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PART ONE

'OK, tell me three things you like about it, then I'll shut up.'

'There aren't three.'

'There must be. You can count food.'

Black-iron leaves hold up a globe of pale-pink light that turns my shadow turquoise on the pavement.

'Here's the right place,' says Very, climbing some steps on to a bench that looks across the dark river. She gets out her drawing book, a bottle of black ink, and a paintbrush with a bamboo handle.

'Olive,' I say, sitting down beside her.

I watch as Very turns the white of the paper into the lit-up beads strung across the bridge against the black-ink sky, and into bright ripples of reflected light in the black-ink river.

'Olives?' she says, watching her paintbrush.

'No, Olive, I like her.'

I could tell she was new too, and terrified like I was, standing in the supper queue with her hands in a twisted plait, looking about with those magnified eyes.

Very tears off the picture carefully and gives it to me to hold while it dries.

She had numbers in those eyes. They lit her up, measurements, distances, the speed of light, twenty-three times round the earth in one second.

And she loves the sun.

I watch as Very draws the moon with a stick of charcoal. I look up and see it shining across the river.

When the other two arrived, girls shouted, 'Queue-bargers!' from behind.

'The new girls saved our places, didn't you,' they said, and Olive and I both nodded that we had.

Eliza sang under her breath, 'Little new girls do what they're to-old,' and I didn't want to remember that.

'Olive what, anyway,' said Eliza.

'Olive Burnham,' whispered Olive.

'I thought you were going to say Olive Green!' said Eliza.

'I thought you were going to say Olive Oyl,' said Pen. 'You've got the right hairstyle!'

I look at the black water with the sleeping boats sliding to and fro on the wake of a night-time police boat. Very is hurrying to draw it into her picture as it moves across the page shattering the bright ripples of reflected moon.

In fact what Olive likes best are the stars, their size, their names Bellatrix and Betelgeuse in the constellation of Orion, and Bellatrix has a diameter of two hundred and forty million miles, which is only just under three times the distance between us and the sun, she told me, her eyes blinking a lot.

Very blows the charcoal dust off the page. She has a smudge down the side of her nose and black fingers.

She looks at me and her eyes are lit by the pink street lights.

'Second thing?'

I shake my head.

'Think about it,' she says.

I scan through the days and nights of my memory, trying to avoid the things I don't want to see.

That first night when I lay in bed listening to the creaking partitions and waiting for the lights to go out, breathing not too deeply so I wouldn't disturb the wrench that happened in my throat when they said, 'Don't come all the way downstairs, we can say goodbye here,' and they'd walked along the yellow strip of carpet down the centre of Yellow D that stood for dormitory, and past the colourless virgin with her arms outstretched. There had been a little tapping on the wood behind the yellow curtain. It took a few taps before I thought to say, 'Yes,' in a whisper.

She'd drawn back the curtain and asked permission to come in when she was already through, and to sit down as she sat down on the bed. They were all dressed the same and it was hard to tell them apart, you had to look at their eyes, and the shape their hidden bodies made the habit; tall habits, short habits, fat habits, stooped habits, all black and down to the ground with a veil that got swept behind like long hair, only a triangle of face showing, and hands emerging from white cuffs.

She sat on my bed looking at me with her eyebrows raised in a question.

'Do you know how to finish the day, dear?' she asked, looking at me with her eyes shut.

I shook my head.

'No, Sister.'

'You should finish the day by kneeling down and saying your night prayers.'

'Yes, Sister, I did say them.'

'Good child, and after your night prayers what should you do?'

Again she looked at me with her eyes shut, but the eyelashes fluttered.

'Get into bed?'

'After your night prayers you should observe due modesty in going to bed . . .' she said, lowering her eyes.

I waited for her to continue.

'. . . occupy yourself with thoughts of death . . .' There was another pause. 'And endeavour to compose yourself to rest at the foot of the cross and give your last thoughts to our crucified saviour.'

She waited a long time with her eyes shut.

When she opened her eyes I got a shock because I was watching them.

'Yes, Sister.'

'All right, goodnight, my child.'

'Goodnight, Sister.'

She seemed to be waiting at the curtain.

'Thank you, Sister.'

She nodded and slipped through.

'Well?' says Very, rubbing out a big patch in the centre of her page, and flicking away the bits of rubber. The bright

moon has gone behind an orange cloud and the sky has turned brown. She sighs – her drawing is not working.

'Don't you have a second thing, Cath?'

I look at her head bending over the picture and all that straggly hair going in her eyes, the charcoal smudged down the side of her nose. I'm so relieved to be with her.

'The river.'

'This one?'

'No, at school, the second thing.'

'You're not allowed there, are you?'

'No, but I sneaked there.'

'You can't count out of bounds.'

The out of bounds, the not allowed, the forbidden river is where I feel at home. Like I feel at home with Very. Through the wet ferns that splash your face with water droplets, and under them the blue grass with rows of water beads, the nettles and tall willow herb covered in fluffy seeds, their long thin leaves turning orange and red next to the violet flowers, through the grass and thistles and down to the stones. The large smooth stones and the black mud, and if you take your shoes and socks off and wade in you can see the dark-brown water turns your feet deep-orange.

The water froths when it has been raining and rises up the bank.

'D'you sneak there a lot?'

'Only did it once.'

'Well, the river doesn't count. Think of something else.'

I watch her black hand, the charcoal snaps, Very spits on to the page and starts drawing with her fingers.

She'd come the next morning too. She walked into my dream and I nearly screamed because she was sitting on my bed, looking at me with her eyes shut. But I gasped instead and tried to blink away the monkey with the blue tongue.

'Do you know how to begin your day, my child?'

'No, Sister.'

'You should begin the day by making the sign of the cross as soon as you wake in the morning' – she took my hand and helped me make the sign of the cross – 'saying,' "Oh my God . . ." ' She stopped and nodded to let me repeat it. ' "I offer my heart and soul to you." '

'Do you know how you should rise in the morning, dear?'

'No, Sister.'

'You should rise in the morning diligently,' she said, bowing her head, 'dress yourself modestly,' another bow, 'and kneel down to say your morning prayers.'

'Yes, Sister, thank you, Sister.'

Very closes her book. She looks at me and chews her cheek.

'Come on. I'll show you the sculpture,' she says, and pats me on the back.

We walk along by the twinkling Thames, Very

pointing out the four upside-down table-legs of Battersea Power Station. The leaves are falling in the water although there is no wind. We cross the road. Outside a tall glass building is a boy suspended in midair, his arms and legs outstretched, holding the fin of a dolphin with one hand. Very thinks it is sentimental. I think it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

We walk back through the dark buildings, glowing with rectangles of coloured light, yellow, pink, red, green, depending on the curtains. They make the night look cosy.

I think of the biology lab and the copper taps with verdigris in the cracks, the coiled orange tube, a faint smell of gas, a yellow lick of flame and the quivering blue eye. And I think of Miss Tweedie who isn't a nun, who told us we're made of spinning atoms, but mostly space. You're a miniature universe, she said, and it made me breathe in to think of all that space inside me, and she smiled her red smile. We made acid drops in her class and she even took us to the stone staircase of the Upper School so we could pour dry ice down the steps and see it rise in clouds of white mist.

'Miss Tweedie.'

'What?'

'The chemistry teacher. I like her.'

'Glad to hear it. That's two things.'

She opens the front door and we quietly sneak up the stairs, so as not to wake the old man and his housekeeper, who live underneath. Mrs McGonogall is small with a hunched back and yellow wizened skin, but eyes so bright they twinkle like a child's.

'Come and visit, darlin',' she'd said. 'Come and have a sit in the garden under the pear tree and I'll make us a nice cup of tea.'

'Thank you,' I'd said, and her hand had reached up far longer than you'd expect from such a short body, reached up along the banister slowly, like a spider's leg, and given my back a stroke.

'There, honey, I hardly ever get to talk with the young ones – it's just that old bastard to keep me company.' She'd smiled a yellow smile.

We clamber up the narrow stairs, into the little room with too-big furniture. A black desk under the window, a long square sofa under a huge gilt mirror, a large chest with faded painted flowers, two small chests of drawers with loose gold knobs, some of them missing, so you can't open them any more.

'D'you want tea?'

I'd considered the chest but when I saw the loose gold knob I'd stuffed it all in the drawer and pulled the knob off, the brown pleated skirt, the yellow-and-brown tie, the blazer, the white shirt, the brown socks. They were unreachable now.

'Do you? I've got biscuits.'

'Mmm.'

I'd worn it on the train, of course. Very said she couldn't tell which one I was when she collected me from the station. I had to call out to her. 'Very! Very, it's me!' She was looking at all their faces with a frown,

trying to see mine. But then the frown broke, I could see her eyes all lit up. Her face was smiling.

'There you are!'

We'd come out on to the thundering road.

She'd said, 'Let's go there,' pointing over the road.

The cars were zooming. 'Wimpy Bar' was written in huge red letters. I'd screwed my face up.

'Oh just a quick bite, I'm starving.'

'All right,' I said, 'but I'm not eating anything.'

So we crossed the road from the station.

'Light the heater if you like. The matches are in the jar,' Very calls down the stairs.

I can hear the kettle beginning to boil. She bangs down the stairs and into the bedroom.

I didn't like it, still wearing my school uniform. Very was wearing her wellingtons and the turquoise skirt with paint spattered over it, and that striped jersey with holes in the elbows. I suppose her hair wasn't exactly brushed. She was carrying her sketch book and her fingers were covered in charcoal.

'What, scared it'll still be alive?' She'd winked at me as she pushed the dark-red door.

Inside it was dingy, the pale-yellow paint was peeling off the walls and the floor looked dirty. Three large photographed hamburgers were lit up behind the counter. The man serving had a gap between his teeth. Very had stood at the counter looking at the photographs and chewing her lip.

'Well, hmm,' she said.

I noticed the man behind the counter look her up and down.

'Shall I have a cheeseburger with fries or double burger?'

The man was coming round the counter shaking his head.

'Which d'you think, Cath . . .'

He was striding towards her.

'. . . you could have a Coke.'

But his hands were on her shoulders and he was shaking his head.

She'd looked surprised, as if he was greeting her, but he was shaking his head.

'No!' he'd said.

'Sorry?'

He was pushing her towards the door.

'No!'

'What?'

He opened the door, pushed her through. I'd slipped out behind her and looked round at him.

'We don't serve scruffs in here!'

We stood on the pavement, the sun coming through a crack in the white sky, and Very seemed bewildered. She looked down at her clothes.

'Do I look weird or something?'

'Well . . .'

'He wouldn't serve me . . . I mean, look!' She pointed at the dark-red door with peeling paint. 'That place wouldn't serve me!'

'Let's just go, Very.' I pulled her by the arm.