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Opening extract from
The Crowham Martyrs

Written by
Jane McLoughlin

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To Sean and Hannah

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A.D.

My fingers do tremble as I write these words.

*The devil liveth in yonder woods~yea, the fiend himself,
who prattles and prances upon this good earth like an unholy
prince.*

And my heart doth weep with horror at what I have seen.

*Mine own brave sister~oh, lamentable childe~to be treated
thus. Like to a criminal for all thy goodness. Like to an evil
witch for all thy innocence.*

*Never shall I speak of the tortures and cruelties that have
been inflicted upon thy kindly person.*

*Nor speak of the infernal beast who hath these foul obscenities
begot.*

*But never shall I forget these monstrous things, mine own
dear one.*

Never, ever . . .



A silver wisp of ghost hovers on the ceiling and a raspy voice rattles the timbers of my narrow staircase.

‘Maddy Deeprise! You’re ten minutes late.’

I run a brush through my tangled hair and look in the mirror. Pale skin, round face – shouldn’t I have cheekbones by now? I’m nearly thirteen. I rummage through my dresser drawer, dig out the make-up Mum sent from the States. Maybe lipstick would help. Or some blusher. I lean into the mirror for a closer look. Thick black eyeliner?

‘Seriously, Maddy, this is beyond a joke.’

‘Coming, Missy.’

I slip on my blazer and stumble down from my attic room. What would be the point of having cheekbones, anyway? It’s impossible to look cool in the Crowham Martyrs School uniform – a checked yellow dress, topped with an itchy blanket of dark green wool – and it’s not as if anyone would notice. After all, I’m not posh or pretty, so I

might as well be invisible in this place – even the ghosts ignore me.

The deputy housemistress waits at the bottom of the stairs with two bundles of school brochures and student planners. Because I've been here all summer – again – I'm helping her greet the new infants and juniors.

'And stop calling me Missy,' she growls. 'It's Miss Burke, in front of the others at least.'

When I started at Crowham two years ago, I wondered if Missy was in charge of the ghosts as well as the students. It stood to reason – the way she moved, as if she were floating. And her skin, so pale and translucent. It was in her clothes, too – gauzy and light, pastel and dreamy.

Turned out she was just a bit of a hippy, though, like an older, forty-something version of my mum. And she can't even *see* the ghosts. Nobody can, except for me.

'Come along, my dear.'

She pats me on the back and whisks me along the corridor. I get a whiff of tobacco and her old-fashioned patchouli perfume. On most people the scent would be overkill, but on Missy it's just right, a bit exotic, like spices from a street market in Marrakech or Istanbul, not that I've ever been to those places . . .

'Any news from La-la land?'

Missy tosses the question while we scuttle down the newly polished parquet floor, trying not to slip.

‘Mum’s a doctor at the moment.’

‘At least she’s off the streets for a change,’ Missy replies. ‘What was she the last time? A drug dealer?’

‘Something worse, I’m afraid.’

Missy laughs and smiles at me, and for a few seconds, I don’t feel so alone.

Mum’s an actress, living in Los Angeles – far, far away. She started out with smallish parts on British TV – historical dramas, mostly. ‘I’ve got a face for bonnets,’ she’d say. They were nice, the bonnet years – the late night line-learning in our cosy London flat, the early morning breakfasts before the studio’s driver arrived, the school around the corner where I got dropped off every day.

Missy glides along the corridor and down the mezzanine staircase so gracefully you’d think she could slip between the cracks the way the ghosts do. As we pass the huge fireplace by the front door I catch a glimpse of one, two, maybe three of them – they’re so close together it’s like counting clouds in an overcast sky – hovering near the heating vent, ready to swirl away.

The ghosts never cause me any problems, though.

Think of the sound a radio makes when it’s not tuned in properly. It’s just background noise, right? Annoying, but a

person can live with it. That's what the ghosts are like – most of them, anyway; a kind of visible static that I can't completely turn off or clearly tune into.

Okay, there was *one* ghost when we first got to LA, who was clearer than the others. I called her Edwina. She crouched in the stairwell of our run-down apartment building. She had something like a face – that was weird – and it seemed bruised and puffy, as if she'd been stuck under water when she was alive, as if somebody had deliberately –

'Hurry, Maddy.' Missy waits impatiently at the front door. 'We don't want the little ones to wet themselves while they're waiting, do we?'

Then Mum met Robert, a big time Hollywood producer, and it was bye-bye Edwina, bye-bye rat-infested neighbourhood, and hello glass-fronted house in Hollywood Hills.

Robert's money wasn't important to me, though. His pool and Jacuzzi meant nothing, those ceiling-high windows overlooking Los Angeles only made me feel dizzy and anxious, like there was nothing between me and the rest of the world.

So when I got shipped back to England just a few weeks after we moved in with Robert – when Mum dumped me at the Crowham Martyrs Boarding Kennel without a word of explanation – who cared? Not me.

Mum was happy with Robert; she was safe in that luxurious house up in the hills.

And the ghosts here at Crowham never bothered me in the slightest. Because they're nothing, really, just like poor old Edwina.

You can't be afraid of *nothing*, right?



A crop of eager faces sways on the lawn, like dwarf sunflowers in a field.

'Hel-lo!' Mr Grayling, the headmaster, bellows, shaking hands with one of the parents.

'Good-morn-ing!'

The gentle breeze has blown his comb-over off course so his head gleams in the sunlight. He's wearing his dark suit even though it's as warm as a summer day. It's all such a performance – the caterers and cleaners are lined up like an honour guard in their starched black dresses and white aprons. Who is the school trying to fool?

On the gravel drive, the cars – silver Mercs, chrome blue BMWs – honk and strain to make their escapes. It's a quick enough procedure – drop off little darling, shake somebody's hand, head off back to the country pile or the island in the Caribbean – but they're still in a mad rush to get away.

'Maddy! You are needed!'

Missy stands behind a makeshift bar, pouring champagne into fluted glasses that have been arranged on a tray.

‘We need to find little Jordan,’ Missy whispers. ‘He’s here somewhere.’

‘Who?’

Somebody’s pink-shirted bull of a father swaggers up to the table and takes a glass from Missy’s tray. She glowers at him, but he downs the champagne in one frothy gulp and struts back to his wife – an orange, overstretched skeleton in jeans and Chanel.

‘Jordan Fairlight.’ Missy picks up the dirty glass, gives it a quick wipe with a tea towel. ‘New boy in Year 3. I told you about him yesterday, remember? Showed you his picture?’

I look across the lawn for a boy with blond curls and piercing blue eyes that are the right side of creepy, but only just.

‘Go find him,’ Missy says. ‘He arrived on his own and needs looking after.’

I put my brochures down and weave through the crowd. As I step on to the gravel drive, something bright reflects off the bumper of a parked car, dazzling me. A metallic bronze Mercedes pulls into the driveway and a tinted window rolls down.

Natalie Ashmore – self-crowned queen of Crowham – is back. After her chauffeur stops the car, she gets out and

glances around as if she's expecting to be mobbed by a crowd of photographers.

I wave cheerfully and smile. She sees me, she must do – and she recognises me, because we're in the same house – but her eyes glaze over, and she stumbles forward, on the lookout for someone more interesting, more popular.

Who needs her, I think, as I tromp down to the bottom of the driveway, swallowing the embarrassment and hurt. *Who needs anybody at this stupid school?*

Another car pulls through the front gate – a massive silver Audi – and I have to step aside. I check the pavements on the other side of the school walls, look up and down for Jordan Fairlight.

Nothing. Nobody. Where has he gone?

Across the road Crowham Wood looms like something out of a Grimms' fairy tale, with tall, thick spruces and firs growing on the fringes, forming an almost impenetrable barrier.

The day after I arrived at Crowham – on my own, like Jordan, but without any champagne reception because it was the middle of the term and the dead of night – Missy made a huge show of leading me through the gates, marching me across the road, forcing me to stand at the edge of the forest and gaze into the shadows. *Think how terrified you'd be if you got*

lost in there, Maddy, she said. Imagine how long it would take for you to be found.

Two years later, the darkness and cold still make me shiver. There's no way Jordan would have wandered into Crowham Wood on his own – not if he'd heard of Hansel and Gretel, or the Big Bad Wolf, anyway.

I head back towards the refreshments table, scanning each new face. There's a pudgy little girl with her hair in pink-ribboned bunches; there's a boy who's sobbing and clinging on to his weeping mother's yellow and gold sari.

And on the lawn, there's a blond kid, gazing up at the school, his mouth wide open, his eyes filled with terror. He's shaking too, and who could blame him? The gaping mouth of the school's front door, the blank stares of the windows, the jagged crown of spikes along the rooftop – the school looks like a monster ready to gobble up a child-sized treat.

'Jordan?'

'Y-y-yes?'

Jordan's staring at a row of stained-glass windows above the main entrance, dazzlingly lit by the sun's light.

I squint to block the harsh rays, but I can't see anything scary.

'Don't worry,' I say. 'The building only *looks* like it bites.'

Suddenly, Jordan gets worse – his teeth chatter, his head

twitches from side to side and his body shakes as if he's having a seizure or some bizarre reaction to the light.

Before I have a chance to shout for help, Missy's at my side.

'Jordan?'

He's still trembling, transfixed. I glance up again – what is he afraid of? There's just the sunlight glinting off bright coloured glass.

Missy stoops over and puts her arms around Jordan's shoulders. 'It's all right, dear,' she purrs. 'You're bound to be upset on your first day, but that will soon pass.' Her voice is calm and reassuring, and soon she straightens up, waiting for him to calm down. She smiles at him, sighing patiently, and pats his shoulder while she glances back across the lawn and up at the windows.

We stand still, waiting for Jordan's noisy sobs to subside.

Missy hardly moves, so at first I don't notice what she's doing.

She's watching the building. I can only see it from the corner of my eyes, but her chin is tilting slightly and her eyes move upwards. She's scanning the top of the roof – the slate tiles, the lead seams, the tall brick chimney.

What is she looking for?

'Right then.' Missy claps her hands briskly, and Jordan finally snaps out of it. 'Lunchtime. We can't keep Mrs Gibson waiting.'

She pats Jordan on the shoulder and guides his faltering steps towards the front door. I follow behind, checking out those windows before Missy can turn around and see me.

There *is* something, barely visible at one of the narrow panes. It's not a ghost. It doesn't have a form or a shape, it's just a dull, glowing wash of grey, like dark light, like –

'Maddy,' Missy barks. '*Do* try to keep up.'

Like nothing I've seen before.



The clouds are heavy with rain and threatening thunder. I'm high above the ocean, standing on the edge of a grassy outcrop – scared to look down, but unable to resist a quick glance at the boiling foam that bashes against the rocks below.

'Maddy, get away from there.'

Mum's voice is harsh, anxious.

'Now!'

I inch backwards on to solid ground, holding out my arms for balance.

Something touches me.

A hand – rough and leathery – grabs my wrist, squeezes until it hurts. I look up – who is this? Who's dragging me along the clifftop's jagged edge? I can't see anything in the mist and rain. I can only feel the hand, pulling me faster and faster until everything swirls together in a terrifying blur – the angry sea, the scowling horizon, the crumbling path beneath my feet –

The alarm clangs. I bundle the duvet around my neck, check the time.

I try to remember the nightmare. At least I think that's what it was – the sea, a clifftop, somewhere familiar. Have I been there? Or just dreamed about it before?

It takes a few seconds before I realise how quiet – how *weirdly* quiet – it is this morning. Normally on the first day of term there'd be loads of noise from downstairs – girls rushing about getting ready, the prefects barking out orders, footsteps thundering down the hallway for the first breakfast sitting or racing back and forth between the rooms.

I push the duvet down and look around my room. The shelf in the corner is still listing to the left. The posters Mum sent to remind me of the West Coast – paintings by Hockney and Kahlo and O'Keefe – are still Blu-tacked to the sloping attic wall, brightening the room like rays of Californian sunshine. Sweet wrappers and empty drinks cans are strewn across my desk and clothes tuft out of part-opened drawers . . .

Everything's the same, isn't it?

Of course it is. It was just that creepy dream, Maddy, so pull yourself together. There's nothing in your room that's going to grab you or drag you along the top of a cliff or –

I hear a scraping sound. Then another, and another like a series of tiny scratches. Where is it coming from? There are

no ghosts trying to find a way up through the ceiling, no tree branches or telephone wires are tapping at the window. What about the wardrobe? Is something inside it, trying to claw its way out?

Footsteps creak on my staircase and something shuffles outside my door.

‘H-h-hello?’ It’s a squeaky whisper.

I pull the duvet back up, gather it around my throat, as if that could smother my panic and stifle the sounds of my thumping heart. Who could this be? None of the other girls ever comes up to my room, so is it one of the ghosts? But they can’t talk . . .

More shuffling from behind the door, an almost silent tap-tap-tap.

‘M-M-Maddy?’

My stomach flips. *It knows my name.*

‘Are you there?’

Finally, I get out of bed. I put on my dressing gown and tiptoe to the door – one step, two steps, three steps, four. My hands shake, and my muscles are tight with a fear I’ve never felt at Crowham before.

‘L-let me in, Maddy. Please.’

I take a deep breath. The door groans on its hinges as I open it enough to peek through the narrow gap, dreading some ghost

child's translucent face or a monster's grip finding my wrist . . .

There's a kid at the door all right. Jordan Fairlight, the Year 3 boy, alive and well and looking as frightened as I am.

'You were m-meant to take me around,' he stutters.

Suddenly I remember – Missy asked me to give him a tour of the school before assembly, show him the ropes, do the whole big sister routine.

'And then I couldn't find you . . . and . . . and then . . .' He whips his head around, as if someone's waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

'Those *fings*,' Jordan whispers.

I glance behind him – no one's there – and pull him into my room, closing the door and locking it, just in case.

'Th-those *fings* won't let me b-be,' he blubs.

His head jerks back and forth, as if he's trying to get rid of a bad memory.

'*Fings*, Jordan?' I demand. 'What's a *fing*?'

'Those *fings*.' He wipes his damp eyes on the back of his blazer cuff. 'Those ones that come out of the walls.'

A ghost sweeps under the door. It whooshes up to the top of the ceiling, dropping down to the mirror where it twists and twirls, like it's trying out some new dance moves.

Jordan lets out a cry and grabs me by the legs as the ghost floats through the window, leaving nothing behind but a

glowing spot of smudgy darkness embedded in the mirror.

What is that? I wonder. Ghost poo?

Jordan lets out a massive, shuddery sigh.

‘What *things*?’ I ask.

When I glance at the mirror again, the weird stain is gone.

Jordan sniffs. ‘*Fings* that want to hurt me.’