

The Ghost Guard



Christina Manolescu
Illustrations by Mary Fitzpatrick

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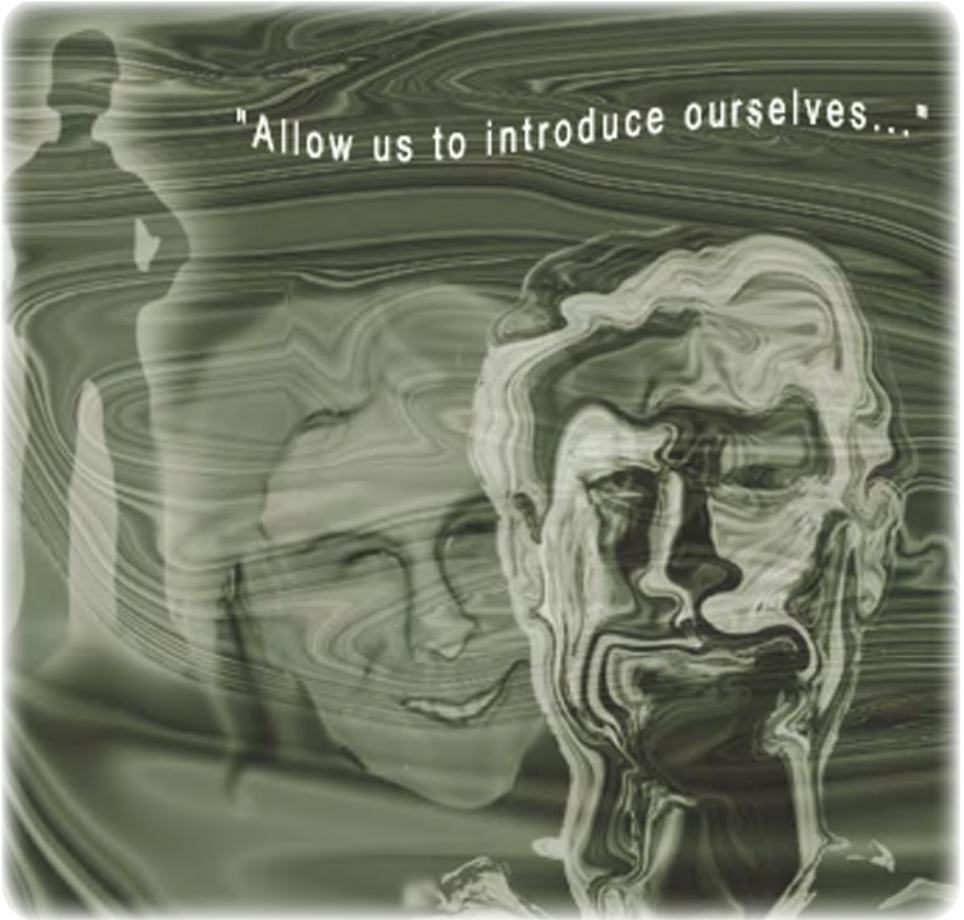
**To Mary Fitzpatrick
for her enchanting illustrations**

**To Joan Plunkett and Margaret Goldik
for their critical appreciation;
to Virginia Manning
for her editorial acumen**

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

The Ghost Guard

CHAPTER I	Auntie Vannie and Uncle Ed
CHAPTER II	Lares and Penates
CHAPTER III	The cheval glass in the attic
CHAPTER IV	Visitors
CHAPTER V	Funerals and tea-leaves
CHAPTER VI	Rainstorms and stories
CHAPTER VII	The trap door
CHAPTER VIII	Digging trenches
CHAPTER IX	Aunt Calliope's Tea Shoppe
CHAPTER X	The gypsies
CHAPTER XI	The Ebb Tide Theatre
CHAPTER XII	The telegram
CHAPTER XIII	Kidnapped
CHAPTER XIV	Queen Flamenca
CHAPTER XV	Petrus and Marta of Rome
CHAPTER XVI	Enter Scotland Yard
CHAPTER XVII	Fitz at large
CHAPTER XVIII	Rooftops of London
CHAPTER XIX	In the palace of the Emperor
CHAPTER XX	The little Princeling
CHAPTER XXI	The goatherd's widow
CHAPTER XXII	Mr. Latimer to the rescue
CHAPTER XXIII	Uncle 'Jewels'
CHAPTER XXIV	The crystal ball
CHAPTER XXV	The King will die—long live the Emperor
CHAPTER XXVI	Ingrid remembers
CHAPTER XXVII	The end of the story
CHAPTER XXVIII	The Christmas Spirit



Aunt Vannie and Uncle Ed pay a visit

Chapter One

AUNTIE VANNIE AND UNCLE ED

England, South East Coast, October, 1951.

“But I don’t understand, why can’t I go with you?” said Fitz, for about the hundredth time.

His mother, Miriam Henderson, tucked a black silk scarf into her pocket and zipped up her traveling bag. She smiled, but at the same time she looked anxious. “Darling, you can’t come with us because the journey’s going to be difficult, maybe even a tiny bit dangerous,” she said. “Look, we’ll be coming back in just a few weeks and you’ll be much happier, and safer, here at home.”

Fitz’s parents were leaving tonight for a faraway island—he couldn’t remember its name—which had been struck by an earthquake. Their job would be to find homes for some of the orphan children on the island. Much as Fitz felt sorry for these poor orphans, he couldn’t help feeling a bit resentful that, thanks to all this, it was his father and mother who were now having to go away.

Fitz's mother was tall and regal looking. Her hair was powder black and curled just a little at the shoulders. Her eyes, like his own, were the colour of amethyst. Her voice was soft, and when she laughed, it was like the ripple of a pool that's suddenly stirred. At the moment, though, Fitz wished he could reassure her; she looked so anxious and stressed.

"Mr. Latimer will come as usual for your lessons," she said. "Carmela will be here, of course, and Mr. Darnley—"

"Miriam, hurry up, the taxi's waiting," said Fitz's father, Lionel Henderson. He was standing at the bottom of the staircase, gripping his own suitcase. He was a dark blond Englishman, thick-set and sturdy looking. As he glanced at his wristwatch, he frowned. "We can't risk missing the flight, with the weather the way it is."

"Lionel, I really wish we could stay for Aunt Vanessa's funeral tomorrow," she said. "It seems so disrespectful not to wait one extra day."

"We can't, darling, we haven't the time."

Fitz dragged the last suitcase, one step at a time, to the bottom of the staircase. His younger sister, Ingrid, clung onto her mother's arm. She looked sad and forlorn.

"Just a minute," said Mrs. Henderson, "Where's Carmela?"

"Here, Madam, I'm here," called Carmela, their young nanny, hurrying toward them from the kitchen.

“Carmela, you do have the telex number to contact in case of emergencies?”

“Yes, Madam, please don’t worry about anything,” said Carmela, wiping her fingers on her apron and twirling a wisp of shiny brown hair behind one ear.

Even Carmela is looking more serious than usual, thought Fitz; perhaps she’s feeling a bit anxious too. Of course, it’s all right for ten-year-old Ingrid to have a nanny; honestly, though, it did feel a bit silly for himself to be still needing a ‘nanny’—*even if she was as nice and kind, and as pretty and funny as Carmela*—after all, he (Fitz) was already twelve years old. And that was practically grown up, wasn’t it?

“You’ll make sure nothing dangerous is left lying about, Mr. Darnley’s medicine, the garden tools and kitchen knives—”

“Oh, of course, Madam!”

“Quick, Miriam, we have to go,” said Mr. Henderson, swiftly kissing Ingrid’s cheek and hugging Fitz.

“I’m coming, Lionel. Oh, Carmela, one last thing, if Ingrid comes down with a fever again like the last time, don’t take chances, ring up Dr. Skinner right away!”

The front door shut behind them with a gentle thud; then the motor car flashed on its headlights and purred away. The evening mist seemed to curl all around them, muffling the old house for a moment before everything became dark again.



“Oh, come on, don’t cry,” said Fitz, patting Ingrid on the shoulder. “Everything will be all right, you’ll see.”

“Come into the kitchen, you two,” called Carmela. “It’s nice and warm in here.”

She had made a great pile of apple pancakes, sprinkled with powdered sugar, and three cups of Ovaltine. Once they’d all finished supper, Carmela looked more relaxed. She smiled and laughed and acted more like herself again. She cleared the long wooden table and invited them to play a game of Rummy, although she kept watching over Ingrid’s cards and whispering to her which ones to keep and which to throw away. Still, it was a treat, all the same, because Carmela rarely had time for more than a brisk fairy tale at bed-time. Later that evening, once they were both in pajamas, she read them the tale of Rumpelstiltskin. Boring stuff for Fitz, but Ingrid seemed to like it. Soon she was deep asleep, hunched as usual like a tortoise shell under the quilt.

Outside, the fog was clearing. Black patches of sky showed through the mist. The twin roof peaks of the old house seemed to pierce little holes in the swollen clouds as they rolled overhead. And behind the house was the forest, mysterious, and a little scary, but wonderful to dream about. In summer, you could stroll past the pock-marked statue of Cupid, climb over the brick wall and into the thicket of bluebells. It was hard to tell where the thicket ended and the forest began.

Outside the old house, the damp wind blew; the bedroom curtains trembled and parted slightly, for Mother insisted that the children sleep with fresh air, winter and summer, to chase away bad dreams, she said. And when Fitz did fall asleep, it was very sudden, like slipping down a black well, only to find himself trapped inside a restless wide-awake dream:

the wicked dwarfkin
Rumpelstiltskin cackling
around a forest campfire;
black motor cars skidding
along misty forest lanes;
Carmela frying the King,
Queen and Knave of
Spades in her flat waffle
pan; Aunt Calliope hiding
Mr. Darnley's medicine
tablets in the garden shed;
and Mr. Latimer, late for
lessons, being rapped
across the knuckles by
the gardener.



The moon vanished behind a cloud. High up, near the roof of the house, the shape of a lady hovered in mid-air. Wrapping her pale shawl around her shoulders, the lady peeped through the children's bedroom window. Then the misty shape of a man came floating toward her. He dropped down onto the window ledge, and she followed beside him. They looked like a couple of ghosts, floating from place to place.

"Well, this is the old house all right," said the man-ghost. The coins in his pockets rattled as he dusted off his navy blue suit. "This brings back memories, this does," he said, with the ghost of a smile.

"Oh, Edward," whispered the lady-ghost, "look at those two children. They look just the way we did when we were small."

"*Humph*, I can't see her face all muffled up under the quilt."

"You used to tease me all the time," said the lady-ghost. "Remember the day you said you were going to drop me off the old stone bridge, just to frighten me, you rotter!"

"Well, what do you expect? Mummy's little milk-bottle baby, following your big brother around all the time!"

"All right, Edward, let's forget all the quarrels we had when we were young. We have a special mission now. I want to do this job as best I can."

"Who dreamed up this special mission? That's what I'd like to know," grumbled Edward. "Who



wants to be ghostly guardian to two little rascals? To be honest, I'd rather dig ditches!"

"They don't look like rascals to me," said the lady-ghost, peering through the bedroom window at Fitz and Ingrid. "I think they look rather sweet."

"Goodness, Vannie! You have become quite motherly, all of a sudden."

"Edward, you promised you wouldn't start!"

"It's a pity you didn't pay much attention to your own little darlings when they were young. How many *little darlings* did you have? Two or three or four—or don't you remember?"

"I'm trying to be pleasant, Edward, but you are making it very hard. You know my two children, Judith and Jules, perfectly well."

"Well, it's a wonder that you found time to notice them at all. Didn't you spend all summer fluttering around Paris? And your winters lolling around the sunny Riviera?"

"And what about you, Edward?" cried Auntie Vannie, abruptly losing her patience. "Didn't you hide a King's fortune in gold coins, *when you were alive*, stuffed in a sock or under a mattress somewhere, while your wife and daughter went around, dressed almost in rags?"

"What!" cried Uncle Edward, looking very grave.

But once Auntie Vannie started, she just couldn't stop. "Such a timid little woman your wife was, too. Poor sad Alice, she had no sense of fashion, no *joie de vivre*. I never cared for her."

“How dare you say such a thing!” shouted Uncle Edward, flushing ghostly purple.

“And that daughter of yours, Carrot Kate, Calliope, or whatever her name is!” went on Auntie Vannie, “If ever she finds that fortune you’ve hidden away, she’ll spend every farthing of it, I’m sure!” Auntie Vannie was tempted to poke out her tongue at her brother, Edward, the way she used to, many years ago, when they were young, but instead she raised a finger to her lips. “Now, there’s to be no shouting at all when we go inside. Keep your voice down, or you might disturb the children.”

Uncle Edward glared at her (and if you had seen him at that moment, he might have frightened you quite a bit). “Let’s go inside then,” he said, stifling his temper. “I want to see what changes they’ve made to the old house.”

“I’m coming,” said Auntie Vannie airily.

“Haven’t you learnt that sliding trick yet? Just follow me. That’s it, ease yourself through the wall like this.”

“I’m trying. Just wait a minute.”

“Don’t be nervous, silly.”

“Do not patronize me, Edward, just because you’ve been a spirit longer than I have. I haven’t even had time to think about my new state. I’ve been so rushed. It took me ages arranging all the details for my funeral. Then I had to navigate across the Channel back to England. Very blustery it is too, at this time of year.” She unfolded a crumpled map and

studied it for a few moments. “Now, what exactly are these Ley Lines?”

“Well, they’re supposed to be energy channels of some sort; they give you energy to get from place to place. I don’t understand exactly how they work, but I do know they help you to travel faster.”

“Oh, I think I understand—”

“There’s a Ley Line running underneath this house, as a matter of fact; it probably goes right through the sitting room. You have to be careful, though, because unsavoury characters like to travel along the Ley Lines, too; all sorts of riff-raff you’d rather not meet, if you can help it.”

“Well, I certainly shall be careful,” said Auntie Vannie, folding away her map. “Now, you know that today is my funeral. I’ve prepared strict instructions. It’s got to be very dignified and very sad. Then I’m going to be laid to rest in the village churchyard, right next to you, dear Edward.” Auntie Vannie smiled roguishly. “I thought you’d be pleased.”

“It makes no difference to me at all,” grumbled Uncle Edward, rattling the coins again in his pockets. “Are you coming into the house?”

“Yes, and I bet I can glide through this wall. Just you watch!” Auntie Vannie floated timidly against the stone wall once, twice, three times without success.

“You always were a scaredy-cat,” said Uncle Edward.

“Be quiet, I’ve got to concentrate.”

“Hold my hand,” said Uncle Edward impatiently. “We don’t have all Eternity, you know.”

Auntie Vannie shrieked as her brother jerked her firmly through the wall. They floated into the children’s bedroom.

“Oh, dear, I must have sounded quite ghoulish!” she whispered. “I hope I didn’t frighten the children.” She glided airily across the carpet and stooped to stroke Ingrid’s hair.

“*Hmmm*,” said Uncle Edward, “they’ve put in new paneling and bookshelves over here, and the walls are newly plastered. Look at that fancy wallpaper, quite modern stuff!”

“And look at the dolls and teddy bears. I never had such pretty things when I was small.”

Uncle Edward’s finger hovered over the electric light switch and the bedside lamp flickered on, then off. Fitz rolled over and buried his head under the sheet.

“Edward, I’ve found my antique ballerina music box!”

“A toy train on tracks,” murmured Uncle Edward, kneeling on the rug. “I always wanted one of those. It must have cost a fortune!”

“They’re so lucky, aren’t they?”

“Shameful extravagance, if you ask me. Feel the quality of these rugs. Just look in this wardrobe.” He pointed to Ingrid’s pink taffeta party dress and a velvet jacket belonging to Fitz.

“Edward, look what’s on these shelves! Tiny glass figurines and building blocks and sea shells and costumed dolls and a miniature deck of cards—”

“*Shush*, not so loud,” said Uncle Edward, fingering a volume of fairy tales. It had soft leather covers and the pages were trimmed in gold.

“Oh, I think I’ve woken him up,” whispered Auntie Vannie. “Now be careful, I don’t want to frighten him.” She tiptoed backward and tripped over a toy piano. It fell on its back with a bright, stubborn, tinkling sound. “Oh, no, will I never learn to glide?”

“I always said you were a clumsy lump,” smirked Uncle Edward.

Fitz mumbled in his sleep and sat up in bed. He had the startled look of a sleepwalker, lost in his own dream. He was almost sure that his eyes were wide open, as he stared directly ahead. Two luminous figures hovered just above the rug.

“Now don’t be afraid, Fitzpatrick,” whispered the lady. “We were just drifting by and thought we’d stop to make your acquaintance, so to speak.”

“Allow us to introduce ourselves,” said Uncle Edward. “I am, at least I was, your Great-Uncle Edward Henderson and this lady, once upon a time, was your Great-Aunt Vanessa.”

“I beg your pardon, Sir,” said Fitz, “but could you tell me whether I’m still dreaming?”

“Absolutely not,” said Uncle Edward. Then he frowned. “Well, how should I know? Perhaps you are, and perhaps you aren’t.”

“You haven’t bumped into Carmela tonight, have you?” asked Fitz.

“I leave all the bumping to my sister, Vannie,” snickered Uncle Edward.

“Have you seen Rumpelstiltskin?” said Fitz. “Or Mr. Darnley, or—?”

“Sorry, I’ve never heard of Rumpelstiltskin,” said Uncle Edward, “but I do know Darnley, the gardener. He’s worked for our family for years; good man, he is!”

“You’ve never heard of Rumpelstiltskin!” exclaimed Auntie Vannie. “My dear Edward, you are an ignoramus.”

“Master Fitz, please allow me to explain. Many years ago, my dear departed sister, Vannessa, and I used to live in this very house.”

“Yes, dear,” whispered Auntie Vannie, “some seventy years ago our father, God rest his soul, Albert Henderson and mother had three children, Edward, Willy and I—”

“I do wish you wouldn’t interrupt, Vannie. There is no need to take out the family tree. Suffice it to say that we’ve been sent on a special mission (Uncle Edward poked his pale finger up toward the ceiling) to act as your—*er*—celestial guardians.”

“In other words, we’ve been sent to take care of you both while mummy and daddy are away,” put in Auntie Vannie helpfully.

“Shall I wake up Ingrid?” asked Fitz.

“Well, dear,” said Auntie Vannie, looking doubtful, “if you really think you should.”

“Ingrid!” called Fitz urgently. “Wake up.”

Ingrid rolled over. Her eyes were gummed shut. Fitz jumped out of bed and shook her briskly by the shoulders. “Wake up, Ingrid, quick, quick—!”

“What’s the matter?” grumbled Ingrid. She was always irritable first thing in the morning, or late at night. “*Mmmm*, leave me alone,” she said.

Too late. Unlce Edward gave Auntie Vannie a not-too-gentle push from behind. Together they drifted through the wall. Fitz’s bare feet padded over the rug. He was definitely wide awake by now. Well, at least he thought he was awake. He pushed the window all the way up and leaned over the ledge. Nothing was there. Nothing but the moon slipping through a rolling mass of cloud that promised rain. Fitz noticed Ingrid’s yellow-haired rag doll perched beside him on the window ledge. Deliberately, he tossed it into the grass below.

Chapter 1

AUNTIE VANNIE AND UNCLE ED



1. Why are Fitz's parents going away?
2. Whose job is it to take care of Fitz and Ingrid while their parents are away?
3. What do you think about Carmela? What kind of person is she?
4. What does Fitz think about his parents leaving?
5. Who are the strange visitors that appear at the house during the night?
6. What are the Ley Lines? Why are they important?
7. Do Uncle Ed and Auntie Vannie behave like brother and sister? Why or why not?
8. What do Uncle Ed and Auntie Vannie argue about?
9. What do Uncle Ed and Auntie Vannie say about their guardian mission?
10. How does Fitz test whether the guardian ghosts are real?

BUILDING WORDS

1. earth	QUAKE	shelves
2. pan		watch
3. church		QUAKE
4. blue		case
5. sleep		cakes
6. suit		ward
7. wrist		case
8. back		bells
9. stair		walker
10. book		yard

Chapter Two

THE LARES AND PENATES



There was a loud clatter in the entrance. The front door slammed shut. Carmela cupped her hand over one ear and pressed the telephone receiver close to the other.

“Yes, Monsieur Jules,” she said. She pronounced this word very slowly and respectfully: Monsure (rhyming with tonsure) Jewels. “The coffin has arrived—*stop shouting, Ingrid love, I’m on the telephone*—yes, Monsieur Jules, everything has been arranged. The funeral will be at four o’clock this afternoon in the parish church. Thank you, Monsieur Jules.”

Carmela hung up the telephone. “Now what is it?” she said.

“Fitz threw Annie out of the window on purpose, and Goldie’s bitten her dress to pieces. Look—!”

Fitz was trying to wipe little nobs of mud from the rag doll’s face and hair with his handkerchief. “It

was an experiment, that's all," he muttered. "I had a funny dream last night—well, I thought it was a dream, but I wasn't sure. Sometimes you can't tell, can you? So I tossed Annie off the ledge, so I'd know for sure if I was dreaming or not. And guess what? I wasn't dreaming, after all!"

"I couldn't care less about your funny dream!" screamed Ingrid. "Remember the last time you dropped a whole bottle of smelly sulphur on my desk? I'm sick of your experiments!"

"Mr. Latimer's waiting for you in the library, Fitz," interrupted Carmela. She sounded annoyed. Her voice was breathless. "He does hate it when you're late. Hurry now, I've no time to waste. The whole family's coming to Tea after the Service."

"Carmela, who's going to be buried this afternoon?"

"Your Great-Aunt Vanessa, God rest her soul; the family hasn't seen her for years," said Carmela, pointing to one of the hall paintings as she hurried away.

Fitz stopped in front of the painting and stared. He must have walked past it at least a thousand times, yet this was the first time he really looked at it. Great-Aunt Vanessa! So this was the mysterious dream-time lady of the window ledge, the one who tripped over toy pianos and glided through walls. She had bright blue eyes and hair like wispy moonbeams. Her silky cream-coloured dress was fastened by a sparkling brooch. Nearby, frowning as though he'd counted all his coins and found one missing, was the gloomy oil portrait of Great-Uncle Edward.



Fitz's thoughts were interrupted by a powerful booming voice. "Master Henderson! Here you are, and late for your lesson again, as usual."

It was Fitz's tutor, Mr. Marmory Latimer. He was standing in the hall, clinking his old-fashioned gold watch and chain. Mr. Latimer had rosy blooming cheeks and hair that erupted all over in a mass of black and silver sparks. Perhaps he was handsome in a pompous sort of way: dark brown eyes of a humourless expression, a stately nose, neat mustache and pearly fingernails. Day in, day out, he wore the same black jacket and woollen waistcoat over a pressed shirt and shiny white collar. If he gazed sternly at Fitz this morning, it was because he knew that the Henderson boy didn't care so much as a brass farthing for studying Latin poetry and grammar, nor for the glory days of ancient Rome.

“Don’t jump so wildly whenever you’re spoken to, my boy,” said Mr. Latimer, tucking his watch and chain back into his waistcoat. “Anyone would think you’d seen a ghost. Incidentally, Fitzpatrick, what is the Latin word for ghost?”

Fitz glanced backward at the portrait of Great-Aunt Vanessa, and she smiled serenely back at him.

“Come, come, boy,” said Mr. Latimer, “you may have to answer any question on the College entrance examinations in December. You must be prepared. Nouns, verbs, declensions, conjugations: everything must be memorized on the final day.”

No answer from Fitz. His jaw hung loose, reminding Mr. Latimer of a beached fish lying among the pebbles. Would the boy remember nothing that he was taught?

“La-ru-a,” pronounced Mr. Latimer, as though Fitz were slightly deaf. “The word comes from Lars or Lares. Now what does that mean, young man? Do you remember?”

“No, Sir,” said Fitz.

Mr. Latimer sighed. “It means ‘household gods’. The Lares and the Penates were the departed ancestors of the ancient Romans. The Lares were supposed to watch over and protect their families who were still alive. Call them guardian angels, if you will,” concluded Mr. Latimer with an indulgent little smile.

Auntie Vannie smiled down at them, too, but if there was a message in her flat blue eyes, Fitz did

not grasp it at once. His own mind went blank, like a tablet of wax.

“Strange though it may seem,” went on Mr. Latimer, (he did seem to love to hear himself talk) “modern scientists have corrupted ‘Lares’ into the word ‘Larva,’ in other words, any disgusting maggot, caterpillar or grub.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Latimer,” called Carmela, coming along the corridor toward them. Perhaps, thought Fitz, she had stood through the lecture on Roman ghosts, waiting for the politest moment to interrupt. “Mrs. Henderson has asked if you’d like to join us for Tea after the funeral.”

Carmela’s dark hair was parted straight down the middle. It was as shiny as the shells of French chestnuts and kinked into waves by those old-fashioned press irons she wore at night. Her eyes were dark and shiny too, like obsidian stones flashing and twinkling underwater. It was silly, but Carmela would never tell the children how old she was. Once, Fitz had guessed that she must be 19. Then Ingrid said 36, which made Carmela laugh out loud. Then she told them her secret; she was just two years short of her hundredth birthday, she whispered, patting Ingrid under the chin. Fitz had stared in disbelief and Ingrid had gasped, but then, of course, they’d both laughed. Carmela was such a curious mixture of young and old; sometimes she led them on nature expeditions through the woods like a laughing Pied Piper, and often she was their cotton-swab nurse.

Carmela was the eldest daughter of an Italian who had married an English girl from the village of Mare's End by the Sea. In their thatched roof cottage was a collection of farmer's almanac, some *Home&Country* magazines, and a Bible with print so small, you needed a magnifying glass to read the gospels. Fitz knew that Carmela had little else to read at home and every evening, after he and Ingrid were asleep, she came down into the library to search for novels and history books, and especially books on medicine with lists of horrid scary symptoms. When Fitz asked her why she read about such things, she told him she wanted to become a nurse one day; she was saving up her money to go to the very best training school in London.

Right now, Carmela was standing patiently waiting for a reply from the schoolmaster. By way of encouragement, she repeated, "*Er*, we do all hope you'll join us for Tea."

Mr. Latimer blushed in surprise; he smiled broadly, all severity gone. "Why, thank you, Miss Carmela, I would be delighted."

Carmela seemed serious enough as she glanced respectfully at Mr. Latimer, but it was something in her sparkling eyes that gave her away.

Fitz couldn't understand it, but this was the effect the young schoolmaster seemed to have on her. And what Mr. Latimer was thinking (if he noticed Carmela laughing at him at all) Fitz could only imagine.



Chapter 2

THE LARES AND PENATES



1. Whose funeral is the family attending at four o'clock in the afternoon?
2. What do you know about Auntie Vannie?
3. What does Fitz think of his Latin tutor, Mr. Marmory Latimer?
4. What does the word LARES mean in Latin? Is this a good word for the guardian ghosts?
5. What does Carmela do in her spare time? What is her ambition?

FILL IN THE MISSING LETTER TO MAKE THE CORRECT WORD:

1. Speak clearly: PR NO N E
2. Close with a bang: S AM
3. The French word for Mister: MO S EUR
4. Burial service: F N RAL
5. Speak in a low tone: M T ER
6. Chemical substance: S LPH R
7. Strange: M S ERI US
8. Piece of jewelry: B O CH
9. Picture: P R RA T
10. Self-important: PO P US
11. An obsolete coin: F RTH NG
12. By the way: NC DENT LLY
13. Happy and calm: S R NE
14. Verb form: C NJUG TI N
15. Roman Household gods, guardians: L RES
16. Shiny black stone used in jewelry: O SIDI N
17. Long journey: E PED TI N
18. Reference book: A MA AC
19. Sign of illness: SY P OM
20. Sternness: SE ERI Y

Chapter Three

THE CHEVAL GLASS IN THE ATTIC

During Fitz's lesson, Ingrid climbed the staircase to the attic. It was a sloping place under the roof, directly on top of the children's bedroom. Against one wall was an old-fashioned cabinet with deep drawers, on top of which, as soon as she'd learnt her letters, she had traced her name I-N-G-R-I-D into the dust.

Inside this cabinet were some pieces of ugly pottery, a jewel box full of glittering glass beads, a heap of clattering sea shells and a broken fan. And next to the cabinet was Ingrid's 'dressing-up' trunk. It was stuffed with old-fashioned party dresses folded in mothballs, moulting fur jackets, lacy shawls to drape over your shoulders and long skinny ballroom gloves.

You could tell that no one had cleaned out the attic in years. During her lifetime, Ingrid's great-grandmother Henderson had been very attached to her possessions. Here was still an antique baby cradle, an empty silver picture frame, even a rocking horse belonging to one of the children. In a musty cardboard box Ingrid found a faded ledger.

The covers opened with a squeaking sound, and a handful of antique stamps spilled out from the yellowed pages. Underneath the ledger was a pile of old books that smelled as though someone had left them outside all night in the rain. What Ingrid wanted was some cloth to make a new dress and apron for her rag doll, Annie. But there was nothing she could use, so she pushed on past the mountain of cardboard boxes to where the winter light streamed in through one high porthole window. Below this window, on top of an antique wardrobe, all of a sudden, something stirred. Two sapphire-blue eyes flashed in the gloom. Inchling, the Siamese house cat, stretched up on all fours.

True, Inchling was a cat, but she'd been deprived of cat company for so long that she seemed almost human. As guardian of the house, she kept an almost constant watch at the window. When she got bored, she leapt like a trapeze artist onto a table, a cabinet, or a cluttered mantelpiece which was safe and warm. There she sat, hour after hour, dozing, dreaming, once in a while twitching her velvety brown cord of a tail.

The oddest thing about Inchling was that she seemed to understand everything you said, even if you whispered it under your breath. She disappeared whenever her appointment with Dr. Daw was mentioned; she vanished into one of her hundred 'hidy holes,' then reappeared, hours later, to claw at the open pages of your book. At this moment Inchling was staring at something. Her ears flattened down. Her head shrank low, and her fur stiffened into a war-like crest along her backbone.

She let out a piercing scream, then gave a sudden panther's leap. The door of the wardrobe flew open; Inchling crash-landed behind it and crouched there, very still, and then—

Something white and fuzzy, like the ghost of a super-large dandelion, rolled over the floorboards and vanished right through the wainscoting.

Oooh, that's strange, thought Ingrid; it gave her such a shivery feeling. She looked around. "Inchling, where are you? Come, kitty, come here!" she called.

But Inchling whined and whined and refused to come out from behind the wardrobe. Its doors were still rattling on their hinges as Ingrid looked inside. On the wooden rack pole hung a single, old-fashioned dress. It was shiny silk, the colour of cream, with a fancy belt buckle and a flounced neck. As Ingrid pulled it off the hanger, something sharp pricked her finger.

"Ouch!"

What was that quicksilver ripple in the tall swing-mirror? A twinkling light that appeared, then was gone. Was it a sunbeam? thought Ingrid. No, it couldn't be. There was no sun at all this morning. The sky looked as if someone had stretched a woolly grey blanket over it and put it to bed. But this brooch she'd found was all aglitter in her fingers. It was shaped like a gold butterfly, with pale green wings of polished jade. This is a really nice dressing-up costume, she thought, as she pulled the silk dress over her head. It was loose and, of course, much too long, so she rolled it up several times and tightened the belt around her waist.

She was glad now that Fitz was busy downstairs with Mr. Latimer. She knew what names he would have called her—Silly Cinderella or Patch-Stick or Ugly Dugly—just because she loved dressing up in old-fashioned costumes and parading around in front of the mirror. Ingrid fluttered her eyelashes the way her Aunt Calliope did at theatre rehearsals.

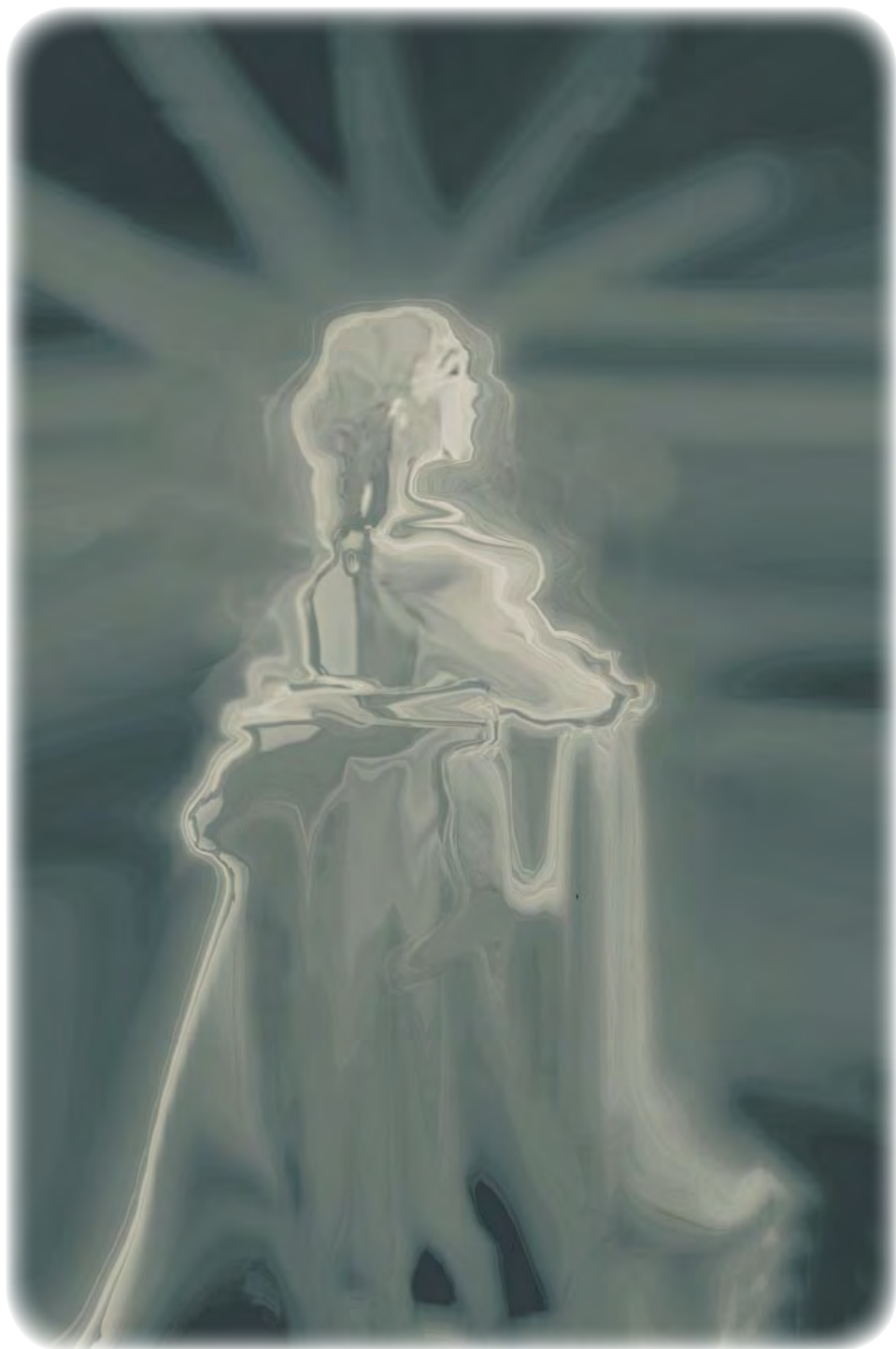
“Fairy godmother, dear,” she said loudly, feeling very elegant and grown-up, and trailing the scent of mothballs around the attic. “Do you think I should wear this dress to the Ball?”

“Yes, do keep that old dress for dressing up, it’s perfect for Sleeping Beauties and tragic Queens,” replied a light silvery voice. It seemed to come tumbling out of the air like a handful of tinkle bells—*Gosh!* There was that luminous flicker in the mirror again. More than a flicker. It was now a soft, translucent shape, the shape of a lady. Her cobwebby gown was woven, here and there, with silver threads. Her reflection in the glass trembled for a moment, then it became clear and still.

“That was my favourite swing-mirror,” remarked the silvery lady, stroking her pale moon-coloured hair. “I don’t know why they’ve buried it up here in the attic. It’s quite valuable, you know. A genuine antique, a cheval glass, with only a spot or two of rust.”

“Your mirror?” echoed Ingrid.

“And my old ball gown, dear, and my favourite antique brooch. I am your dear departed Great-Aunt Vanessa. You can call me Auntie Vannie. And this is—”





Uncle Edward floated, all of a sudden, through the plaster of the attic wall.

“—your Great-Uncle Ed, he’s dead!” giggled Auntie Vannie. “I bet he’ll start roaming around the house now, switching off lamps and things. He hates wasting electricity.”

“It’s just dreadful,” muttered Uncle Ed. “All this waste!”

“Now, Ingrid, my dear, do you know that I’ve been trying to talk to you for ages?”

“Stop exaggerating, Vannie, we’ve only just arrived.”

“I tap on the windows to get your attention. I ruffle the drapes. I squeak on these old floorboards,” said Auntie Vannie, “but most of the time you and your brother, Fitz, just don’t hear me.”

“I’m sorry,” said Ingrid.

“Sometimes I might knock a picture down from the wall, but I don’t really like doing that,” said Auntie Vannie. “I hate being a nuisance, don’t you?”

“No matter,” said Uncle Ed, with a ghostly smirk, “from now on you’ll just have to learn to be rude.”

“By the way, Ingrid, have you seen Contessa?” said Auntie Vannie, blithely ignoring Uncle Ed as he faded away.

“Who?”

“Contessa, my cat. She has long white fur and beautiful eyes, one green and one blue.”

“No—wait a minute—yes, I did see her. She disappeared right through the wall just now. Did *she* frighten my Inchling?”

“Probably,” said Auntie Vannie. “She can be rather nasty at times.”

“Oh, but—!”

“What’s the matter, Ingrid? Why are you staring like that? You do believe in me, don’t you?”

“*Er*, yes, well, I think I do.”

“That’s good,” whispered Auntie Vannie, disappearing, little by little, from the dusty glass. “Because I believe in you, Ingrid, honestly I do.”



Chapter 3

THE CHEVAL GLASS IN THE ATTIC

1. Why does Ingrid enjoy playing up in the attic? What is she looking for today?
2. What is most special about Inchling, the cat?
3. What strange experience does Ingrid have when she looks into the antique cheval glass?
4. Who is Contessa and what does she look like?
5. What two gifts does Ingrid receive from Auntie Vannie?

FILL IN THE MISSING LETTERS TO MAKE WORDS:

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**Auntie Vannie and Uncle Ed
are two ghostly guardians
on a mission: to watch over
Fitz and Ingrid while their
parents are away.**



‘A fascinating story,’

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**‘The layering adds a lot of richness;
a wonderful book,’**

*Margaret Goldik, former Executive Director,
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