

The Haunted Mill Cottage

The tall Chinese nurse placed the baby carefully into the clear perspex cot. ‘Well, I must say you’ve got a real fighter here,’ she said, smiling. ‘It must have been all that Guinness!’ It was early August 1983. I was 18 years old and had just given birth to my daughter Gemma. Pink, plump and perfect, she looked every inch a Botticelli cherub. The nurse had laughed when I had told her that I had religiously drunk a bottle of Guinness a day throughout the pregnancy. It was the only thing that had cured my anaemia, and I was sure it had helped my baby develop into the strong little infant in the cot next to my bed.

Home was a terraced cottage in the village of Bugbrooke. Within a few weeks of taking Gemma home I was beginning to get the hang of motherhood. We had been decorating the cottage bit by bit since moving in seven months earlier. The only room left to do and the one that filled me with dread was the attic bedroom. The cottage was on three floors with the two bedrooms on the top two floors. The problem was that since moving in I had felt the attic to be not quite right. It just had a bad feeling about it. Until then we had used it as a storeroom, and I had a strong seemingly irrational feeling that if I put the baby in that room something bad would happen to her. My husband Paul told me not to be so daft as it was a lovely large room ideal for a nursery. I even had some pink

wallpaper from Laura Ashley ready for it, but try as I might I was unable to shake off the feelings. So I set up the cot on the upstairs landing and kept the attic door firmly shut.

Some months later the chance came up for our family to move to the larger house next door. So we began packing in preparation. About a fortnight before the move I was on my own in the cottage when I heard a strange noise coming from upstairs, sounding like something tapping on the attic room wall. Intrigued but a little scared I opened the door and looked in. The string of the light pull-switch was swinging violently on its own and the plastic toggle on the end was hitting the wall. Hence the noise. It was as if someone was standing a little way from the wall and pulling it fiercely again and again, letting it smash against the wall. Totally baffled, and at a loss as to what to do, I ran downstairs to get some scissors. I thought that cutting the string would be the only way to stop the noise. After that I felt glad to be moving next door away from whatever it was. It was to be only a short respite.

After Gemma's first birthday we went on a short holiday to Jersey. The island was beautiful with its small, rocky coves and golden beaches, and with a warmer climate than at home. In fact it was more like France than England, and a real treat. The hotel was nice, too; small and in the middle of the island.

On the second day of our holiday I had fed Gemma quite late and settled her down into the cot in our room. She fell asleep straight away, so I went downstairs to the television room to join Paul. Although this was easily within earshot of our room I went to check on the baby every 10 minutes or so. The news was on, and two other men were in the room, one engrossed in his paper. I picked up a book which another

visitor had left behind, but had barely read a page when I heard a voice in my left ear. Scarcely above a whisper it said, 'The baby, check her, now!' I swung round. It was a woman's voice but I was the only woman in the room. Without thinking I grabbed the room key and raced up the stairs two at a time. My hands were shaking so much that I couldn't get the key into the lock. So I bent down and peered through the keyhole. What I saw filled me with horror.

Gemma was standing up in her cot with a plastic bag over her head. She was frantically trying to pull it off. Somehow the key slid in and I flew into the room, tearing off the bag. The baby's face was red and clammy and she was crying. Cuddling her in my arms I looked around, puzzled as to where the bag had come from. Under the cot was a small bin on its side. Someone had left it under the cot lined with a liner. She must have woken and found it. There and then I said a silent 'thank you' to whoever was looking after us. I realized then, as I had done all those years ago when my grandmother visited us, that there was more. Our actions and deeds are sometimes observed. Someone had been watching over Gemma that day, for sure.

My baby grew into a feisty little toddler over the next two years. Meanwhile I determined to nurture any potential psychic ability I might have. I was unsure at the time whether the voice that had saved my baby's life was a ghost, my own outwardly-projected subconscious or some kind of spirit guide or guardian angel. Like any new mother I was kept busy bringing up my daughter and running a home, but my interest in the spirit world grew. I feel sure that the learning process was encouraged by opening myself up to the possibility that I

possessed some level of psychic, clairvoyant ability and also to the possibility that a spirit world existed seemingly alongside our own. This was very soon to be taken a stage further when, like Gemma, I had my very own brush with death.

Out of the Body

The bowl of the toilet was full of blood and floating in it was a small white foetus. I screamed both in physical agony and in shock. I had been staying for the day at my in-laws' house doing some decorating for them in the kitchen. They were away for a few days and it was to have been a surprise. My hands were still covered in white paint. I flushed the toilet. I couldn't bear to look, but part of me wanted to rescue the small scrap of life that was in the toilet. It felt wrong somehow simply to flush it away. Indeed, in the days that followed the miscarriage I wished that I had placed it in a little box and buried it.

Paul was visiting me in his lunch-hour and he called the doctor who told us to come in straight away. He was very kind, and after examining me told me I had been about 10 weeks pregnant. He sent me to hospital for a D&C after which I went home feeling much better. I was upset, but as I had not known that I was pregnant I had not had time to get used to it.

Two days later we were again at my in-laws' house and we were all on our way to chapel where my father-in-law, a retired Baptist minister, was preaching that night. As I walked down the street I suddenly came over all hot and clammy and my legs started to buckle. My brother-in-law told me I looked rough and should go back home. I barely made it back before

being violently sick. Something was badly wrong, and I felt terrible. Paul took me back to the doctor who sent me back to hospital.

I had been in hospital for three days, vomiting constantly. The doctors thought I might have food poisoning and, as a precaution since it can be contagious, had put me in a room on my own. I was on a drip because I couldn't eat and had been so sick. I felt dreadfully weak. My mother had come to visit me early one evening and was sitting on the bed cuddling me. Two doctors came in and told us they wanted to operate that night as they now suspected either that I had suffered an ectopic pregnancy or there was something left inside causing an infection. Mum kissed me and promised to come back soon. A nurse told me she would be coming with my pre-med to ready me for the operation.

The room was quiet and quite dark with the curtains drawn. I remember feeling desperately ill and so weak. Looking over to the basin and mirror in the corner, I saw a cobweb hanging from the ceiling complete with spider. My body felt warm and floaty, and the next thing I knew I was looking in the mirror. My face seemed different, and the pain and nausea had gone. 'I'm better,' I thought, and turned round to look at the bed. It's hard to describe the shock I felt at seeing myself lying there, grey-faced and so still. Although I wanted to look away I couldn't, yet in myself I felt marvellous. The door opened and a nurse came in carrying a silver dish with a syringe. She spoke to me and then shook me gently when I did not respond. In an instant I was back; back in my bed and in pain. This was so quick and forceful that it was like a stretched elastic band snapping back.

I was well enough to leave the hospital a few days later, but it took me some months before I felt really well again. The doctors had warned me that I might not be able to have more children, but happily they were proved wrong. I had a son Laurie, followed 18 months later by another daughter, Becky.

In the seven years we spent in our second home odd paranormal events continued to happen regularly. The two older children shared an attic bedroom on the third floor, next to the bathroom. The atmosphere in this house seemed much better on the whole, but the light bulbs on the upstairs floor were forever blowing. And the top floor landing was permanently cold, despite the central heating. This landing ended in a blank wall to the next cottage where we had lived previously.

One morning Gemma came downstairs very upset and told us that after waking up in the night she had gone to the bathroom. She had seen a funny old lady sitting on the landing clutching her bedclothes. Gemma had grabbed her covers and the old woman had disappeared. Too frightened to go to the toilet, she had run back to bed and hidden under the bedclothes before finally falling asleep. Was that old lady just a child's vivid dream, or did the ghost, if that is what it was, somehow walk through the wall from next door? (In the past, when the cottages had been modernized, their internal structure and some walls had been changed.)

Once again we had an opportunity to go to a bigger house in the village, and as we now had three children we decided on a further move. The new house was lovely, an eighteenth-century cottage with a mature garden of about half an acre. Since having my last baby I had been suffering from ever-worsening post-natal depression. With three children under five I found

myself constantly exhausted. In addition I began to suffer from insomnia and lost my appetite. Anyone who has suffered from the curse of depression will know how it can creep up on you slowly over a period of time until it has you firmly in its grip. Everything seems dark and hopeless.

Paul and my family tried to help and be sympathetic at first, but I found that people very soon lose patience with chronic depressives. No one wants to be close to misery, and most cannot understand why you cannot just hurry up and snap out of it. It's the loneliest illness of all, and looking back I can now see that it spelt the beginning of the end of my marriage. There were times when I felt so bad that I just wanted to go to sleep and never wake up. The only thing that kept me going and spurred me on at that time were my children. I realized, too, that just as we come into this world on our own we are, in many respects, alone in our battles through life. The only person one can ever trust totally is oneself. This was a hard lesson, but I knew that the only way out of the black hole I found myself in would be through my own efforts.

Feeling Blue

The room was grey; grey walls, grey ceiling, grey floor. Appropriate really, since anyone who ever came here must have felt grey inside as well. Lying on the metal hospital trolley I felt that this must surely be what hitting rock bottom was like. I was in one of the local mental hospital's electro-convulsive therapy rooms.

After struggling with spiralling post-natal depression and ever-worsening despair this is where I ended up. The kindly doctor told me that I was suffering from a serious bi-polar disorder or depressive illness. I had tried medication to no avail. A large part of the old Natalie, the person I considered myself to be, had vanished and been replaced by someone I could not and did not want to recognize: a sad, frightened individual. I remember how I sat crying in the doctor's office with my head in my hands when she recommended ECT. It was like being inside a bubble. No one could touch me or come near. I was separated from all humanity by this invisible wall. Years later I was to read *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, and realize that others, too, could feel this utter loneliness of suffering and torment.

I asked the doctor, 'Am I going mad?' This was my biggest fear, that I would lose my mind, but she just smiled gently and said, 'Don't worry. The very fact that you worry for your sanity

means that you are certain not to lose it. Truly mad people are always sure that they are sane.' This thought kept me going in the weeks that followed. Over a period of six weeks I had twelve ECT treatments. As with everything, the first time was the worst. I had little faith at the time that it could make me better. I was only 24 and had little faith in anything. I felt that my world was in pieces. I remember having to lie on the trolley and being told not to worry. An injection into the back of my hand made me feel heavy and drowsy. Hearing a noise I glanced to the left and saw someone else who had been wheeled in to wait for the treatment; a poor, frightened creature of about 60 who appeared to be trying to push the nurses away in a desperate bid to escape. Her dark eyes were moist with tears and her shaking limbs bone-thin and scrawny.

Waking up some time later I felt confused and, as I had been warned, I had a headache to end all headaches. A nurse brought me a cup of tea and encouraged me to sit up. Mum was there and gave me a hug. She had been very much against my having the treatment as it frightened her, but I believe that at the time it was my only hope. A downside of this treatment is that it induces memory loss, and I found that I retained only patchy memories of the previous three years, but luckily as time passed most of them have returned, though occasionally I still suffer blanks.

Mum took me home that day where I went to bed as advised to sleep off the effects of the anaesthetic. Gemma was at school and my mother-in-law was looking after the two younger ones. I got up in the afternoon feeling strangely numb and wandered downstairs. Paul arrived back briefly from work to see how I was. I remember asking him how I looked, and he replied,

‘Shocking, actually!’ It was typical of him to try and use a joke to defuse the situation. True gallows humour. With new tablets to take and lithium to stabilize me I gradually got better, but it took a long time. For every little bit of progress I made there were also setbacks. I also had counselling, and slowly the blackness receded.

After going through all this I realized the truth in the saying: What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. There is a tendency to see people who have suffered breakdowns and depression as somehow weak; weaker than others who have mercifully been spared that fate. But this is not true. To come through a major illness infuses you with a sense of your own achievement and potential, and hopefully also gives you an enduring compassion for the sufferings of others. Another common reaction to mental illness of any type is shame and embarrassment. Family and friends may not want or even find themselves able to talk about the ‘trouble’ their loved one is in. Paul, in fact, gave me strict instructions not to talk about it as no one would understand. I felt ashamed at the time, and even now it is difficult to write about these things. But I have learnt not to worry too much about what others will think. If we can talk and be open about these things perhaps one day many of the taboos associated with mental illness will disappear. These feelings are largely born out of fear, the same basic fear that surrounds death in our culture. If it is hidden away and not spoken about it won’t happen to ‘us’.

My illness made me determined to find some purpose and meaning for my life, a general plan and direction to follow. This decision was to bring about a total change for myself and my family, and a yearning for a greater understanding of the

world of ghosts that had so captured my imagination as a child. It was my battle with depression that ultimately brought with it a greater understanding of myself and empathy for the suffering and anguish of others. This was to prove invaluable for my work in the future.