

My Girl

From Ron A Sewell

Many years ago, one young woman changed my life. My ambition was to be retired by my fortieth birthday, and, in pursuit of this goal, Keevil House entered my property portfolio. Purchased by auction in London, and I should have realised that something was amiss being the only bidder. From the blurb, I read that it had been empty since the end of World War Two. During this period, it was a children's home. However, according to the blurb, its owners kept it wind and watertight.

One week later, a letter arrived from a firm of solicitors in Dunfermline, re-Keevil House. They requested I visit them to sign the relevant documentation and complete the transaction.

My objective was to travel to Scotland, complete the deal, visit the site and prepare a rough sketch of the alterations required for my architect and builder. My journey by car was uneventful.

A local hotel proved suitable for my needs, and I booked in for two nights' bed and breakfast. The next morning the weather, as described by the hotel receptionist, was dreek, which I gathered in English meant wet and horrible. With little choice, I ventured forth, found the solicitors and greeted them. The paperwork was ready for my signature, and I duly signed. I requested that the Utility companies connected the services as soon as possible.

Leaving their offices with clear directions, I went in search of my acquisition. I wanted to complete my survey in one day and travel south the next morning. In the middle of a deluge, I found myself driving up and down narrow country lanes for two hours before I found the entrance to the manor.

The gatehouse seemed too good to be true. In front of me stood a substantially built three-bedroom bungalow in its hedge-bordered plot. This would be ideal for my new manager. A quick look around determined it needed work, mainly decorative, and it would be more than acceptable.

Time was passing, and I drove on. At the end of a long, meandering, overgrown, tree-lined drive stood the manor house. A silence from years of abandonment surrounded it. My first impression of this Victorian relic was one of amazement. The lack of owners had given over this spacious old mansion to echoes of the past.

My decision to buy had been the right one. While parking my car, immediately to my right were many small headstones surrounded by a mixture of wildflowers. Curious, I wandered over to those nearest. Someone must have loved animals, for it appeared these were the family pets' final resting places.

I walked around the exterior of the building. There were weathered streaks on the walls and cracks in the paintwork, but beyond its forsaken appearance, there seemed to be structurally nothing wrong. The walled garden was overgrown but not irrecoverable.

Heading towards the main entrance, I inserted the key and was pleasantly surprised to find it turned in the lock. Pushing the vast door open, there in front of

me was a beautiful pillared and mirrored hallway. This place had the splendour and spaciousness of a grand mansion. Looking forward, a broad, once carpeted staircase rose in a majestic sweep to the upper floor. As I stood there admiring what was mine, the main door slammed shut with an almighty crash that echoed through the empty rooms and passages.

Through the shabby shutters, filtered sunlight cast strange flickering shadows. I shivered, but with plenty of work to do, I told myself standing there would achieve nothing. With a clipboard and pen in hand, I began my survey. To my left was the main dining room; its bare walls and boarded-up fireplace showed years of neglect. The most bizarre thing was the number of broken children's toys scattered everywhere. While making copious notes, from the hall came a strange thumping sound. Intrigued, I retraced my steps. One tread at a time, a child's sizeable multicoloured ball bounced down the stairs. When it reached the bottom, it rolled to a stop in the middle of the floor. Having no idea why this happened, I gave it a hefty kick to one side and continued with my report. Apart from those discarded toys, the rooms were empty.

The ballroom was terrific with its high, ornate copular, radiating light into every corner; even the marble fireplace was original. Briefly, I imagined what it would be like in the winter with large logs blazing in the hearth.

From behind me, something squeaked. I turned and saw a tricycle trundling across the floor. Closer examination revealed its wheels were seized solid. Whatever I thought I'd seen could only have been my imagination or a trick of the light.

In the eaves above the ten spacious bedrooms were the original servants' quarters. Climbing the narrow staircase that led to them, I felt something intangible.

The creepy atmosphere communicated eerie feelings. An aroma of evil deeds made my head whirl, my nerves tingle and my hair rise. On reaching the top of the narrow wooden stairs, I could hear children laughing as they played, but there were screams of terror in the background. Closing my eyes and shaking my head, the sounds disappeared. Each of the rooms was small, with broken furniture littering the floors and cracked mirrors hanging from rusty nails. This part of the house felt terrifying, depressing and dismal.

My notes designated the whole area, 'Useful for storage'.

I returned along the corridor from which every bedroom led off. Each door now closed. Strange, but I'd left them open to let air circulate and assumed they closed automatically as a fire stop.

My next inspection was the library. Once in the main hallway, the hairs on the back of my neck began to tingle. There was the distinct sound of someone saying, 'Hello'. At the top of the stairs stood a barefoot girl, leaning on the bannister staring at me. I never saw a sight so dreadful; all she wore was a tattered nightdress. As I moved towards her, she ran away and, despite searching every room, I could find no trace. Without warning, every light flashed on and off a few times before remaining at full brilliance. A hammering on the main door followed this. Gingerly, I opened it to find two Scottish Power Engineers. "Sign here, Guv – that's you connected."

I closed the door, and my little girl materialised in front of me. Her lips had no colour; the pale eyes had a frightened look with dark rings around them as one whose nights had been sleepless. The blood froze in my veins as a dim shapeless shadow covered her and then drifted away.

Later, she reappeared – made no sound I could hear, but I distinctly saw her lips move. ‘Help us.’

What was I to do? Again she vanished. I must admit I was intrigued but felt helpless. Looking at my watch, it was well past six in the evening, and I still had plenty to do. Deciding enough was enough. I would start again in the morning.

I was about to get into my car when my little ghost appeared in the pets’ graveyard, barely discernible in the fading light.

She seemed to be watching me. I moved towards her - this time, she did not disappear. Now I could hear her singing. *“Tommy is a Turtle. Molly is a Cat. My name is Jane, and I’m just a Dirty Rat.”*

Into the gloom, she faded, still singing. I would come back tomorrow.

I returned to the hotel, went to my room, sat on the bed, bewildered by what I had experienced.

Maybe I’d been over-doing-it, and they do say stress can bring on hallucinations, but it had appeared so real.

During dinner, I asked the young waiter about Keevil House, but she knew nothing. Exhausted, I reasoned that a good night’s sleep was the answer to my problems.

That night I had the strangest of dreams. I had no idea where I was, but the air seemed laden with the scent of wildflowers. Children played happily, shrieks of laughter filling the air. Then a shadowy veil covered everything, and darkness filled my mind. I awoke in the morning, drained. The last thing I wanted was to return to that house. To buy it, I had mortgaged my other hotels; to abandon it would destroy my dreams. I picked at my breakfast, read the local paper from cover to cover, drank far too many cups of coffee, but knew I must go back.

As I negotiated the long drive, I attempted to convince myself it had been my imagination. I laughed aloud, and sure, if I opened every shutter, sunlight would dispel my fears. On opening the main door, I stood there listening. There was no sound, not even a bird song. My inner-self told me to shut the door and leave, but that young girl’s pitiful face lingered in my mind.

I grabbed my clipboard, walked to the stables and started work, believing if I stayed out of the house for a while, the clearer my thoughts would become. I scribbled away, made sketches and formulated plans. The little coach house and cobbled yard were ideal for parking and offices. The stables, once converted, would make at least another ten bedrooms. Pleased with my activities, I entered the small smithy at the rear of the coach house, and my fear erupted. I tried to run, but my feet remained fixed to the ground. In front of me stood that wretched-looking girl. She stared into my soul. I heard her even though she spoke not a word.

“The others told me to speak to you; they know you will understand. Please listen. I don’t have much time before the dark ones come. Bad people have hurt us.”

I stood there rooted to the spot and stammered, “H...How can I help?”

She vanished in an instant. Whether she heard me, I didn't know. I ran into the yard, sat on an old millstone and breathed clean air. Maybe I was going mad; after all, I had been working all the hours possible. The cold fresh air restored my reason. What did she mean by 'they know you will understand?' I wandered around the building, searching for anything that made sense.

The swing in the garden swung as if being pushed, and again I heard her. *"Tommy is a Turtle, and Molly is a Cat. My name is Jane, and I'm just a Dirty Rat."*

The swing stopped, but her words lingered as the perfume of wildflowers penetrated my nostrils.

I must have been stupid not to realise she was telling me about the pets' graveyard. My mind whirled at an unbelievable thought. Determined to discover if my thinking had any sense to it, I rummaged around for anything that resembled a spade. In a dilapidated garden shed, I found what I needed and ran to the pets' cemetery. Trembling, I searched for Jane the Rat. A tiny wooden cross, which had rotted at the base, appeared to mark the grave. I began to dig, desperately hoping that only the brown earth existed beneath my feet.

Not a labourer, I sweated as I dug into the soft soil. For a second, she appeared and peered into the hole. This time a smile lit up her angelic face before her image faded. I felt like giving up after three feet, but something or someone asked me to dig deeper. I saw what I didn't want to see a small human skull at a depth of five feet or so. Then I knew; She wanted me to find her.

I contacted the police, but how could I explain why I was digging such a large hole in a supposedly pets' graveyard. It didn't matter. I'd deal with that question if they asked.

In less than an hour, the whole area was closed off. Six men dug furiously.

My statement at the police station satisfied the DI in charge and returned to the hotel for another night.

At breakfast the next morning, the Detective Inspector arrived. Over three cups of coffee, he told me they had discovered six small skeletons and were in the process of opening up the remainder of the marked graves. He explained that I could continue with my survey but to keep away from their excavations.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"During the war, your property was used as a children's home. From our records, it would seem many of the youngsters ran away; a few were found while others were not. It was wartime, and what with the bombing of the dockyards and a hundred other reasons, missing children, unless someone shouted, were overlooked and eventually forgotten. Regrettably, sixty years have passed, their parents will be dead if they had any, and even if any of the murderers are still alive, we could spend a lot of time and taxpayers' money trying to prove the impossible. At least they will now be buried properly. Oh, by the way, my men found a tiny bracelet on the wrist of the little girl you unearthed. On it was the name Jane. Thought you might like to know."

I returned to the house, finished my survey and waited. Jane appeared for a short while. With her ordeal over, the mistrust in those large blue eyes was gone. She wore

an air of triumph and shimmered within an aura of warmth and light. Not seeming to run or walk, she merely floated noiselessly across the floor, fading as she went.

As I drove back to London, I thought to myself. 'So the house has a ghost. Maybe that could be good for business.'

When Jane's Hotel opened, the sun shone, and the birds sang. Sometimes I'm sure I see her playing in the garden