



TOPSY-TURVY



Haunted

Victor Kelleher (2003)

Here is what Susie did at bedtime every night. She tiptoed into her darkened room, ran quickly across the carpet, and jumped into bed. She never dared look under the bed. She didn't let so much as a toe stick out over the edge. Her big sister had told her what would happen if she did. Something might reach up from below and grab her. Something might tug her out of bed and pull her down and down into the ...

But it was too scary to imagine. She had heard stories about the ghosts and monsters that hid under beds, and she never wanted to meet one. She didn't even want to think about them. With a shiver, she clenched her eyes shut and went straight to sleep.

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In that very same room, here is what Giffin did every night. He tiptoed from a darkened corner, hurried across the carpet, and dived *under* the bed. He never dared peek out. He didn't let so much as the tip of his nose show. His big brother had told him what would happen if he did. Something might tug him out from under the bed and pull him up and up into ...

But it was too scary to imagine. He had heard stories about horrible humans who slept on the top of beds. He certainly never wanted to meet one. He didn't even want to think about them. With a shudder, he opened his eyes wider than ever and didn't sleep a wink.

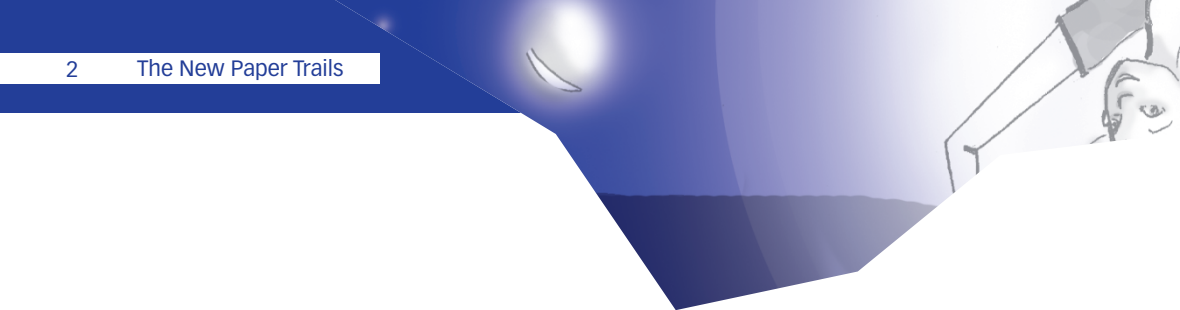
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Things stayed that way for months and months. Then early one morning, just before dawn, everything changed. As the clock in the passage struck five, Susie's eyes flicked open. She was suddenly wide awake.

At exactly the same moment, Giffin's eyes clicked shut. He was suddenly fast asleep.

So there they were. Susie on top of the bed, staring into the dark. Giffin underneath it, sleeping peacefully down amongst the dust and balls of fluff.

He was snoring too!



It was his snoring that frightened Susie. Every time he breathed in, it was like the howling of hungry wolves. Every time he breathed out, it was like the clanking of rusty chains. She'd never been so scared in all her life. She tried hiding under the blankets, but the creepy noises floated up through the mattress. She tried blocking her ears, but his snores still made the bed tremble.

She was trembling by then. She couldn't even get her voice to work properly. 'H-e-l-p!' she croaked, and made a dash for the door. But her feet tangled in the sheet, and she fell with a crash.

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The noise woke Giffin. He could hear someone crying and moaning. Every time she sobbed, it was like the stab of burning sunshine. Every time she moaned, it was like an icy wash of morning light. He'd never been so scared in all his afterlife. He tried huddling in amongst the fluff-balls, but the terrible noises floated down through the mattress. He tried blocking his ears, but her sobs still made the floor tremble.

He was trembling too by then. He couldn't even get his voice to work properly. 'H-e-l-p!' he jibbered, and made a dash for the darkest corner. But his feet slipped on the fluff-balls, and he fell with a splat.

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That was when Susie saw it: a ghostly white blob with wide staring eyes. It was gazing at her through the dark.

That was when Giffin also saw it: a solid pinkish blob. It was gazing back at him.

'Wh-wh-who are y-y-you?' asked Susie in a terrified whisper.

'Wh-wh-who are y-y-you?' asked Giffin in a hollow voice.

'M-m-my name is S-s-susie. I'm a p-p-person.'

'M-m-my name is G-g-giffin. I'm a g-g-ghost.'

Once they'd admitted the awful truth, it didn't seem so awful any more. Susie even noticed that Giffin's soft white body was rather nice to look at. It reminded her of silvery moonlight. And Giffin noticed that



Susie's soft brown hair was rather beautiful. It reminded him of shadows stirred gently by the night wind.

'What are you doing in my room?' Giffin wondered aloud.

'What are you doing in *my* room?' Susie corrected him.

In his creakiest voice, he explained how he had always lived in this same room in this same house with the same ghostly family. When he had finished, Susie explained how she and her family lived there as well.

Giffin was shocked. 'You mean our house is haunted by humans?'

'And ours by ghosts?' Susie added.

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Round about then, dawn started to break. As the first grey light stole into the room, Susie noticed something peculiar happening. Giffin's eyes were growing dimmer by the moment; and the round blob of his body began fading away.

'Giffin!' she said, surprised. 'Where are you going?'

'Susie!' he called back, as she also began to fade. 'Where are *you* going?'

Frantically, they reached for each other. They had forgotten about being afraid of creatures that might grab them in the dark. All they wanted now was to keep each other there.

But Susie's hand swept only empty space. And Giffin's brushed nothing more solid than shadows.

'Come back!' Susie pleaded, as sunlight peeped through a gap in the curtains.

'Come back!' she heard Giffin reply, his voice fainter than the creak of a distant door.

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With a sigh, Susie lay down amongst the tangled bedclothes. She was lying there still, fast asleep, when her mum came to wake her later that morning.

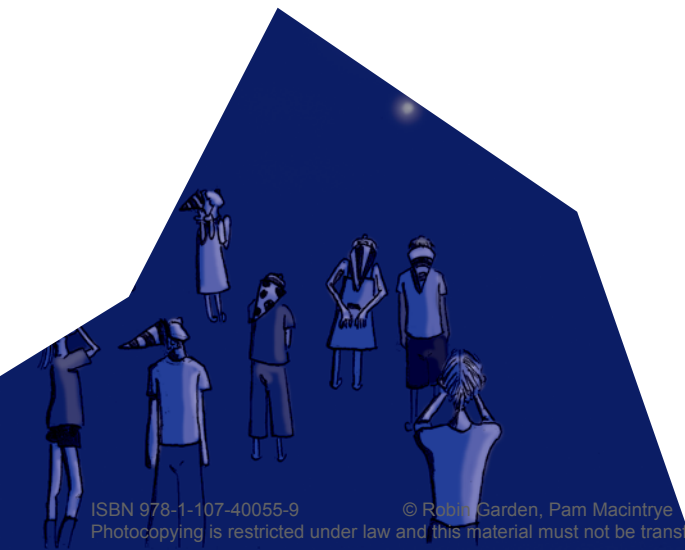
'My goodness!' she exclaimed. 'What a racket you were making in the night. Anyone would think you'd seen a ghost.'



At the very same instant, up in the gloomy old attic, a far spookier voice was saying, 'My badness! What a noise you made last night. Anyone would think you'd seen a human.'

Susie and Giffin smiled a secret smile.

'Maybe I did,' they answered together.



The Affair at the Ritz

Carmel Bird (1996)

Speaking as a dying cockroach, I tell you it is nice to have spiders and insects like you to talk to. My voice is faint and muffled, but I know you can hear me, and I sense your sympathy and kindness. I know you would help if you could.

I am reasonably philosophical, but tonight has been almost too much for me. Tonight I have discovered that I am unable to face death calmly. I do not want to die.

I have lived in this bathroom all my life, raised a large family with hundreds of descendants all over the hotel. Two years ago I was Grandmother of the Year. We always have a huge reunion in the kitchen on Christmas Eve, and next time, I won't be there. I can't bear to think of it – the sea of shiny backs and handsome feelers – and I will never know it again.

It's because I'm getting old, slowing down, that I'm in my present state. Once upon a time I could anticipate a human visit to my bathroom, even before the human thought of it. But tonight, she turned on the light and there I was – marooned on the tiles, halfway between the bath and the hand-basin.

She hated me with a radiant hatred. She must have realised I knew all about her, and she hated me for that. She was, of course, frightened of me too. As far as she's concerned, I am a creepy-crawly, whereas she wears satin lingerie and goes to the hairdresser twice a week. She's in town for a brief holiday with her husband, but I have learned to sum people up in no time. I've got her number, and she damn well knows it.

Her holiday consists of shopping and eating and drinking, going to the pool and the sauna and having massages. Once she had her horoscope done. Her husband tries every now and then to interest her in the theatre – they went to the ballet and the opera, but she drew the line at experimental plays. I adore that kind of thing myself. Once I went to the university in the pocket of a leather jacket and saw some students doing *King Lear* as flowers and vegetables. And another time I arrived at the Opera House in a velvet handbag. I heard Joan Sutherland.



Occasionally this woman goes out with her husband to humour him, but mostly her holiday consists of little trips to the boutiques and the antique shops, and then a drive to the beauty shop to have her nails done – then off to lunch.

Food is her main topic of conversation, actually, what she has and has not eaten. She says she eats the salad and not the strawberry shortcake. I wonder sometimes about that. Her figure is beyond repair, beyond belief, and must surely frighten other people in the sauna.

Oh, why was I so slow and stupid? I was having a lovely stroll along the green arabesques when on goes the light and in she comes to cleanse her face. Creams and lotions and moisturisers and all the rest of it. She is definitely not a good advertisement for Estée Lauder. Did I mention her boyfriend? He had just left, and she was moved to rush into the bathroom and remove her face.

What happens is: husband goes to the opera; boyfriend arrives with flowers and wine; lady and boyfriend laugh and drink and hop into bed; boyfriend leaves taking empty bottle; husband comes back. ‘Frank and Julia sent flowers,’ she says.

You see, I do know all about this woman. And she has done for me.

We both stood still and looked at each other for quite a long time like beasts in the jungle. But I was defenceless.

She reached for her husband’s spraycan of shaving foam. She squirted a great white cloud of the stuff on me so I could see nothing and I could barely move. Then I think she put a glass over me, slid a piece of cardboard under the glass. Trapped. She wrapped the whole thing up in a plastic shower cap, took out the glass, sealed the little parcel with a rubber band.

And now I am in the little rubbish tin under the vanity unit. Waiting to die. Can you hear me? It’s a comfort to have friends like you with whom to share the final moments.



Displaced Persons

Leah Bobet (2004)

Regime change is a bitch, and we never saw it coming. Although I suppose nobody ever does. One day you're in public service, the next you're out of a job. One day you're on top of the world, the next, in the gutters of the Emerald City and being driven out of there, too.

One day you have wings, and the next you crawl.

*

Louis-Chance is the leader now, for our generals are all dead. He was a porter once; they did not think he was dangerous enough to kill, and it's easy to see why. He's bent from age, exhaustion, defeat, as well as the sudden lightness on his back. He wants us to bide our time, up on the mountain where nobody goes. *If primates were meant to fly, he says, the Great Monkey would have given us wings himself. We have transgressed horribly, my fellows. It is no more than we deserve.* She offered us wings; she gave us somewhere to live, all the fruit we could eat and throw, travel opportunities, learning and leisure. It was a good life: I can't see how we could have offended by taking that which was given.

There was no way we could have known.

And then one day we came home and she was naught but a puddle on the floor. We collected as much of her as we could for a decent burial: some had already leaked through the cracks in the flagstones, run into the drains and then the river and the sea, and was lost for good. We poured what was left around the roots of a mighty oak, meaning to tend it until the end of our days. But there was no place for us in the New World Order, no place for monkeys and trees amidst scarecrows and men of tin and other artificialities.

We were tried, and we were found guilty. To this day I'm not sure what exactly the charge was.

*

I still have nightmares, some nights, of those last days: the smell of burning flesh, the pain in my back, the shouts that followed us for days and nights of nonstop running, running some of us had never done in



our lives. The blood that marked our path until it stopped, and the tears that kept on going.

She gave us wings; the mob lined us up, one by one, and took them away again.

It hurt more than I expected from the sounds of chopping coming down the line. It sounded more solid: like an axe moving through nerveless, stubborn wood, something that could offer at least token resistance to the blade. The wings made no sound as they were piled high in the centre of the green-paved square, feathers ruffling in the afternoon breeze.

‘Death to the Witch!’ they cried as the torches came down and the stink rose into the air. ‘Death to her kingdom!’

I’m told I fainted.

*

Nobody goes up into the mountains, so we went up into the mountains.

There is little to eat; those we have not lost to pain or injury we are losing to despair. Those who are still brave, still strong, are building a life. Our gardens are not like her gardens. Our caves are not like her castle, and when we pluck fruit from the trees we have nursed so carefully in crevices, away from the wind, we have to climb their rough and horrid trunks.

These days we do a lot of waiting.

We wait for their anger to heal, for their memories to fade, for our next generation to be born and weaned. For this I believe: the wings of our children will be their own. Not grafted: inseparable from their small brown bodies by axe or trial or fire. They will hunt through the skies, play in the clouds, alight on the tops of trees instead of reaching from below. They will bring us news of the world, delicacies from afar, sights to be tasted and savoured on cold nights. They will not walk, or crawl, or beg.

They will fly.

Haunted

Discussion

- 1 'Haunted' gives two sides of the same story. We expect people to be scared of ghosts. What is the surprise in this story?
- 2 Find the description of Giffin as seen through Susie's eyes. Then find the description of Susie as seen through Giffin's eyes. Why do you think they see each other in this way?
- 3 Both Susie and Giffin are too scared to imagine what will happen to them if something reaches out and grabs them. Yet both lie frozen in terror, unable to face what scares them. Why do you think people are paralysed by fear, even when they believe they are in danger?

Activities

- 1 List the things that Susie and Giffin have in common. Next, list the things that are different about them. Then explain which you think are more important – the things in common or the differences.
- 2 Tell the tale of how Giffin and his family came to live in the house. You could write a story, a poem or even a song.
- 3 Write a short play for four actors. Imagine Susie and Giffin are angry with Susie's sister and Giffin's brother for making them unnecessarily scared. Susie and Giffin think up a plan to teach their siblings a lesson. Rehearse and perform the play for the class.

The Affair at the Ritz

Discussion

- 1 We humans might think we know pretty much everything that goes on in the world. Not only that – we probably reckon that we can control most things too. We'd be confident of holding the power of life and death over simple creatures like cockroaches. Yet in this story, it is the insects that observe us. They know a great deal more about us than we'd like them to. What is it like to be watched? Do you change your behaviour in case someone (or something) is watching you?
- 2 The narrator (the cockroach) addresses the readers as though we were other cockroaches and spiders. What effect does this have on you? Do you like the cockroach assuming that you are part of her story? Why or why not?
- 3 What is your attitude to the woman the cockroach describes? Explain your answer.

Activities

- 1 Create an image of the cockroach's funeral. Draw it by hand, or use Photoshop or software like it. Set the funeral in an appropriate part of the Ritz Hotel, like a dark cupboard or a heating duct. Be sure to include all the mourners and as much detail as you can.
- 2 Make a brochure advertising the Ritz Hotel as a romantic destination for insects, rats and mice. Draw and write it by hand or use software such as Publisher. Include images as well as words. Think about which features of the hotel will appeal to your clients, and make a big deal about them in your brochure.
- 3 Imagine you are one of the cockroach's hundreds of descendants. You have been chosen to deliver the eulogy at her funeral. A eulogy is a speech that praises someone who has died. Write the eulogy, then deliver it to the rest of your class.

Displaced Persons

Discussion

- 1 Describe the life the monkeys have had since the Witch was killed and they were taken to the Emerald City as prisoners.
- 2 Have you seen *The Wizard of Oz*? How well do you remember the movie? Were the flying monkeys as innocent as the narrator makes them seem?
- 3 The last lines of 'Displaced Persons' suggest it might not be long before the monkeys of Oz take to the skies once more. Should the people of the Emerald City be worried? Will the monkeys be out for revenge? What do you think the narrating monkey wants for his kind?

Activities

- 1 Is what happened to the monkeys fair? Do you have any sympathy for them? Why or why not? Write a paragraph explaining your answer. Use your knowledge of *The Wizard of Oz* (if any) as well as what you have read in 'Displaced Persons'.
- 2 Write a transcript of the judges pronouncing sentence after the monkeys are tried for crimes against Oz and convicted. The narrating monkey is conveniently unsure of what the charges against them were, so you'll have to make them up.
- 3 Choose an obscure character or characters from another famous novel or film. Invent the story of what happened to them after the main characters went on their way.