

# **Where Angels Come In**

## **Before You Sleep**

**by Adam Nevill, 1969–**

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One side of my body is full of toothache. Right in the middle of the bones. The skin and muscles of one arm and one leg have a chilly pins-and-needles tingle. They'll never be warm again. That's why Nana Alice is here; sitting on the chair at the foot of my bed, her crumpled face in shadow. But the milky light that comes through the net curtains still finds a sparkle in her quick eyes, and gleams on the yellowish grin that hasn't changed since my mother let her into the house, made her a cup of tea and showed her into my room. Nana Alice smells like the inside of overflow pipes at the back of the council houses.

‘Least you still got one half,’ she says. She has a metal brace on her thin leg. The foot at the end of the caliper is inside a baby’s shoe. Even though it’s rude, I can’t stop staring. Her normal leg is fat. ‘They took me leg and one arm too.’ Using her normal fingers, she picks the dead hand from a pocket in her cardigan and plops it onto her lap. Small and grey, the hand reminds me of a doll’s hand. I don’t look for long.

She leans forward in her chair, and I can smell the tea on her breath as she says, ‘Show me where you was touched, luv.’

I unbutton my pyjama top and roll onto my good side. At the sight of the scar, Nana Alice wastes no time and her podgy fingertips press around the shrivelled skin at the top of my arm, but she doesn’t touch the see-through parts where the hand once held me. Nana Alice’s eyes go big and her lips pull back to show gums more black than purple. Against her thigh, her doll hand shakes. Cradling the tiny hand and rubbing it with living fingers, she coughs and sits back in the chair. When I’ve covered my shoulder, Nana Alice still watches that part of me without blinking and seems disappointed to see it covered so soon. She wets her lips. ‘Tell us what happened, luv.’

Propping myself up in the pillows, I peer out the window and swallow the big lump in my throat. Feeling a bit sickish, I don’t want to remember what happened. Not ever.

Across the street, inside the spiky metal fence built around the park, I can see the usual circle of mothers. Huddled into their coats and sitting on benches beside pushchairs, or holding the leads of tugging dogs, they watch the children play. Upon the climbing frames and on the wet grass, the kids race about and shriek and laugh and fall and cry. Wrapped up in scarves and padded coats, they swarm among hungry pigeons and seagulls; thousands of small white and grey shapes, pecking around their stamping feet. Eventually, the birds all panic and rise in a curving squadron, raising their plump bodies into the air with flap-cracky wings. And the children are blind with their own fear and excitement in brief tornadoes of dusty feathers, red feet, cruel beaks and startled eyes. But they are safe here—the children and the birds—and closely watched by their tense mothers, and are kept inside the stockade of iron railings: the only place outdoors the children are allowed to play since I came back, alone. A lot of things go missing in our town: cats, dogs, children. And they never come back. Except for me and Nana Alice. We came home, or at least half of us did.

Lying in my sickbed every day now, so pale in the face and weak in the heart, I drink medicines, read books and watch the children play from my bedroom window. Sometimes I sleep, but only when I have to. At least, when I’m awake, I can read, watch television and listen to my mom and sisters downstairs. But in dreams, I go back to the big white house on the hill, where old things with skipping feet circle me, then rush in close to show their faces.

For Nana Alice, she thinks that the time she went inside the big white place, as a little girl, was a special occasion. She’s still grateful for being allowed inside. Our dad calls her a silly old fool and doesn’t want her in our house. He doesn’t know she’s here today. But when a child vanishes, or someone dies, lots of the mothers ask Nana to visit them. ‘She can see things and feel things that the rest of us can’t,’ my mom says. Like the two police ladies, and the mothers of the two girls

who went missing last winter, and Pickering's parents, my mom just wants to know what happened to me.

'Tell us, luv. Tell us about the house,' Nana Alice says, smiling. No adult likes to talk about the beautiful, tall house on the hill. Even our dads who come home from the industry, smelling of plastic and beer, look uncomfortable if their kids say they can hear the ladies crying again, above their heads, but deep inside their ears at the same time, calling from the distance, from the hill, and from inside us. Our parents can't hear it any more, but they remember the sound from when they were small. It's like people are trapped up on that hill and are calling out for help. And when no one comes, they get real angry. 'Foxes,' the parents tell us, but they don't look you in the eye when they say it.

For a long time after 'my accident' I was unconscious in the hospital. When I woke up, I was so weak I stayed there for another three months. Gradually, one half of my body got stronger and I was allowed home. That's when the questions began about my mate, Pickering, whom they never found. And now Nana Alice wants to know every single thing that I can remember, and about all of the dreams too. Only I never know what is real and what came out of the coma with me.

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For years, we talked about going up there. All the kids do, and Pickering, Ritchie and me wanted to be the bravest boys in our school. We wanted to break in there and come out with treasure for proof that we'd been inside, and not just looked in through the gate like all the others we knew. Some people say the white house on the hill was once a place where old, rich people lived after they retired from owning the industry, the land, the laws, our houses, our town, us. Others say the building was built on an old well and that the ground is contaminated. A teacher told us the mansion used to be a hospital and is still full of germs. Our dad said the house was an asylum for lunatics that closed down over a hundred years ago, and has stayed empty ever since, because it's falling to pieces and is too expensive to repair. That's why kids should never go there: you could be crushed by bricks or fall through a floor. Nana Alice says it's a place 'where angels come in'. But we all know that it's the place where the missing things are. Every street in our town has lost pets and knows a family who's lost a child. And every time the police search the big house they find nothing. No one remembers the big gate being open.

So on a Friday morning when all the kids in our area were walking to school, me, Ritchie and Pickering sneaked off the other way. Through the allotments, where me and Pickering were once caught smashing deckchairs and beanpoles; through the woods full of broken glass and dogshit; over the canal bridge; across the potato fields with our heads down so the farmer wouldn't see us; and over the railway tracks until we couldn't even see the roofs of the last houses in our town. Talking about hidden treasure, we stopped by the old ice-cream van with four flat tyres, to throw rocks and stare at the faded menu on the little counter, our mouths watering as we made selections that would never be served. On the other side of the woods that surround the estate, we could see the chimneys of the big white mansion above the trees.

Although Pickering had been walking out front the whole time telling us he wasn't scared of security guards or watchdogs or even ghosts—*Cus you can just*

*put your hand frow them*—when we reached the bottom of the wooded hill no one said anything, and we never looked at each other. Part of me always believed that we would turn back at the black gate, because the fun part was telling stories about the house and planning the expedition and imagining terrible things. Going inside was different because lots of the missing kids had talked about the house before they disappeared. And some of the young men who broke in there, for a laugh, always came away a bit funny in the head. Our dad said that was because of drugs.

Even the trees near the estate were different, like they were too still and silent and the air between them was real cold. But we went up through the trees and found the high brick wall that surrounds the grounds. There was barbed wire and broken glass set into concrete on top of the wall. We followed the wall until we reached the black iron gate. The gate is higher than a house, and it has a curved top made from iron spikes, fixed between two pillars with big stone balls on top. Seeing the PRIVATE PROPERTY: TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED sign made shivers go up my neck and under my hair.

'I heard them balls roll off and kill trespassers,' Ritchie said. I'd heard the same thing, but when Ritchie said that, I knew that he wasn't going inside with us.

We wrapped our hands around the cold black bars of the gate and peered through at the long flagstone path that goes up the hill, between avenues of trees and old statues hidden by branches and weeds. All the uncut grass of the lawns was waist-deep and the flower beds were wild with colour. At the summit was the tall white house with the big windows. Sunlight glinted off the glass. Above all the chimneys, the sky was blue. 'Princesses lived there,' Pickering whispered.

'Can you see anyone?' Ritchie asked. He was shivering with excitement and had to take a pee. He tried to rush it over some nettles—we were fighting a war against nettles and wasps that summer—but got half of the piss down his legs.

'It's empty,' Pickering whispered. 'Except for hidden treasure. Darren's brother got this owl inside a big glass. I seen it. Looks like it's still alive. At night, it moves its head.'

Ritchie and I looked at each other; everyone knows the stories about the animals or birds inside the glass cases that people find up there. There's one about a lamb with no fur, inside a tank of green water that someone's uncle found when he was a boy. It still blinks its little black eyes. And someone said they found skeletons of children all dressed up in old clothes, holding hands.

All rubbish; because I know what's really inside there. Pickering had seen nothing, but if we challenged him he'd start yelling, 'Have so! Have so!' and me and Ritchie weren't happy with anything but whispering near the gate.

'Let's just watch and see what happens. We can go in another day,' Ritchie said.

'You're chickening out!' Pickering kicked at Ritchie's legs. 'I'll tell everyone Ritchie pissed his pants.'

Ritchie's face went white and his bottom lip quivered. Like me, he was imagining crowds of swooping kids shouting, 'Piss pot! Piss pot!' Once the crowds find a coward, they'll hunt him every day until he's pushed out to the edges of the playground where the failures stand and watch. Every kid in town knows this place takes away brothers, sisters, cats and dogs, but when we hear the cries from

the hill, it's our duty to force one another out here. It's a part of our town and always has been. Pickering is one of the toughest kids in school and he had to go.

Standing back and sizing up the gate, Pickering said, 'I'm going in first. Watch where I put me hands and feet.' And it didn't take him long to get over. There was a little wobble at the top when he swung a leg between two spikes, but not long after that he was standing on the other side, grinning at us. To me, it now looked like there was a little ladder built into the gate; where the metal vines and thorns curved between the long poles, you could see the pattern of steps for small hands and feet. I'd heard that little girls always found a secret wooden door in the brick wall that no one else can find when they look for it. But that might just be another story.

If I didn't go over and the raid was a success, I didn't want to spend the rest of my life being a piss pot and wishing I'd gone in with Pickering. We could be heroes together, and I was full of the same crazy feeling that makes me climb oak trees to the very top branches, stare up at the sky and let go with my hands for a few seconds knowing that if I fall I will die.

When I climbed away from whispering Ritchie on the ground, the squeaks and groans of the gate were so loud that I was sure I could be heard all the way up the hill and inside the house too. When I got to the top and was getting ready to swing a leg over, Pickering said, 'Don't cut your balls off.' But I couldn't smile, or even breathe. It was much higher up there than it looked from the ground. My arms and legs started to shake. With one leg over, between the spikes, panic came up my throat. If one hand slipped off the worn metal I imagined my whole weight forcing the spike through my thigh, and how I would hang there, dripping. I looked at the house and I felt that there was a face behind every window, watching me.

Many of the stories about the white place on the hill came into my head at the same time too: how you only see the red eyes of the thing that drains your blood; how it's kiddie-fiddlers that hide in there and torture captives for days before burying them alive, which is why no one ever finds the missing children; and some say that the thing that makes the crying noise might look like a beautiful lady when you first see it, but soon changes once it's holding you.

'Hurry up. It's easy,' Pickering said, from way down below.

Ever so slowly, I lifted my second leg over, then lowered myself down the other side. He was right; it wasn't a hard climb at all; kids could do it.

I stood in hot sunshine on the other side of the gate, smiling. The light was brighter over there; glinting off all the white stone and glass on the hill. And the air seemed weird, real thick and warm. When I looked back through the gate, the world around Ritchie seemed grey and dull like it was November or something. He stood on his own, biting his bottom lip. Around us, the overgrown grass was so glossy it hurt my eyes to look at it. Reds, yellows, purples, oranges and lemons of the flowers flowed inside my head and I could taste hot summer inside my mouth. Around the trees, the statues and the flagstone path, the air was wavy and my skin felt so warm that I shivered. Closing my eyes, I said, 'Beautiful.' A word that I wouldn't usually use around Pickering.

'This is where I want to live,' he said, his eyes and face one big smile.

We both started to laugh and hugged each other, which we'd never done before. Anything I ever worried about seemed silly now. I felt taller, and could go

anywhere, and do anything that I liked. I know Pickering felt the same. Anything Ritchie said sounded stupid to us, and I don't even remember it now.

Protected by the overhanging tree branches and long grasses, we kept to the side of the path and began walking up the hill. But after a while, I started to feel a bit nervous. The house looked even bigger than I'd thought it was, down by the gate. Even though we could see no one and hear nothing, I felt like we'd walked into a crowded but silent place where lots of eyes were watching us. Following us.

We stopped walking by the first statue that wasn't totally covered in green moss and dead leaves. Through the low branches of a tree, we could still see the two stone children, naked and standing together on the marble block. One boy and one girl. They were both smiling, but not in a nice way, because we could see too much of their teeth.

'They's all open on the chest,' Pickering said. And he was right. Their stone skin was peeled back on the breastbone, and cupped in their outstretched hands were small lumps with veins carved into the marble—their own little hearts. The good feeling I had down by the gate went.

Sunlight shone through the trees and striped us with shadows and bright slashes. Eyes big and mouths dry, we walked on and checked some of the other statues that we passed. We couldn't stop ourselves; it was like the sculptures made you stare at them so that you could work out what was sticking through the leaves, branches and ivy. There was one horrible cloth-thing that seemed too real to be made from stone. Its face was so nasty that I couldn't look at it for long. Standing under that thing gave me the queer feeling that it was swaying from side to side, and ready to jump off the block and come at us.

Pickering was walking ahead of me, but he stopped to look at another statue. I remember he seemed to shrink into the shadow that the figure made on the ground, and he peered at his shoes like he didn't want to see the statue. I caught up with him, but didn't look too long either. Beside the statue of the ugly man in a cloak and big hat was a smaller shape covered in a robe and hood with something coming out of a sleeve that reminded me of snakes.

I didn't want to go any further and knew that I'd be seeing these statues in my sleep for a long time. Looking down the hill at the gate, I was surprised to see how far away it was now. 'Think I'm going back,' I said to Pickering.

Pickering never called me a chicken. He didn't want to start a fight and be on his own. 'Let's just go into the house quick,' he said. 'And get something. Otherwise no one will believe us.'

The thought of getting any closer to the white house, and the staring windows, made me feel sick with nerves. It was four storeys high and must have had hundreds of rooms. All the windows upstairs were dark, so we couldn't see beyond the glass. Downstairs, they were all boarded up against trespassers.

'It's empty, I bet,' Pickering said, to try and make us feel better. But it didn't do much for me. He didn't seem so smart or hard any more. He was just a stupid kid who hadn't got a clue.

'Nah,' I said.

He walked away from me. 'Well, I am. I'll say you waited outside.' His voice was too soft to carry the usual threat. But all the same, I imagined his triumphant face

while Ritchie and I were the piss pots. I'd even climbed the gate and come this far, but my part would mean nothing if Pickering went further than me.

We never looked at any more of the statues. If we had, I don't think we'd have reached the steps that went up to the big iron doors of the house. Didn't seem to take us long to reach the house either. Even taking slow, reluctant steps got us there real quick. And on legs full of warm water I followed Pickering up to the doors.

'Why is they made of metal?' he asked me.

I never had an answer.

He pressed both hands against the doors. One of them creaked but never opened. 'They's locked,' he said.

But as Pickering shoved at the creaky door again, and with his shoulder and his body at an angle, I'm sure that I saw movement in a window on the second floor. Something whitish, behind the glass. It was like a shape had appeared out of the darkness and then sunk back into it, quick but graceful. It made me think of a carp surfacing in a cloudy pond before vanishing as soon as you saw its pale back. 'Pick!' I hissed.

There was a *clunk* inside the door that Pickering was straining his body against. 'It's open,' he cried out, and he stared into the narrow gap between the two iron doors.

I couldn't help thinking that the door had been opened from inside. 'I wouldn't,' I said. He smiled and waved for me to come over and to help him make a bigger gap. I stayed where I was and watched the windows upstairs as the widening door made a grinding sound against the floor. Without another word, Pickering walked inside the big white house.

Silence hummed in my ears. Sweat trickled down my face. I wanted to run to the gate.

Pickering's face reappeared in the doorway. 'Quick. Come and look at the birds.' He was breathless with excitement, and then he disappeared again.

I peered through the gap at a big, empty hallway. I saw a staircase going up to the next floor. Pickering was standing in the middle of the hall, looking at the ground, and at all of the dried-up birds on the wooden floorboards. Hundreds of dead pigeons. I went inside.

No carpets, or curtains, or light bulbs, just bare floorboards, white walls and two closed doors on either side of the hall. On the floor, most of the birds still had feathers but looked real thin. Some were just bones. Others were dust.

'They get in and they got nothin' to eat,' Pickering said. 'We should collect the skulls.' He crunched across the floor and tried the doors at either side of the hall, yanking the handles up and down. 'Locked,' he said. 'Both locked. Let's go up them stairs. See if there's somefing in the rooms.'

I flinched at every creak our feet made on the stairs, and I told Pickering to walk at the sides like me. But he wasn't listening and was just going up fast on his plump legs. When I caught up with him, at the first turn in the stairs, I started to feel real strange again. The air was weird, hot and thin like we were in a tiny space. We were both sweaty under our school uniforms too, from just walking up one flight of stairs. I had to lean against a wall.

Pickering shone his torch at the next floor. All we could see up there were plain walls in a dusty corridor. A bit of sunlight was getting in from somewhere upstairs, but not much. 'Come on,' he said, without turning his head to look at me.

'I'm going outside,' I said. 'I can't breathe.' But as I moved to go back down the first flight of stairs, I heard a door creak open and then close, below us. I stopped still and heard my heart bang against my eardrums from the inside. The sweat turned to frost on my face and neck and under my hair. And real quick, and sideways, something moved across the shaft of light falling through the open front door.

My eyeballs went cold and I felt dizzy. From the corner of my eye, I could see Pickering's face too, watching me from above, on the next flight of stairs. He turned the torch off with a loud click.

The thing in the hall moved again, back the way it had come, but it paused at the edge of the rectangle of light on the floorboards. And started to sniff at the dirty ground. It was mostly the way that she moved down there that made me feel as light as a feather and ready to faint. Least I think it was a she, but when people get that old you can't always tell. There wasn't much hair on the head and the skin was yellow. She looked more like a puppet made of bones and dressed in a grubby nightie than an old lady. And could old ladies move that fast? Sideways like a crab she went, looking backwards at the open door, so I couldn't see the face properly, which I was glad of.

If I moved too quick, I'm sure that she would have looked up and seen me, so I took two slow steps to get behind the wall of the next staircase, where Pickering was already hiding. He looked like he was trying not to cry. I thought about them stone kids outside, and what they held in their little hands, and I tried not to cry too.

Then we heard the sound of another door opening downstairs. We huddled on a step together, trembling, and we peered round the corner of the staircase to make sure that the old thing wasn't coming up the stairs, sideways. But another one was down there. I saw it skittering around by the door like a chicken, and all the air leaked out of me before I could scream.

That one moved quicker than the first one, with the help of two black sticks. Bent over with a hump for a back, it was covered in a dusty black dress that swished over the floor. What I could see of the face, through the veil, was all pinched and was sickly-white as the grubs you find under wet bark. And when she made the whistling sound, it hurt my ears deep inside and made my bones feel cold.

Pickering's face was wild with fear and it was like there was no blood left inside his head and I was seeing too much of his eyes. 'Is they old ladies?' he said in a voice all broken.

I grabbed his arm. 'We got to get out. Maybe there's a window, or another door round the back.' Which meant that we had to go up the stairs, run through the building and find another way down to the ground floor, before breaking our way out.

I took another peek down the stairs to see what *they* were doing, but wished I hadn't. There were two more of them. A tall man with legs like sticks was looking up at us with a face that never changed, because it had no lips or eyelids or nose.



He wore a creased suit with a gold watch chain on the waistcoat, and was standing behind a wicker chair. In the chair was a bundle wrapped in tartan blankets. Peeking above the coverings was a small head inside a cloth cap. The face was yellow as corn in a tin. The first two were standing by the open door so that we couldn't get out through the front.

Running up the stairs into a hotter darkness, my whole body felt baggy and clumsy and my knees chipped together. Pickering went first with the torch and used his elbows so that I couldn't overtake him. I bumped into his back, and kicked his heels, and inside his fast breathing I could hear him sniffing at tears. 'Is they comin'?' he kept asking. I didn't have the breath to answer and kept running through the long corridor, between dozens of closed doors, to get to the end. I just looked straight ahead and knew that I would freeze if one of the doors opened. And with our feet making such a bumping on the floorboards, I can't say that I was surprised when I heard the click of a lock behind us. We both made the mistake of looking back.

At first, we thought it was waving at us. But then we realised that the skinny lady in the dirty nightdress was moving her long arms through the air to attract the attention of the others that had followed us up the stairwell. We could hear the scuffle and swish as they came through the dark behind us. But how could this one see us, I thought, with all those rusty bandages around her head? Then we heard another of those horrible whistles, followed by more doors opening real quick, like them things were in a hurry to get out of the rooms.

At the end of the corridor, there was another stairwell with more light in it, which fell from a high window three floors up. But the glass must have been dirty and greenish, because everything around us on the stairs looked like it was under water. When he turned to bolt down the stairs, I saw that Pickering's face was all shiny with tears and the front of his trousers had a dark patch spreading down one leg.

It was real hard to get down to the ground. It was like we had no strength left in our bodies, as if our fear was draining us through the slappy, tripping soles of our feet. But it was more than terror slowing us down; the air was so thin and dry, and it was hard to get our breath in and out of our lungs fast enough. My shirt was stuck to my back and I was dripping under the arms. Pickering's hair was wet and he'd almost stopped moving, so I overtook him.

At the bottom of the stairs, I ran into another long, empty corridor of closed doors and greyish light that ran along the back of the building. Just looking all the way down it made me bend over with my hands on my knees to rest. But Pickering just ploughed right into me from behind and knocked me over. He ran across my body and stamped on my hand. 'They's comin',' he whined in a tearful voice, and stumbled off, down that passage.

When I got back to my feet I followed him, which never felt like a good idea to me, because if some of them things were waiting in the hall by the front doors, while others were coming up fast behind us, we'd get ourselves trapped. I even thought about opening the door of a ground-floor room and trying to kick out the boards over a window. Plenty of them old things seemed to come out of rooms when we ran past them, like we were waking them up, but they never came out of every room. So maybe we would have to take a chance on one of the doors.

I called out to Pick to stop. I was wheezing like Billy Skid at school who's got asthma, so maybe Pickering never heard me, because he kept on running. As I was wondering which door to pick, a little voice said, 'Do you want to hide in here?'

I jumped into the air and cried out like I'd trod on a snake, and stared at where the voice had come from. There was a crack between a door and the door-frame, and part of a little girl's face was peeking out. She smiled and opened the door wider. 'They won't see you. We can play with my dolls.' She had a really white face inside a black bonnet all covered in ribbons. The rims of her eyes were red like she'd been crying for a long time.

My chest was hurting and my eyes were stinging with sweat. Pickering was too far ahead for me to catch him up. I could hear his feet banging away on loose floorboards, way off in the darkness, and I didn't think I could run any further. So I nodded at the girl. She stood aside and opened the door wider. The bottom of her black dress swept through the dust. 'Quickly,' she said with an excited smile, and then looked down the corridor, to see if anything was coming. 'Most of them are blind, but they can hear things.'

I moved through the doorway. Brushed past her and smelled something gone bad. It put a picture in my head of the dead cat, squashed flat in the woods, that I found one time on a hot day. But over that smell was something like the bottom of my granny's old wardrobe, with the one broken door and little iron keys in the locks that don't work.

Softly, the little girl closed the door behind us, and walked off across the wooden floor with her head held high, like a 'little Madam', my dad would have said. Light was getting into this room from some red and green windows up near the high ceiling. Two big chains were hanging down and holding lights with no bulbs, and there was a stage at one end, with a heavy green curtain pulled across the front. Footlights stuck up at the front of the stage. It must have been a ballroom once.

Looking for a way out, behind me, to the side, up ahead, everywhere, I followed the little girl in the black bonnet to the stage, and went up the stairs at the side. She disappeared through the curtains without making a sound, and I followed because I could think of nowhere else to go and I wanted a friend. But the long curtains smelled so bad around my face that I put a hand over my mouth.

She asked me for my name and where I lived, and I told her like I was talking to a teacher who'd just caught me doing something wrong. I even gave her my house number. 'We didn't mean to trespass,' I also said. 'We never stole nothing.'

She cocked her head to one side and frowned like she was trying to remember something. Then she smiled and said, 'All of these are mine. I found them.' She drew my attention to the dolls on the floor; little shapes of people that I couldn't see properly in the dark. She sat down among them and started to pick them up one at a time, to show me. But I was too nervous to pay much attention and I didn't like the look of the cloth animal with its fur worn to the grubby material. It had stitched up eyes and no ears; the arms and legs were too long for its body too, and I didn't like the way the dirty head was stiff and upright like it was watching me.

Behind us, the rest of the stage was in darkness, with only the faint glow of a white wall in the distance. Peering from the stage at the boarded-up windows along the right side of the dancefloor, I could see some bright daylight around the edge of two big hardboard sheets, nailed over patio doors. There was a draught coming through the gaps too. Must have been a place where someone got in before.

'I got to go,' I said to the girl behind me, who was whispering to her toys. And I was about to step through the curtains and head for the daylight when I heard the rushing of a crowd in the corridor that me and Pickering had just run through; feet shuffling, canes tapping, wheels squeaking and two hooting sounds. It all seemed to go on for ages; a long parade I didn't want to see.

As the crowd rushed past the ballroom, the main door clicked open and something glided inside. I pulled back from the curtains and held my breath while the little girl kept mumbling to the nasty toys. I wanted to cover my ears. A crazy part of me wanted it all to end; wanted me to step out from behind the curtains and offer myself to the tall figure down there on the dancefloor. Holding the tatty parasol over its head, it spun around quickly like it was moving on tiny, silent wheels under its long musty skirts, while sniffing at the air for me. Under the white net attached to the brim of the rotten hat and tucked into the high collars of the dress, I saw a bit of face that looked like the skin on a rice pudding. I would have screamed but there was no air inside me.

I looked over to where the little girl had been sitting. She had gone, but something was moving on the floor. Squirring. I blinked my eyes fast, and for a moment, it looked like all of her toys were trembling. But when I squinted at the Golly, with the bits of curly white hair on its head, the doll lay perfectly still where she had dropped it. The little girl may have hidden me, but I was glad that she had gone.

Way off in the stifling distance of the big house, I then heard a scream; a cry full of all the panic and terror and woe in the whole world. The figure with the umbrella spun around on the dancefloor and then rushed out of the ballroom towards the sound.

I slipped out from behind the curtains. A busy chattering sound came from the distance. It got louder until it echoed through the corridor, and the ballroom, and almost covered the sounds of the wailing boy. His cries were swirling round and round, bouncing off walls and closed doors, like he was running far off inside the house, and in a circle that he couldn't get out of.

I crept down the stairs at the side of the stage and ran to the long strip of burning sunlight that I could see shining through one side of the patio doors. I pulled at the big rectangle of wood until it splintered and revealed broken glass in a door-frame and lots of thick grass outside.

For the first time since I'd seen the old woman, scratching about the front entrance, I truly believed that I could escape. I imagined myself climbing through the gap that I was making, and running down the hill to the gate, while *they* were all busy inside with the crying boy. But just as my breathing went all quick and shaky with the glee of escape, I heard a *whump* sound on the floor behind me, like something had just dropped to the floor from the stage. Teeny vibrations tickled

the soles of my feet. Then I heard something coming across the floor toward me, with a shuffle, like a body was dragging itself real quick.

I couldn't bear to look behind and see another one close up, so I snatched at the board and I pulled with all my strength at the bit not nailed down. The whole thing bent and made a gap. Sideways, I squeezed a leg, hip, arm and a shoulder out. My head was suddenly bathed in warm sunlight and fresh air.

One of *them* must have reached out right then, and grabbed my left arm under the shoulder at the moment I had made it outside. The fingers and thumb were so cold that they burned my skin. And even though my face was in daylight, everything went dark in my eyes except for the little white flashes that you get when you stand up too fast.

I wanted to be sick. I tried to pull away, but one side of my body was all slow and heavy and full of pins and needles. I let go of the hardboard sheet and it slapped shut like a mouse trap. Behind my head, I heard a sound like celery snapping and something shrieked into my ear, which made me go deafish for a week.

Sitting down in the grass outside, I was sick down my jumper. Mucus and bits of spaghetti hoops that looked all white and smelled real bad. I looked back at the place that I had climbed through and my bleary eyes saw an arm that was mostly bone, stuck between the wood and door-frame. I made myself roll away and then get to my knees on the grass that was flattened down.

Moving around the outside of the house, back toward the front of the building and the path that would take me down to the gate, I wondered if I'd bashed my left side. The shoulder and hip had stopped tingling but were achy and cold and stiff. I found it hard to move and wondered if that was what broken bones felt like. My skin was wet with sweat too, and I was shivery and cold. I just wanted to lie down in the long grass. Twice I stopped to be sick. Only spit came out with burping sounds.

Near the front of the house, I got down on my good side and I started to crawl, real slow, through the long grass, down the hill, making sure that the path was on my left, so that I didn't get lost in the meadow. I only took one look back at the house and will wish for ever that I never did.

One side of the front door was still open from where we went in. And I could see a crowd in the doorway, all bustling in the sunlight that fell on their raggedy clothes. They were making a hooting sound and fighting over something; a small shape that looked dark and wet. It was all limp too and between the thin, snatching hands it came apart, piece by piece.

In my room, at the end of my bed, Nana Alice has closed her eyes. But she's not sleeping. She's just sitting quietly and rubbing her doll hand like she's polishing treasure.

