

The Petticoat

The worn stairs alert the attic. 'A visitor comes'. Tentative footsteps leave tell-tale traces on dusty treads. Mrs Whimpenny died two years ago but it has been many a year since anyone set foot in the attic; ten years, twenty even.

Did Grandaunt May venture up these stairs before senility robbed her memory bank?

A thickset door looms ahead. It grips vestiges of peeling brown paint. An ungainly doorknob hangs on, despite several loose screws. The keyhole suggests security but the lock seized a lifetime ago. Arthritic hinges protest yet the door yields with gentle coaxing.

Victoria recoils at the fusty darkness and blinks until her eyes adjust to the gloom. At the far end of the long, vaulted attic, failing twilight strains through a cracked window curtained with ivy.

A sturdy Bakelite switch clunks to life a lone, bare lightbulb. Its restricted radius struggles to banish shadows to darker reaches. Cobwebbed trunks of hopes and chests packed with yellowing dreams brood in silence. Stacks of unfiled memories and hastily-packed boxes of inconsequential matters fester on naked floorboards.

Victoria feels the cold key beneath her Aran jumper. It has remained concealed since given into her safekeeping when she entered adult life, as her father succumbed to cancer.

'This key opens the unspeakable; guard it well but never use it, I beseech you,' he said. He didn't live long enough to explain what and why.

Ten years later, Victoria's Grandaunt May passed away. It took a year for her estate to settle, longer for her grandniece's nerves.

What ominous tales skulk these dark hallways? Why did my grandparents uproot the family to Canada and Dad cut ties with his aunt, given generations of Whimpennys called North Yorkshire and Moors Manor home? How did they find me?

Victoria shakes her head in a futile attempt to recalibrate jumbled thoughts. A prematurely grey strand of hair, camouflaged in chestnut brown, falls across her face.

Focus, Vicky.

Victoria tucks away the recalcitrant hair and moves into the attic. The lightbulb's feeble illumination stalks her. A long, thin shadow looms before her as her alter ego rises to her defence.

Outside, sleet tries every which way to gain access. Its icy fingernails transmit SOS messages on the manor's boarded-up windows. They rattle in defiance and withstand the onslaught. Tudor chimneys suck in the North Sea winds like a near-drowned man gulps oxygen. The sudden whoosh in the flues startles Victoria and she steps back against a walnut grandfather clock. The weights and pendulum awake from years of slumber and clang annoyance. She coughs from musty dust that rises to the occasion. And all the while the apothecary cupboard waits.

Goosebumps sidle up Victoria's arms despite the sweat on her forehead. Opposing voices settle on her shoulders and drip-feed doubt and encouragement in equal measure.

I can't do this. Yes, you can. I can't. You are strong; you can.

Victoria gags on the funk of multiple generations. It desiccates her throat and exacerbates her longing for a gin and tonic. She rubs her eyes then fiddles with a pearl earring – the price of jetlag and anxiety.

Give up. Keep going. Why disturb the unknown? It is now or never. I can't breathe. You are breathing.

The heiress lights a hurricane lamp to dispel darkness not reached by the lightbulb. Alarmed shadows rearrange themselves. The sleet intensifies and beats a warning on the slate roof; the rhythmic chant of Inuit throat-singers flits across Victoria's mind. Doubts besiege the last of the Whimpenny line.

Perhaps the cupboard is empty, after all. Let's play with the fun stuff. Look – there's an old doll's house! Or we can play dress-ups with that old petticoat.

To the left of a handsome, two-story Victorian doll's house stands a decaying dress form. Fragments of hole-ridden hessian peel from the headless, armless torso like flesh from a leper. The top is exposed but the most beautiful, delicate, white cotton petticoat hangs from the waist. Its ankle-length hides the dress form's stand and gives the impression of a body floating above the dirty floorboards. Victoria thinks the garment is riddled with holes until she realises they are part of intricately patterned, hand-made lace that adorns the petticoat's waist and hemline. It reminds her of the painting that hangs downstairs. In it, lace peeks from beneath the dress of her umpteenth-great-grandmother. It was rumoured Helena Whimpenny inspired Brontë's character Helen Graham in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. For centuries, the Whimpennys dined out on such rumours, like being descendants of Mary Queen of Scots who stayed at the manor when fleeing Scotland.

Something else about the petticoat puzzles Victoria but she can't reach the niggling itch. She approaches the floating spectre and leans forward to feel the fabric. She stops herself; her hands are filthy. There, the itch is scratched.

Good Lord! What the hell?

The petticoat could have come straight from below stairs, freshly laundered and ironed. It displays neither blemish nor the merest suggestion of age; not even a speck of dust. A draft wafts the folds of cotton. The movement breathes the illusion of life into the form. It frightens Victoria. The snatch of a displaced smell flashes a subliminal memory across her internal screen but the Northerlies bully their way through unseen gaps to disperse the prompt. She reknits her pashmina and shudders. 'Mouse run over your grave?' her mother used to ask.

Victoria turns once more towards her goal – the apothecary cupboard. She negotiates a nineteenth-century Silver Cross pram; it nurses a bundle of newspapers. *First Martyr for Votes for Women* headlines the topmost edition. A race-day photograph of a fallen horse and jockey also reveals an inert jumble of white clothes on the race track. A reader has circled the latter. Victoria squints at the photograph. The pile of clothes becomes clearer. It is a woman. Black boots on legs akimbo protrude from a white dress and revealed petticoat. *No way.* Victoria glances at the petticoat on the dress form but shakes her head. *Can't be.*

The newspapers remain undisturbed. She must get to the cupboard before her increasingly fragile bravado disintegrates. She ducks beneath an ambush of rolled-up carpets draped across a beam and is spooked by a cobweb – the last line of defence thrown up by the attic. She breaks through the abandoned threads and stops dead. The apothecary cupboard waits before her.

The cupboard is substantial. Layers of shelves disappear into the rafters. They rest atop rows of brass-handled drawers. Glass-panelled doors protect the shelves and reveal rows of jars and bottles, each with a paper or enamel label in various stages of decay. The contents belie their age. Iridescent hues of fresh mustard yellows, ultramarine blues and fiery reds spark in the lamplight.

Victoria scans the drawers and sees only one with a keyhole. She withdraws the cold key from its warm resting place and tries it in the lock. It fits. The lock concedes with surprising ease. The deep drawer opens to reveal an intricately carved wooden box.

Open it. Don't open it.

Victoria runs her fingers around the box's perimeter. They hesitate on the front corners. She taps lightly with indecision then applies pressure with her thumbs and carefully lifts the lid, fearful the contents may spring at her. She tuts a blend of relief and

disappointment. A thick leather-bound book rests on red velvet. Its ornate metal clasp brings to mind an old family Bible.

Is this it? Is this what all the fuss is about? No genies? No magic?

She draws the lamp near and brushes the gold-embossed letters with her fingers tips.

Whimpenny Women

1532-2020

2020? How can that be? The manor has been uninhabited for years.

Everything in Victoria's body, mind and soul scream at her to abandon the quest. Acid broils in her stomach and urges her to flee the attic. The same message buzzes in her eardrums like the hum of high-voltage power lines. The mouse beats on her grave. It's too late; she's come too far. Victoria lifts the book from its resting place. She feels the weight of the tome and, with some effort, flops it onto a steamer trunk. A disgruntled spider scurries from the light.

What's the worst that can happen if I open the book?

Sleet becomes snow. Winds die down. The attic quietens. Gentle undulating ripples continue to shimmy across the petticoat, even without the soft breath of a breeze. Unsure hands release the clasp on the book. Downstairs, the mid-eighteenth-century portrait falls to the floor. Victoria waits for demons to escape their incarceration or a violent fissure to rent the house asunder. Nothing happens. But the manor holds its breath for, once again, history will be redressed.

Slowly, Victoria turns the cover and opens the book. The petticoat drops silently from the lifeless torso. The last Whimpenny woman begins to read ...