

The Silent Scream

by Richard Lewis

Janice was a worrier who'd become obsessive about checking things ever since her father had left without warning two years previously. She worried about her mother who was drinking heavily, never knowing what to expect from one day to the next; whether she'd shower her in hugs and kisses or ignore her, staying in bed all day.

The nine year old was small for her age, her delicate appearance resembled a half starved sparrow. Rivers of fair hair rippled over her shoulders and her skin was as pale as polished bone.

Janice tried to concentrate at school but nothing stuck. Words jumbled in her head like clothes in a washing machine. She'd been keeping her head down, pretended to look busy but her form teacher Miss Adams wasn't fooled, and called out,

"Janice, stand up and tell the class what we've been discussing."

Reluctantly, Janice stood, her head bowed in submission.

"Well Janice?... "Janice I'm waiting."

"Don't remember Miss."

"You must remember something, why don't you pay attention?"

"Don't know miss."

"Sit down, you'll stay behind and write a hundred lines. I must pay attention in class."

Unused to so much writing, Janice's wrist ached as she traipsed home feeling sorry for herself, her leaden heels slowly hauling her up the hill she used to fly up. She became aware of a dark, threatening cloud hanging overhead as she approached the red brick semi and felt her apprehension building, wondering what mood her mother would be in. Then she asked herself, 'is the house trying to tell me something?'

She checked but everything appeared the same. The same old wooden gate with its rusty hinges that squealed out for a drop of oil. The same whispering pampas grass swaying in the breeze and the same number of strides along the path to the house. She knew there were eighteen but still had to count them. One, two, three.....

Then she counted the five steps up to the front door. Janice didn't know why she counted things but it was reassuring to know that nothing had changed.

As she reached the front door her heart started racing. She had a key, though her mother was always in when she came home from school. Janice opened the door and listened, thinking, 'the house is silent as the distant stars and yet I'm sure it's trying to tell me something.' The deafening silence was beginning to hurt her ears.

Taking in every detail of the hallway she checked for clues. Everything seemed the same, the same faded rug on the floor, the same hallstand with an array of hats and scarves, yet her racing heart knew differently.

She called out, "mum," but no answer.

Janice crept into the kitchen, being careful not to step on the joints between the tiles and called out again; still no answer, everything was in its usual place. She counted the pots on the window sill, one, two, three four.

Her heart was still pounding as she climbed the stairs, but then Janice thought, 'I know, she must be asleep.' The bedroom was cold, the curtains still drawn and an empty bottle of gin glared at her defiantly from the bedside table. The bed was unmade and clothes were strewn all over the floor.

Janice was wondering now, 'perhaps she had gone out after all.' Still she would continue the search; every area had to be checked. Having been through all the rooms in the house Janice went out to the garden. The lawn was overgrown and the few remaining flowers in the borders were fast losing the battle against battalions of strangling weeds.

Once again she called out, "Muum." Janice thought, 'well that's it, she must be out.' But then she remembered, there was one more place she'd not checked. It was strange she'd not thought of it but it had become invisible to her.

As she turned to face the garage Janice felt the lead return to her heels, somehow she didn't want to go near it and yet equally it couldn't be left out. Slowly she crept up to the neglected side door with its flaking paint.

Abruptly she froze. 'What's that noise?' she thought. She'd not heard it before but now the familiar purring sound of the old Morris played on her ears. 'Why would the car be running when the garage doors are closed?' she wondered. Slowly she forced her reluctant hand to turn the knob on the door but it was stiff to open as if the garage didn't seem to want her to enter. But then finally it gave in, swinging open and Janice was hit by a blast of pungent exhaust fumes.

Her stomach fell away as she choked and tried to call out but there was no sound, just a silent scream.