

LOST & FOUND of THE TRAVELING DEAD

The children were dead.

According to the first rule of lost souls, it was all they had to be.

To the eleven-year-old twin siblings, Charlotte, older by two minutes (and taller), and George, short-changed in minutes and height, death wasn't apparent as they continued to participate in the dream. Each thought living in 1892 Chattingwood England was a nightmare in itself with its strict rules. Even now, in sleep, there was no escaping them either.

Charlotte read the printed scarlet letters on the sign over the gated entranceway.

“Rule number two- Any deceased who enter must have a cherished object from their past to pay room and board,” she said.

Both were standing empty-handed.

“Room and board for what?” George said.

“I don't know. The gate is locked. I can't see beyond it.”

Misty fog swirled all around, inhibiting any sure way to escape.

George pointed to Rule #3, the final one.

“Wait for the ferryman!” George said, “Who's that?”

“Don't know, maybe we'll wake up before he arrives,” Charlotte said.

The children, who hours before were getting tucked into bed by their mother, were thinking about the one yearly present they'd just received on their Christmas birthday. One gift a year, a rule carved in stone by their father who thought any more would spoil them. When George was

in third grade he traded a pair of socks at school for some marbles which he kept in a small burlap bag. He also put his sister's gold ring from Baptism in there as a prank so she would think it was missing. George buried the bag deep in the dirt by the apple tree so his father wouldn't know. But Charlotte loved her clothes as any young girl would. No trading for her ever. This was a particular year because they were old enough NOT to get clothes. Charlotte wore a pearl necklace around her neck during the night. George snuggled a handmade wooden toy sailboat underneath his left arm while he slept. Both would never give up these now, not even for room and board.

“Pinch me,” Charlotte ordered George.

“You're not going to hit me if I do?” he said, thinking about being five inches shorter, which enabled his sister to pop one upon his head easily for no reason at all. She had accomplished this many times in his life and he had the bumps to prove it.

“No, just testing rule number one to see if we were really dead.”

George made a crab claw pincher with his thumb and index finger. Her fatty upper arm was a good spot for contact, but instead of making her wince, Charlotte screamed. George began to yell too. They saw both of George's fingers, his whole hand, and part of his arm push right through Charlotte's body, right out to the other side. Bloodless and painless. But scary for their age or any age for that matter.

Noise from the children was enough to wake up the dead before they realized they were the dead and wide awake. They knew nothing about being dead. This was their first time after all, and it was all too real. Both ran in opposite directions, screaming in and out of misty vapors until they met up again at the locked gate.

“What is all ye screaming and cackling about this half-moon night,” a voice asked from beyond the iron gate spindles.

An arm, holding up a lantern, lit a vision of a dark beardless stranger with teeth of gold and an eyepatch over his non-protubing eye. He stepped out of a slender boat in the surrounding moat and smiled.

“I’m the ferryman, and you are ghosts with no souls,” he said.

He noticed their hands carried just air. The ferryman rattled the gate, placing a rolled-up paper in between the bars.

“You will regain your soul when room and board are paid to me. And the journey to Heavenell complete,” he said. The ferryman turned back toward the boat, set his lantern on the bow, and picked up a large stick. Before he could push himself away, Charlotte demonstrated her bossiness only George knew beforehand.

“What if we don’t want to pay room and board?” she said.

“Limbo lost,” the ferryman said. “So take heed, you have little time to come back with what I need, by forty rounds at my speed, if not Limbo lost is where ye be. Forever.” He pushed the boat, once and drifted away.

“I don’t want to be in limbo,” George said.

“Either do I, especially forever,” Charlotte answered. “Scary biscuits.”

“Scary biscuits is right.”

“How do we get back then?” she said.

But George paid no attention to her question. His eyes were transfixed on one of the spindles with parchment wrapped around it, too high for him to reach.

“Look a scroll. It wasn’t there before, was it?”

Charlotte took it from the gate, broke the wax seal, and rolled it open to read it.

“Not more rules I hope,” said George.

“Yes, rules but good ones, Rules Of The Traveling Dead,” she said. “To go back to the land where ye came from, wish your moments past come true, say words of pleasure in heart and harmful words few.”

“That’s how we can go back to get the necklace and your boat so we don’t have to go to Limbo Lost,” George said, “How do we get back here though?”

“There’s no more. That’s all it said.”

The twins started to think just like they did to solve ordinary problems like picking apples from the next neighbor's trees or convincing their mother to make pies. But this was an extraordinary problem to solve and putting their heads together had to be interconnected between them like the first two pieces at the start of a jigsaw puzzle to find an answer.

“Wait,” George said, “If that’s how we get to go back home then if we think the same there, we should get to come back here, right?”

“That’s why there isn’t anymore writing,” Charlotte said, “It’s the same no matter where we are.”

The moment they made this discovery the writing of the passage started to move causing Charlotte to drop the paper. Mist outlined the middle of the page as the number forty-four appeared in black and clock-like dots appeared and disappeared around the number moving in a different direction. On. Off. Moved down. On. Off. Moved down again. It continued.

“It’s a clock,” George said.

“And it’s counting down the ferryman’s rounds. We don’t have much time. We got to go now.” Charlotte said. She rolled up the scroll and held on to it tight.

Both started to think of their house, where the happiness, the necklace, and the toy boat existed. No harmful words entered their mind.

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The journey took but a moment. They found themselves standing outside their bedroom door. The house was quiet. Too quiet.

“Let’s go find mother,” George said.

“We don’t have the time. Anyway, we are ghosts without souls. She wouldn’t be able to see us anyway.”

“Or touch us,” George said, thinking back when his claw hand disappeared through his sister.

“Let’s just get what we came for. We can always come back,” she said.

But when Charlotte opened the bedroom door, the room, their room, was empty. They ran to their mother’s bedroom, empty. Father’s room, the same. The whole house had nothing, no objects, no furniture, and worst of all, no people either. Strangely the twins felt the same; abandoned.

“What do we do now?” Charlotte unrolled the scroll. The number 39 appeared as the colored dots blinked around. “Are you sure this is our house?” she said.

George didn’t answer. He was thinking.

“There is only one way to find out,” he said, “Come with me.”

He took Charlotte's hand and went out the back door to the backyard apple tree which was much larger than what he remembered. He bent down next to it and started digging in the dirt with his hands.

"What are you doing? We're running out of time and have to find my necklace and your boat somewhere," she said.

"This," George said, holding up a small dirty burlap bag, "This will pay our room and board so we don't have to go to Limbo Lost."

"But it's not my necklace or your boat," Charlotte said.

"It doesn't have to be those. He won't know about them anyway because he doesn't know what we got. As long as we cherish what we give the ferryman, that's what counts. How much time do we have left?" George said.

Charlotte opened the parchment. This time the number eight was showing but the dots were moving at a faster pace.

"Just enough to get back," she said, "I hope this works."

The twins closed their eyes, standing side by side, one holding the scroll, the other, a tied burlap bag, both trying to think happy thoughts about the misty gated place with no evil words in mind.

Something went wrong. When the twins opened up their eyes, they were in the same spot. No traveling back to the gate at all.

"Let's try again, hurry," Charlotte said.

This time they concentrated on the happiness of not going to Limbo Lost. Both visualized the mist as if they were playing hide and seek in the clouds.

Their slot-like eyes squinted open. The gate was like it was earlier but no ferryman.

“We’re either just in time or we missed him for good,” George said.

Charlotte opened the scroll. A bright red number one blinked on/off in the middle of the page with the accompanied clock-like dots nowhere to be found. A noise from behind the gate got their attention. When they looked beyond, a bow of a boat appeared. The ferryman was here. The lantern light came closer and bigger as he approached. Boots jangled as he walked forth. Finally, the gold teeth smile was evident. From the one good eye, the ferryman saw a bag in George’s hand and in Charlotte’s hand, the same scroll he placed on the gate earlier. If true, only one of the twins would be paying the room and board he asked for. The other sent to Limbo Lost. The scroll was the ferryman’s cherished object he would give to the next ghost without a soul if rule #2 was disobeyed.

“What have ye here in your hand boy?” the ferryman said.

“It’s our room and board,” the twin boy said, “And my name is George.”

“So it is,” He looked at Charlotte, “And what do ye have there girl, besides my scroll which you will give back to me now,” he said.

Charlotte was so nervous she threw the rolled-up paper at the ferryman who caught it in midair one-handed.

“Nice catch,” George said.

The ferryman tipped the paper from his forehead outward.

“I like you,” he said as he looked at George. “But you,” as he peered at Charlotte, “get ready for a long trip forever since your hands are empty now.”

“Wait,” said George, “We have room and board payment for both of us. Right here in this bag.”

George opened the bag and poured out four glass cateyes.

“These are the cherished marbles I kept buried for years since my father wouldn’t let me keep them at home. Kind of like a buried treasure.”

“Give them here then,” the ferryman said.

George fussed around inside the bag first, then tied it shut. He tossed it in the air and it was caught by the ferryman’s same hand as before.

“My sister gives you gold,” George said while walking next to her.

The ferryman’s one eyebrow perked up. George opened his hand and Charlotte’s missing gold Baptism ring appeared, not missing at all but kept safe all these years.

“Give it quick,” the ferryman said. Charlotte tossed it to him and he took a bite down upon it to see if it was real. It was.

“Ye did well. But it’s not enough to get your souls back,” he said.

The twins were furious by his comment, Charlotte mostly, so she spoke out.

“Lastly, she said, “we have more, in fact, better than those objects we have given you. We have ourselves. My brother has me. And I, his sister have him.”

The ferryman, along with George, listened.

“We don’t know how or why we got here. It doesn’t matter. We have each other and cherish each other which according to rule #2, we offer ourselves. That in itself should be able to get our souls back. We were never lost, we’ve always had each other and are family...Forever.”

The gates moved a little, then creaked more, and finally unlocked. The ferryman stepped back as the gate swung open. Misty fog began to subside.

“Ye both may enter,” the ferryman said, “I will bring you up to Heavenell to return your souls and be judged by the mighty one.”

All three boarded the boat. With one great push, the ferryman brought the twins to a new place where they could be family together. The gate closed again awaiting the next traveling dead.

