

Without a Shadow

“This one looks great and pretty remote too,” **Maggie Evison** shouted excitedly from the computer room, out of the hallway and through into the adjacent sitting room where her husband Isaac was playing with their daughter. Grabbing Millie in his arms, Isaac made his way to see what his wife was getting worked up about.

As he entered the room, Maggie turned the computer monitor to a more favourable angle and said, “There, what do you think of that?”

Peering over his wife’s shoulder, Isaac raised an eyebrow and shook his head a little but decided not to burst his wife’s bubble of enthusiasm.

“Looks ok I guess. When you said remote, you meant with a capital r! I know you mentioned it a while ago but seems you were serious,” Isaac said, pulling up a chair to the computer and bouncing Millie on his knee. “We’ll have to ask your mother to look after this one.”

“She won’t mind and besides, she owes us one for cat sitting on about a hundred occasions,” Maggie replied. “You need a getaway from it all if only for a couple of days.”

And so it was decided. Maggie made an online reservation for the following weekend at ‘The Old Rectory’. It would be a journey of 2 hours or so, traffic permitting. She would ring her mother later to arrange the babysitting.

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It was Maggie who organized everything. Her husband had only recently come home after time in the ‘Meadow View’ private clinic, recuperating from depression. His mother had passed away the month before. That and his workaholic tendencies had combined to bring him to the edge and step off. He was keen to return to work now but his wife could see that he still needed rest and persuaded his employers to give him another week paid leave. Peace and quiet at the coast would be the perfect tonic she assured him.

After dropping Millie off at her mother’s, early evening on the Friday, the Evisons set off on the drive over to the holiday cottage. They managed to avoid the worst of the motorway traffic and soon hit the quiet and winding b-roads towards their coastal destination. The key to the cottage should be waiting for them, cunningly placed in a pre-arranged location.

The white washed flint cottage had been recently refurbished for holiday letting after being left for a number of years to rot away in its stunning but extremely secluded surrounds. Maggie and Isaac were its first inhabitants for over thirty years.

‘The Old Rectory’ was perched on a rocky ledge, behind it a sheer, rugged cliff face which overlooked a remote bay bordered with a sandy beach. At one o’clock am, just as the Evisons drove up the winding access road, all these geographical features were shrouded by the pitch black and deathly silence which enveloped their isolated weekend refuge.

“I’ll unpack the bags and supplies while you find the door key,” Isaac advised his exhausted wife.

They had originally agreed to share the driving but Maggie had ended up at the wheel for the whole trip. The key was where it had been promised and the tired couple just had about enough energy to stumble through the front door, find the bedroom and crash out for a good night’s sleep.

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It was gone 11 the next morning before Isaac stirred to find his wife already out of bed and the sound of sizzling coming from downstairs.

“I don’t know how you do it,” Isaac said, pulling out a chair at the kitchen table and pouring them both a glass of orange juice.

“Do what?” Maggie replied.

“Recover so quickly,” Isaac qualified.

“We’re on holiday, without Millie in a fantastic location. I’m ready to explore and make the most of our time here,” Maggie said excitedly. “I don’t mind if you lie in or take a nap whenever you like.”

After a hearty if late cooked breakfast, they decided to head out on their first exploratory trip. Stepping out of the front door, they both let out audible gasps at the sight that beheld them – clear blue sky, bright sunshine shimmering off the calm waters of the bay which lay about thirty feet below them. Not another living sole was in sight as they made their way down the crudely cut stone walkway onto the beach and up to the water’s edge.

“My God, this is an amazing spot,” Isaac said.

“I guess we got lucky with the cottage only being finished so late in the holiday season. What a privilege to be the first ones to rent it,” Maggie replied.

Isaac turned to face the cottage with the solid wall of rock rising up behind it. Just as he did so, he thought he saw a figure peering into their car and then walking in front of the bay window to the left of the front door. He blinked and there was nothing.

“Hmm, must have been a trick of the light. I thought I saw someone up at the cottage.”

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“Isaac, there is absolutely no one around. We have got the place to ourselves. Come on, let’s walk down the beach,” Maggie reassured, taking him by the hand.

The full stretch of beach out and back took them three hours at a leisurely ‘holiday frame of mind’ pace. Returning to the cottage for a late and light lunch, Isaac was perusing the collection of books nestled in a small alcove that was in the sitting room. A rather curious mixture of clearly aged publications on a diverse range of topics, Isaac thought. Some literary classics from a bygone age, interspersed with heavy historical tomes and a few locally-orientated books which immediately grabbed his interest.

As Maggie entered the room and handed him a plate with a cheese salad sandwich, Isaac plucked a tatty-spined book dated 1907 from the top shelf of three and declared, “That’s my reading for the afternoon – a collection of ghost stories from the area. Wonder if there is anything from this spot? Do you mind a quiet, contemplative afternoon indoors?”

“You’re welcome to but I want to get to the cliff top and take some pictures across the bay. It might be raining tomorrow, so I’ll leave you and your book to make acquaintance,” Maggie replied. “If you can manage it, the breakfast things need washing and the vegetables preparing for dinner tonight. Can I leave you with that?”

“Sure, I’ll get everything ready,” Isaac said unconvincingly as he placed his plate on a small glass table, slumped into a deep, leather armchair and opened his reading material.

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The book was interesting but Isaac soon drifted off. At the same time, Maggie made slow progress on the steep, stone-staired pathway which connected the bay to the cliff top. She kept herself fit with weekly squash games and yoga classes but this ascent was threatening to be more taxing than she had initially thought. After thirty minutes, she decided to take a break and sat

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down for a drink. Taking a pair of binoculars from her shoulder bag, she gazed out over the bay. A dark shape passed rapidly over the sand within the field of vision of the binoculars. It made her jump – it couldn't have been a shadow she thought. There were some local gulls but the shape was not avian.

After taking a few photos, she restarted her journey which took another hour to the top of the cliff. The vista from there was no disappointment. She sat as close to the edge as she dare and let the view wash over her. Glancing at her watch, it was gone five o'clock – she had lost track of time. Already, the sun was disappearing out of sight under the horizon and the clouds were beginning to gather. Her shadow stretched out to the edge of the cliff and over. Feeling a breeze picking up, she put on her coat, pulled up the collar and gathered her things.

As she bent down to tie up an errant bootlace, she heard a voice close behind her.

“Why don't you turn around and look at me?” the gruff and cold voice commanded.

Maggie spun round – there was no one else on the flat cliff top. A chill ran down her spine. Was it her imagination? There had been no shadow cast other than her own and yet the voice had seemed very real. She took a couple of gulps of the stiff breeze which had blown up and began the descent back to the cottage. She was determined not to stop. The incident at the top had unsettled her and the light was fading quickly.

Halfway down, making steady progress, again the voice came from over her shoulder with the same request as before, “Why don't you turn around and look at me?”

Maggie let out a cry of anguish but couldn't resist glancing backwards. As before, there was no one behind her. In the gathering gloom, Maggie was now shaking and scared. From below came Isaac's welcome voice, “Maggie, I was getting worried with it getting dark. Are you ok?”

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Not receiving a reply, Isaac walked up to meet her. His wife was visibly shaken and hesitant to make further progress.

“My God, what’s happened? You look like you’ve seen the proverbial ghost.”

In a quivering and anxious voice, Maggie told him what had happened. “Please get me back to the cottage,” she pleaded. The rain began to lash down as they returned.

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Isaac had forgotten to do the washing up and vegetable chopping. Placing a glass of brandy from a dusty bottle that he’d found in a kitchen cupboard into Maggie’s shaking hand, he began to attend to these duties.

“Get the brandy down. It will help settle your nerves,” he comfortingly advised.

“I don’t think I can spend another night here,” Maggie replied, finishing the drink in one go.

“Oh come on Maggie. I can see you’ve had a scare from something but let’s be rational. It’s already pitch black and I don’t fancy trying to get back onto a main road in these wet conditions at night. I’ll cook dinner and we’ll light the fire and curl up in front of it. Trust me, you’ll be feeling better then.”

Isaac had managed to convince Maggie not to prematurely end their weekend break. They would return as planned the following afternoon. Isaac still had the cliff top to explore for himself.

Maggie was in a better frame of mind as they went to bed just before midnight. Isaac had brought up the local ghost story book which he had started earlier on. After ten minutes or so, Isaac glanced across and saw that Maggie was asleep. He turned back to the book and flicked a page. His eyes widened and his mouth dropped. There in this old and tatty book was an account

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of a 'spectre' that had been seen in and around the very bay and cliff top that lay outside the cottage. The apparition was thought to be that of an 19th century smuggler who had been shot dead on the cliff top after recovering ill-gotten gains from a shipwreck down on the rocks of the bay. Isaac finished the page, put the book on the bedside table and lay back. Maybe it would be better not to tell Maggie of what he had just read.

The next morning, it was Isaac who was first to rise and prepare the breakfast. As he was frying eggs, Maggie came into the kitchen with a large yawn.

"It looks a bit cold and grim out there today. What a change from yesterday," she said.

"I guess we should be grateful that we had one decent day," Isaac replied, sliding egg and bacon from the pan onto a plate in front of his wife.

"Looks like you slept well. I'm planning to go up to the cliff top after breakfast. After your experience yesterday, maybe you should stick to the beach or stay indoors and finish the brandy off," he said joining her at the table.

"Isaac, I know you don't believe what I said I heard but I really don't want you to go up there."

"Come on now. We have to start packing after lunch ready to leave by three. I'll be up and back within a couple of hours. It's too good a view to miss," he tried to reassure her. He failed but she could see that he was determined to make the ascent for himself.

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With Isaac making his way up the cliff path, Maggie tried to focus her mind by cleaning, washing up and starting to pack bags into the car. After an hour or so she began to feel tired and so went to the sitting room to relax for a bit. She noticed the book on the coffee table that Isaac had made a point of bringing to her attention the day before. Picking it up, she noticed one of the

pages had been folded over at the corner. This was an irritating habit that her husband had always had. For some reason he couldn't work with book marks. Curious, she opened the book at the page and began to read.

“My God,” she shouted as she took in the text referring to the spectre that was rumoured to inhabit the bay-cliff area.

Throwing the book back onto the table, she grabbed her coat and put her boots on. She hurried out of the cottage and made her way to the foot of the cliff pathway. She felt an overpowering urge to reach Isaac before he got to the cliff top.

As she began to climb the worn and overgrown stone stairway, the wind picked up and the rain began to come down harder.

Isaac had made steady progress while the weather had not been too bad but now just as he reached the top of the climb, things had taken a distinct turn for the worse. With the rain lashing into his face, he bent his back into the strong headwind and proceeded to the cliff edge. He'd come this far he reasoned, he wasn't going to turn straight back without looking across the bay from this privileged vantage point.

Unfortunately, a thick mist had by now descended across the bay making the view from the cliff top a disappointingly obscured one. Just as Isaac was about to turn around and head back, he heard a deep voice over his shoulder, “Why don't you turn around and look at me Isaac?”

He span round. About five feet from him was Maggie. Her head was bowed and her eyes shut. She raised her head and opened her eyes. Isaac froze in horror – her eyes were jet black and lifeless like a shark's. She began to approach him with her right arm extended. Isaac tried to get away but was rooted to the spot.

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“Maggie, what are you doing up here?” he asked in a trembling tone.

“Revenge Isaac, revenge,” came the cold and guttural response.

Isaac tried to fight her off but she was possessed by an unfamiliar strength and in the rain and cold, his limbs were numb.

“You have taken what’s mine,” the chilling voice emanated from his wife’s mouth.

With that rebuke delivered, his possessed wife thrust her arm towards Isaac. Isaac summoned up the strength to resist and wrestle for his life but slowly his foe gained the upper hand, grabbed him around the waist and threw them both over the cliff.

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Six months after the bodies had been recovered and an investigation drew a conclusion of ‘probable suicide’, the Old Rectory was advertised again for summer letting.

On a beautiful sunny July morning, a car wended its way up the access road to the cottage. As the family began to empty the car and explore the cottage, unbeknown to them, their every action was being followed with interest from the cliff top. A further chapter was to be added to the dusty and tattered book with the folded page which had been left all this time on the table within.

THE END