

## Roisin and the Ghost that Drew Blood

*Perhaps other souls than human are sometimes born into the world, and clothed in flesh.* — J Sheridan Le Fanu, *Uncle Silas*

The room was cold . . . so very, very cold. Michael and Roisin lay side by side in the narrow divan bed. Roisin was curled up in the foetal position; Michael was sprawled on his back; both were fast asleep. They were young and newly-met and in love.

All was quiet in the bedroom of the house in William Street in the city of Limerick on that winter's night. All quiet, save for the ticking clock beside the bed and the rain that had been falling steadily through the thick February darkness.

Outside nothing stirred. The row of terraced houses and shops, curtained and locked against the night, looked as drab and neutral as any row of old buildings in any Irish town centre. However, behind the door of one of those houses something deadly was about to be enacted.

Roisin stirred restlessly and her eyes snapped open – suddenly, abruptly and seemingly without due cause. They locked on the illuminated hands of the clock. She saw that it was 5.10. A terrible dread gripped her. Something horrifying was about to happen. She could sense it. She could feel it. *Get out of the room*, something urged. *Get out of the room!*

She tried to move. But her body wouldn't obey. It couldn't obey. She was paralyzed from head to toe as if trapped in a block of ice.

Fully alert now, she was conscious of Michael slumbering beside her. Could see the pre-dawn light stain the window, hear the ticking clock and relentless rain and the pounding of her own heart. But something "other" was in the room with her; an invisible other. Roisin sensed that the worst was yet to come.

When it did come, only seconds later, it was terrible in its suddenness. She gasped. Brute hands were clasping the sides of her head, pressing, as though intent on crushing her skull. The pain was excruciating. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't speak. She couldn't move.

I'm dying, she thought. Oh, my God, this is what dying must feel like!

The invisible fingers began tightening even more. Her skull was about to crack open. She was screaming but no sound came. The hands were now about her throat,

gripping and squeezing the very life out of her.

She prayed for death to come quickly. She let her eyelids close in defeat—

*Keep your eyes open*, a voice in her head was commanding her. *It's the only way you'll survive. Keep your eyes open!*

The urge to die was strong, but the urge to live must prevail.

God, help me! she silently begged.

All at once the window and the clock-face fell away from view as if a blind had been snapped down. She was in darkness. Her eyes were shut tight. With a fierce act of will she tried to open them. But each attempt sent burning pains shooting through her body, from head to toe. She was under attack. She was fighting for her very life.

*Open your eyes! Open your eyes!*

God help me, she implored again. God, help me!

Then abruptly the weight on her eyelids began to ease; little by little, bit by bit, and the darkness was giving way to a blur of clock-face and a lustre of window.

Something miraculous was happening.

A glorious lightness was beginning to creep up from her throat. The pressure on her head was beginning to ease. Ever so slightly, yes, but it was there: a tingling sensation. Gentle, reassuring.

Her eyes were fully open now and she tried to stir. But no, movement was not yet possible. Her entire body was still locked fast, as before, in the foetal position.

I'm being held like this for a reason, she told herself. Something's going to happen. I can *feel* it.

She waited.

The pain in her head had abated. The clock was ticking and the rain was murmuring and Michael was sleeping beside her.

And she waited. Waited to bear witness – that was how she thought of it now; a part of her was insisting that she look, listen, and remember.

Then they came.

There were two of them, human-shaped, one behind the other. Roisin saw a white figure pursued by a towering, dark form. They passed in front of the window. The white figure appeared to be trying to escape. The dark shape surged behind it, menacing in its great bulk, its evil filling the room like toxic gas.

Roisin prayed the dark entity would not come near her. She *knew*, she just *knew* that if it did, she'd die.

But mercifully, within moments both apparitions had vanished, passing into the wall. With their passing she found her limbs loosening.

She was released.

The clock read 5.30. She reached out a trembling hand to switch on the bedside lamp and turn to the still-slumbering Michael.

Roisin McCabe will never forget that dreadful night. Now, all of seven years later, the twenty-eight-year old still shudders at the mere recollection of it.

“That was just the beginning of it,” she tells me. “I was tormented for months after that.”

Tormented, or indeed, *haunted*. For that’s what Roisin suffered in the aftermath. That February night in Limerick pushed open a door into a dark and frightening world. The ensuing nightmare would finally end much, much later, a thousand miles away in a church in the southeast of Spain.

But let us return to William Street and the night in question.

Michael sat up. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

“What is it? It’s not time to get up already, is it?”

“No, I . . . I just . . . I think . . .” Roisin struggled to explain what had occurred, “I just had a . . . nightmare I—”

“Jesus!” Even in the light from the bedside lamp he could see something was very wrong. “What happened to you?” He scrambled out of bed and switched on the main light.

The light revealed it had been no nightmare. Roisin saw that there were red smudges on the bodice of her nightdress; even as she looked, little spots of blood continued to seep through the material.

Her upper arms and chest were covered in scratch marks. It looked as though she’d been thrust into a hedge full of briars.

“God, we better get you to the doctor!” Michael said. “Did you do that in your sleep?”

Roisin had great difficulty in describing what had just happened, but she did her best, hoping that Michael would not think her crazy.

“Nah, that was a nightmare,” he said, trying to reassure her. “Sometimes dreams can seem very real.”

“That may be, but it doesn’t explain how I got all these scratches, does it?”

“You must have . . . you must’ve been itching in your sleep and scratched yourself.”

Roisin splayed her still-trembling hands. “Look at my nails. I chew them, remember? How could I scratch myself? No, Michael, it wasn’t a dream. It was real. And no, I’m not going to the doctor. If you don’t believe me, what’s a doctor going to think? He’ll have me committed.”

She began to cry. “God, it was awful! You can’t imagine how awful it was. I thought I was going to die.”

“Look, all right, I *do* believe you,” Michael lied, putting a comforting arm about her. “Tell you what: we’ll get you fixed up, then go out and get a nice breakfast at Doolan’s. How’s that?”

Later that morning, after a walk in the fresh air and several cups of strong coffee, Roisin began to feel slightly better. She knew what she’d experienced was very real. It was definitely not a dream. Nor was she losing her mind. The scratches proved that – as did the clock. Throughout the ordeal she’d been fully conscious of the time.

She tried to hide her fears from her boyfriend. They’d only been going out for a few months and she didn’t want to jeopardize the relationship. There was only one person she could confide in: her mother, who lived just a few streets away. She’d call her after Michael had gone to work.

As it turned out, she didn’t need to ring her mother, because at around 10 a.m. Roisin’s mother rang *her*.

“God, are you okay, Roisin, love?”

“Oh, Mum . . . yes, well . . . yes, I’m fine, I—”

“Thank God for that. You didn’t hear the news, then? I was worried sick. A young woman was murdered in your street last night. It put the heart across me ’cause I thought it was you.”

Roisin was shocked beyond words.

When she visited her mother and showed her the scratches she was really taken aback at her reaction.

“You know the last time I saw you like that was when you were a baby.”

“What? How d’you mean?”

“Yes, you woke us up one night, screaming your little head off. And when I lifted you out of the cot you were covered in scratches, just like that. Your father, God rest him, thought a rat had got into your cot when he saw the state of you. We lived in an old damp house then, so it was possible, I suppose. But when I took you to the doctor he said that was very unlikely. Then when I heard that old Mrs Toner had died in the night I put two and two together.”

“Mum, you’re scaring me and you’re not making any sense. What are you saying?”

“Your grandmother had ‘the gift’, you see – or second sight, if you like. She knew when bad things were going to happen, and they say it skips a generation. She could hear the banshee, and when you got to about seven you started hearing it too.”

“What? My God, Mum!” Roisin burst into tears. “I can’t believe what I’m hearing.”

“Look, love, that’s why I never mentioned it, because I knew it would upset you.”

“Well, tell me *now*. I have a right to know.”

Mrs McCabe sighed, choosing her words carefully. “It’s in the past and it was a long time ago. But if you must know, one night you came into your dad and me in the middle of the night because you couldn’t sleep. There was a lady crying beside your bed, you said, and when you asked her why she was crying she told you that young Stephen Neary was going to die. Well, later that day little Stephen *did* die. But your father and me never mentioned it to a soul. The child had leukemia, so it was expected. But I knew you had the second sight for sure after that happened.”

“But why didn’t you tell me about these things before, Mum?”

“I didn’t want to worry you, sweetheart. I worried enough for the both of us. And besides, what good would it have done? There are some things we’re not meant to understand. Just pray for the soul of that poor young girl. You were there to ‘help her over’ by taking on some of the awful pain she must have suffered at the end. So don’t look on it as a bad thing.”

“It’s one hell of a scary thing, Mum, and I don’t want any part of it. God, I don’t want to come through anything like that ever again. Why in God’s name has it started up again?”

“You just happened to be near where a bad thing happened. You’re more sensitive than other people. You sense when bad things are going to happen, so you know

maybe it's best if you move out of that house. You can stay here until you get sorted out."

"Oh, don't worry. I wouldn't stay in that place another night."

Roisin waited until Michael returned from work before going back to the house. Since they shared the house with three others, moving out was easy enough; just the clothes from the wardrobe and chest of drawers, some photos from the bedside locker and several personal belongings. And the clock.

Somehow she couldn't bring herself to touch it. How could she look at it ever again without being tormented by the memory? The bedding was hers as well, but again, she couldn't go near the bed. Michael bundled the sheets and duvet cover into a bin bag in preparation for the skip.

They shut the door on the bedroom, Roisin praying silently that the next tenant would have a less traumatic time of it.

Finding another place proved simple enough. There were lots of rentals available in the town due to the high influx of foreign nationals. They viewed three places before settling on a small semi-detached house on the outskirts of town.

"I didn't want to live in a terraced row again," Roisin tells me. "The murder happened just two doors down and I kept thinking maybe if I hadn't been so near it I wouldn't have come through all that. You never know who you're close to in a terrace. Ideally I wanted to live in a detached house, but that was way out of our budget. We were saving up for our own place anyway. Our new place seemed a good bet. There was an elderly lady living next door who seemed very decent and we had a little garden."

The couple were very happy with the move and after a week had completely settled in. Roisin's slumbers, however, continued to be disrupted. She had no trouble falling asleep after a hard day at the office, but seemed always to wake up too early in the morning – around the dreaded hour of five – then could not get back to sleep again.

"This is hard to describe," she says, "but since that night there seemed to be a dark cloud hanging over me. I thought it would disappear with the move, but it didn't. There was an oppressiveness in the air, no matter where I was – at home, at work, even when I was out enjoying myself with Michael or my mates. It was as if

something was following me. Then odd things started to happen. Little things to start with.”

The “little things” she refers to were easily enough discounted at first. Her photographs would be rearranged on the mantelpiece. Maybe Michael had done it, she reasoned each time, yet when she put it to him he denied it. An ornament would go missing and turn up again out of the blue. One morning she found the contents of the fridge lined up neatly on the kitchen table as though awaiting an inspection.

“Michael, I think there’s something in this house. And I know you’ve noticed it too and you’re pretending you haven’t, just to spare me.”

They were having breakfast. Roisin was exhausted as usual after another unsettled night.

“Look, you’re not sleeping well and that can play tricks with your mind,” he said. “Take the photographs for instance. You might have rearranged them and not even been aware of it. Same with the fridge. You could have come down here last night for a drink and forgot to put the stuff back. You told me once that you were a sleepwalker when you were younger.”

“That was ages ago. I *wasn’t* sleepwalking. I know I wasn’t. I hardly get any sleep for a start, let alone have time to rearrange pictures and clean out the fridge. You think I’m going loopy, don’t you?”

“No, love. I don’t think you’re going loopy. But what I do know is that you need your sleep. Now take the day off and I’ll call in with your boss on the way. Didn’t you say you’re always pretty slack at this time of the month?”

Roisin knew that protesting was futile, so she agreed, to keep the peace.

Michael left soon after and she climbed the stairs to the bedroom. It was the first time she’d been alone in the house and she felt a little uneasy.

She crossed to the window and opened the curtains. The rain was clearing, by the look of things, but it was going to be another grey day. Her new neighbour, Mrs Coyle, was putting bread out for the birds and she waved to her. It was good to have someone close by. Thus reassured, she drew the curtains again, and climbed beneath the bed covers.

She drifted into a light sleep, the sounds of traffic out on the main road fading away and taking her anxieties with them. A faint rumble from downstairs gave her a start, but it was only the fridge having one of its fits. She turned over and waited for sleep

to come again.

Then there came a sound that could not be discounted. Roisin sat up immediately. She'd heard one of the downstairs doors creak open.

"Michael, is that you?"

He had his own key. Maybe he'd forgotten something. She got up and went out to the landing. She always closed doors. It was a habit from childhood. To keep the heat in, as her mother would say.

"Michael, are you there?"

Down the hallway the door to the living-room stood open. Even as she called out to him, she knew it couldn't be him – or anybody else. She'd put the chain on the front door after Michael left, and she saw that the chain was still in place. This fact alarmed her further.

There was someone, or something, in the front room.

She dashed back into the bedroom and slammed the door. What to do?

She'd ring her mother and ask her to come over. But her handbag was downstairs and her mobile was in it.

The doorbell rang. Thank God, she thought: maybe it's the postman! Her fear turned to hope and she rushed downstairs, making sure not to look through the open door of the living-room.

Old Mrs Coyle stood on the doorstep holding a plate covered in tinfoil.

"I was just baking some scones and thought you'd like some."

"How very kind! Won't you come in a for a cup of tea?"

She prayed Mrs Coyle wouldn't refuse. She really needed to face whatever was waiting for her in the front room and was not going to do it alone.

"Well, y'know I was just—"

"Please, it's no trouble and I could do with the company."

"All right, just a small cup then, dear."

"We'll sit in here," she said leading her through. "It's nicer."

There was no one in the room. There was nothing out of place as far as she could see. All seemed normal. All, that is, apart from the coldness. It was practically freezing.

Mrs Coyle hugged herself. "Oh, it's very cold in here. You need the heating on in this weather, dear."

"That's odd," Roisin said. The heating had come on an hour earlier and was not



due to switch itself off for another hour. She crossed to the radiator. It was on full. “Oh, I forgot to turn this one on,” she lied, trying to keep the fear out of her voice. “Let’s have our tea in the kitchen.”

After Mrs Coyle departed, Roisin left the house and spent the rest of the day at her mother’s.

She returned home a half-hour before Michael. Her mother had set her mind at rest, and being out of the house helped her to put things into perspective. Imagination can play tricks when one is stressed and she’d been very stressed over the past few weeks. Her mother had also given her a novena to say.

Back at the house, she went into the front room again and all seemed normal again. The chill had gone. She recited the prayer aloud and placed the leaflet on a small table beside the fireplace. She intended to recite it every day, and felt good that she was being proactive as opposed to feeling helpless.

“Nothing unseen can hurt you,” her mum had said and Roisin knew she was right. Her biggest enemy at present was her own fear. With that in mind, she decided not to tell Michael about the door or the chilliness of the room.

She returned to work the following day and was glad of the distraction.

A week passed and nothing untoward happened. She said the novena faithfully every night and believed it was working. Little things continued to niggle her, however. Her keys or handbag might disappear and then show up again in the most unlikely places – in the airing cupboard or on top of the wardrobe. The doors she always closed before leaving the house would sometimes be open on her return. She tried to ignore these things by calling to mind her mum’s wise mantra, and saying it aloud whenever she felt afraid. *Nothing unseen can hurt me.*

Then one evening something happened which simply couldn’t be ignored or ascribed to an overactive imagination.

She had arrived home to an empty house. Michael’s business hours didn’t always tally with hers. Relieved, she noted that all the doors downstairs were shut, just as she’d left them that morning.

She went though to the kitchen and put the kettle on. As she waited for it to boil she stood gazing out of the back window. It was a crisp March day and a sharp breeze was playing havoc with several lines of washing. Rain began spattering the

windowpanes and she saw Mrs Coyle hurry out to rescue her own washing. Roisin rushed out to help her.

“Wait, Mrs Coyle! I’ll give you a hand.”

The old lady turned from the clothes with a look of surprise. “Goodness me, dear! I thought you were laid up in bed.”

Roisin frowned. “No, why would you think that?” She unpegged a couple of items and handed them to her. “I’ve just got in from work.”

“That’s odd, I thought I heard you going up and down the stairs and at lunchtime when I was putting the washing out, I saw you at the bedroom window in your nightdress. Well, at least I *thought* it was you. I waved but you just turned away. I knocked on the door, thinking you might need something, but you didn’t answer.”

A fret of fear gripped Roisin. What was the woman talking about?

“Must have been my ghost,” she joked, but she could see that Mrs Coyle was serious.

“That’s odd. I could have sworn it was you. Oh, well, I’d better be going. Got the bingo at seven.”

“Right you be then. Hope you win.”

Roisin returned indoors and sat down at the kitchen table. The electric kettle had switched itself off, but she no longer felt like having tea. What was Mrs Coyle talking about? How could she have seen her at the window? She’d been out all day. And how could she have heard somebody on the stairs? It was ludicrous.

As she sat contemplating the absurdity of it all she became aware of a strange smell. A smell of burning. She checked the cooker – needlessly, because she knew she hadn’t turned it on. But the smell wasn’t in the kitchen. It was in the hallway, and she followed it down the corridor. It grew stronger as she neared the living-room door.

What on earth was she going to find in there? But this was no time to waver. The house could be burning down.

She flung the door wide.

There was no fire, however. The room was just as it should have been, but the odour was overpowering. As if someone had been burning paper. Roisin had never lit the open fire; nor had the previous tenant; a pot of dried flowers sat in the grate. So where, she asked herself, was the smell of burning coming from?

She ventured in.

There was something on the little table to the right of the fireplace. She moved gingerly towards it.

She cried out in horror. The novena to the Divine Mercy, the one her mother had given her and which she'd been reciting faithfully night upon night, lay burnt to a crisp beside the reading lamp.

She backed out of the room and slammed the door.

“You have to get Father Ryan to bless the house. I'll give him a ring. That's the best thing.”

Roisin was at her mother's again, having fled the house. She'd rung Michael at work and was waiting for him.

“No way am I going to be there on my own again, Mum.”

“Look, after the blessing everything will be as right as rain. Father Ryan is very powerful with that kind of thing. You don't know what happened in that house in the past, so it's best to be on the safe side.”

But Roisin knew in her heart that the house had nothing to do with it. Ever since the night of the murder her life had not been the same. No, she decided, the house was neutral; she – and she alone – was being targeted. It was as if some mysterious force was pursuing *her*.

Father Ryan came the following evening. He was a stern man not given to small talk. Equipped with a prayer book and a bottle of holy water, he went from room to room, reciting prayers and making the sign of the cross. Roisin, her mother and Michael followed in his wake.

He left the blessing of the front room until last. Upon entering, he crossed to the small table where the remains of the burned prayer leaflet still lay. He prayed over it. Then, turning to the couple and blessing them both with holy water, he said the final prayer.

“Oh, Lord Jesus Christ,” he intoned, “keep Roisin and Michael safe. Protect them from all harm and guide them by the light of your love, in the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.”

And that seemed to be that. He removed his stole.

“Well,” he said, throwing a glance at the burned prayer. “You can do away with that ash now.”

“Yes, Father,” said Mrs McCabe. “We just thought it better to leave it there so you could see for your—”

“Yes, that was the thing to do, Mrs McCabe.”

“I’ll get the dustpan, so,” she said, scurrying out.

Roisin always found herself to be both amazed and peeved at how docile her mother could become when within praying distance of a priest. She herself had given up on the Church a long time before, having had a surfeit of it during her schooldays.

“Father,” she said, “d’you think things’ll be all right now?”

“Well, that depends on yourself and . . .” – he turned his head – “your young man.”

“Michael,” said Michael.

The couple exchanged glances. Roisin’s ire was rising. “On *us*? How on earth—”

“I think, Father, what Roisin means to say,” Michael cut in, not wanting a tense situation to get worse, “is that we haven’t done anything wrong. Roisin didn’t invite all these ghostly things to visit her. She’s not responsible.”

“Even so. Are ye not living under the one roof now?”

“Yes, we are!” Roisin’s anger had made her forthright. “And what’s that got to do with anything?”

“Well, now, it’s better to be married than living in sin. That’s all I’m going to say and—”

Father Ryan didn’t get to answer, because at that moment Mrs McCabe appeared, armed with the dustpan and shovel.

“I’ll be off now,” he said. “Keep up the prayers. That’s all we can do.”

Mrs McCabe dropped the dustpan in a fluster. “Oh, I’ll see you out, Father. It was very good of you to come at such short notice.” She took her purse from her handbag and followed him out to the doorstep.

Roisin wanted to scream but just about managed to remain calm until her mother, too, had departed a few minutes later.

“Typical!” she spat, venting her frustration on Michael. “Have these priests nothing better to do but interfere in people’s private lives? Just because they’re not allowed to marry means we *all* have to feel guilty.” She stormed about the kitchen, preparing supper and rattling the pots and pans. Michael listened quietly, knowing she had good cause to be upset.

“Look,” he said, “I’m just as angry as you. But you know, maybe he’s done some

good here, so let's just wait and see."

Roisin relented. "Yes, I know," she sighed. "I'm sorry."

That same night she went to bed and slept soundly till morning. The next night was the same. Father Ryan's blessing was working. She regretted having ridiculed him. Four weeks went by without any further ghostly manifestations or audible bumps in the night. Roisin's life had returned to normal.

Or so she thought.

One night towards the beginning of April she woke with a great sense of unease. She was sure she'd heard something out on the landing.

She switched on the bedside light. The clock read 4.30. Michael was fast asleep beside her. She always envied his ability to fall into a deep slumber as soon as his head hit the pillow. A slumber that could only be broken by the alarm going off at seven.

She lay very still and held her breath.

She was convinced she'd hear it again. But there was nothing. The house was quiet but for its usual murmurings: water dripping through pipes, the wind at the windowpane, the hum of electrical appliances below in the kitchen.

Satisfied that she'd merely imagined the sound, she got out of bed to use the bathroom.

Before switching on the landing light, however, she noticed a seam of light coming from under the door to the spare room. Odd. Michael was obsessive about pulling out plugs and turning off all lights last thing at night. It was one of his better household habits. She decided he must have overlooked it.

She pushed open the door and shivered. It was cold, but that was understandable: the heating was rarely turned on in the spare room; it was little more than a storage room. There were several cardboard boxes set along one wall. They contained bric-à-brac that she hadn't got round to unpacking.

One of the boxes was open. Strange, Roisin thought. They'd all been taped shut. Not unless Michael had been looking for something. She crossed over and got down on her knees to close it. But as she was getting up again she caught sight of herself in a wall mirror.

She tensed, senses alert.

She was not alone in the room; she knew that with a near-certainty. There was

something “other” with her. She could feel it: a presence. A presence two or three feet behind her.

She tried to move but her body was so stricken with fear that she slumped back onto her knees again. She stared with horror at her image in the mirror. Her face was contorted in terror, her mouth open in a scream, but no sound emerged from her throat.

She tried to shut her eyes against her reflection, but couldn't. She was being held prisoner, yet again.

Slowly, behind her, a shape began to rise. A dark, murky shape as of roiling dense black smoke. It was swirling and swelling, rising higher and higher. Within seconds it was towering above her and had resolved itself into a form. The form of a huge man. It was the dark figure she'd seen in her bedroom the night of the murder. The figure she'd prayed would not come near her was right behind her.

Every nerve and sinew in her body was wrung tight. She was paralyzed. She couldn't move. She couldn't breathe. But she could *smell*.

The odour was overwhelming. She thought of the charred prayer. But this was not the smell of burning paper. It was worse than that. It was a most unpleasant, acrid stench mixed in with something like hearth smoke.

The last thing Roisin remembers was the image of herself disappearing in the mirror as she passed out.

Next she knew, Michael was standing over her, shaking her awake.

It was seven o'clock and the alarm had just gone off.

She'd been lying unconscious on the floor of the spare room for the best part of two hours.

“I couldn't stay in the house after that night,” Roisin tells me. “I was always on edge and even more so when details of the murder in William Street started to come out. The poor girl was a foreign national. She was around my age and she'd been strangled. I was devastated.”

She fingers a little pendant on a chain around her neck and smiles. “Then I was given this,” she says. “The Caravaca Cross. It gives me protection and drove all that stuff out, but I had to go a long way to get it.”

Roisin was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. But she resisted the urge to see a

doctor. How could a doctor help her? Michael, driven to distraction himself, came up with a suggestion. A holiday, he reasoned, would do them both good.

“We’ll go to Spain,” he said. “We can stay with my Aunt Liz in Alicante. She has a big house there. She and my uncle bought it as a retirement home but he died last year. She’ll be glad of the company. We can get a cheap flight so it’ll cost next to nothing.”

“If you think it’s okay. . . .” she said. “As long as we’re not imposing.”

He laughed. “We won’t be.”

Aunt Liz picked them up at the airport. She was delighted to see her nephew and quickly made friends with Roisin. The three spent a lively weekend in the holiday town. Roisin almost forgot her ordeal. At least, she thought she had, until Liz took her to one side on the third day.

“There’s something the matter, isn’t there?” she said. “I can tell.”

Roisin broke down. She had to confide in somebody, she said. No one but Michael would believe her. But Liz did.

“Have you ever heard of Caravaca?” she asked.

“I haven’t, no.”

“It’s about three hours’ drive from here,” Liz told her. “Up in the mountains. People from all over the place go there, on account of the cross. It’s supposed to have great powers.”

She went to a drawer, rummaged about, and returned with a small object. It was a gold crucifix but it differed in important respects from those Roisin had known from childhood. There were two crosspieces, one to which a miniature figure of Christ was affixed and another roughly halfway from the top to the foot. An angel stood on each side of the cross and appeared to be holding it.

“It goes back to the thirteenth century,” Liz said. “The story goes that it was given to a priest who converted the Moorish king. This was when the Moors still ruled Spain.”

“They were the Muslims, weren’t they?” Roisin said.

“That’s right. They came across from North Africa.” And she related the story of the cross and how it came to be given to the foreign ruler of a province of Spain.

In or about 1231 a missionary named Father Gínes Pérez was travelling through the mountainous region of Murcia. His sacred duty: to convert the Muslim invaders to Christianity. In some respects he was successful. Yet he was fully aware of the

dangers; proselytizing was a capital offence in Moorish Spain. Somewhere about March of that year the priest was captured red-handed, and brought to the royal palace at Caravaca.

Father Pérez feared the worst and made his peace with God. But the king, Zeyt-Abu-Zeyt, was intrigued by Christianity. He'd heard much about its rituals and wished to know more about them, perhaps even have one enacted in his presence. To this end he had Father Pérez summoned to his quarters and commanded him to say a Mass.

"I cannot," the priest told him. "I need my equipment for that."

King Zeyt had someone bring the priest what was needed, and all was assembled in due course: a chalice, a paten, a missal, bread and wine, and vestments. All that was missing was a crucifix. Without it, the priest said, it would be impossible to celebrate a proper Mass. A fresh search was made but to no avail: in the Moorish town there was no crucifix to be found. Disappointed, the king was about to dismiss the priest when he happened to look out of the window. To his amazement, he saw two angels descending from on high carrying between them a golden cross. Unlike the conventional cross it had an extra bar in the middle.

The miracles did not end there. It is said that Jesus himself appeared during the consecration as a beautiful little child. The king was so impressed he converted to Christianity that very day.

Liz placed the tiny object in Roisin's palm.

"There it is. They say that if you have a cross of Caravaca you'll never die an unnatural death. That was my husband's. He died in his sleep, God rest him."

Roisin nodded and handed back the cross. Liz returned it to the drawer.

"But we'll get one for you, Roisin," she said. "We'll go to Caravaca and see Monseñor Ansaldo. You'll like him. He was a great friend of my husband's."

"We'd left Alicante behind us," Roisin says, taking up the story again, "and were travelling roughly south on the A7 motorway. It might have been anywhere, if it wasn't for the signs pointing us in the direction of places with names like Cartagena and Almeria. I'd only been to Spain once, years ago, when I went with two girlfriends to Torremolinos for a week. We didn't see much of Spain then, apart from the beach and the clubs.

"This was very different, of course, and I suppose one motorway is very much



like another. Some of those Spanish drivers scared me half to death but Liz took it in her stride. She's a very good driver. My only quibble was that she had the air-conditioning on full the whole time and I nearly got frostbite sitting in the back. Michael laughed at that. Imagine somebody suffering from frostbite in Spain in August! So Liz turned it down for the rest of the journey.

"I honestly didn't know what to expect. Liz told us that her husband, Jaime, came from a place near Caravaca. His people were farmers and quite well to do. They'd met in Alicante when Liz was there on holiday and Jaime was on a business trip. It was all very romantic. He was a widower in his seventies; his wife had died about ten years before. He was into property in a big way so when they married they had the pick of the houses in the city. Liz's house, the one we were staying in, was to be their retirement home."

They left the motorway at Alcantarilla and headed west in the direction of Caravaca. In the distance rose the mountains, blue and purple in the summer heat haze. It was wild country, with little sign of habitation. Roisin considered that very little had changed since the Moors ruled there all those centuries before. They passed a house set in something resembling a desert oasis, complete with palm trees. The house was blindingly white and its architecture owed more to North Africa than to southern Europe. It stood aloof in terrain that was becoming increasingly wild and rugged.

They skirted the town of Cehegin and a strange sight rose on their right. It was a huge sculpture of two white legs cut off at mid-calf. It was set incongruously on a mound in the middle of a roundabout.

"It's a monument to the workers of the area," Liz explained. "It's a man's foot and a woman's foot."

"I see," Roisin said, even though she didn't. She was beginning to feel that they were venturing into strange territory. It no longer bore any resemblance to the Spain she'd been accustomed to. No tourists, no brash billboards.

The Taibilla mountain range was rearing up ahead. It was mid-afternoon and the sun was creating a heat haze. Roisin was feeling as far removed from a dark, Limerick night as it was possible to be.

She'd no need to ask whether they'd reached Caravaca because the town had been rising out of the shimmering landscape for some time. As they drew nearer, Roisin could plainly see the Moorish citadel atop the hill the town had been built on. Its walls

were of pale stone and looked as though they could have withstood any army ever ranged against them. Beyond the battlements she could make out an ornate church or basilica, and beyond that again what must have been a palace at one time. She'd been prepared for a spectacular place but the town and its beautiful mountainous setting almost took her breath away.

Liz negotiated the narrow streets with an ease that told Roisin she'd been here many times before. They climbed ever higher and soon the modern shops and houses made way for the medieval part of town. After a time Liz stopped the car in the shade of ancient fortifications. She pointed. A huge cross stood atop an old church. Its shape was unmistakable: the upright crossed by two bars instead of one. Except that here there was no figure of the crucified Christ, or of the two angels who'd brought the original cross to the palace of the Moorish ruler.

"That's the Church of the True Cross," she said.

"The monsignor's?"

Liz shook her head. "No, but he says Mass there on occasion. Especially when there's a High Mass. I've arranged to meet him in his parish house, if that's all right with you. . . ."

Roisin assured her it was. She told me that she was having mixed feelings at that moment, and was nervous.

"The whole town seemed to be one big shrine," she says. "Everywhere you looked there were churches or statues. And the Caravaca Cross was everywhere. But it wasn't as commercialized as, say, Knock or Lourdes. You didn't see supermarkets selling holy pictures and rosary beads. I suppose it's because not that many people know about the cross. I know I didn't until I met Michael's aunt."

Monseñor Ansaldo was a charming, elderly priest: tall and thin with sleek silver hair. Roisin thought he reminded her of an old film star but was unable to remember who it was.

"He was very respectful," she tells me. "A real gentleman. He spoke very good English too and that put Michael and me at our ease. We'd expected that Liz would have to translate everything. But she'd phoned on ahead and the monsignor knew we were coming. He also knew a little bit about what had been going on in Limerick. He invited us to have coffee with him in the 'salon' as he called it."

It turned out to be a conservatory of sorts at the rear of the parochial house, half indoors and half in the open air. It was a place of great tranquillity. Few sounds of

traffic permeated from the town and the garden was filled with birdsong. From time to time a church bell would ring, sometimes in the distance, sometimes close at hand.

Monseñor Ansaldo questioned Roisin very carefully on the nature of the ghostly manifestations she'd been experiencing. He became very agitated on learning that her "psychic" powers began to show themselves when she was no more than an infant. He seemed to think that this was significant. He asked her to describe as best she could what had occurred on the night of the murder, and the further manifestations she'd experienced in the spare room of her new home.

"I didn't want to go into a lot of detail," she says. "The memories were still very raw. But he pressed me to tell him as much as I could. He didn't actually use the word 'evil' when we discussed the black shape that was chasing after the white one, but I could see him frowning all the time and I think I guessed which way his thoughts were turning. So I came right out and asked him.

"'Evil spirits?'" he said. "'Perhaps. We don't know much about such things. There are many things we cannot explain. But I do not think I would say 'evil', no.'"

Roisin was convinced that the kindly priest was trying to put her mind at rest. But he had a suggestion to make.

"We will go into the church," he said, "and I will give something to you that I know will help you. I gave one to my old friend, God have mercy on him." He was looking pointedly at Liz, and Roisin guessed what he was referring to.

"A cross?" she said.

He nodded, smiling. "*Si, la Cruz de Caravaca*, the Caravaca Cross."

The church adjoined the parochial house. It was beautiful, Roisin recalls, an ornate building that represented the full flowering of the Spanish rococo style of architecture. Its interior was deliciously cool, a stark contrast from the still-hot afternoon sun. When they entered through a side door – Monseñor Ansaldo, Aunt Liz, Michael and Roisin – the church was deserted except for an elderly woman lighting a candle at a small shrine to the Blessed Virgin. She glanced around as the four entered, acknowledged the priest with a nod, turned, made the sign of the cross, and resumed her devotions.

Monseñor Ansaldo beckoned his visitors to follow him as he made his way to the central aisle. He genuflected before the altar; they did likewise. He opened the little gate and signed for them to enter the sanctuary.

"Please, wait here," he said. "I will be back in a moment."

Roisin watched him go to what she assumed to be the sacristy. He returned presently. A tiny, gold-coloured object glittered in his palm, its ornamentation reflecting the light that fell in through the stained-glass windows.

“Here it is,” he said. “The Cross of Caravaca.”

It resembled the one once owned by Liz’s husband. It was much smaller, though: Roisin judged the cross itself to be no more than three or four centimetres in height. Its loop told her it was designed to be worn as a pendant.

With his back to the altar the priest took her right hand and placed the cross in her palm. He folded her fingers over it. He didn’t need to speak; the gesture was unmistakable, no matter what the language. This was a valuable object and must be kept safe.

“Please kneel down,” he said.

Roisin, Michael and Aunt Liz needed no urging. They knelt and bowed their heads, Roisin keeping her fingers pressed tight about the cross. So tight, in fact, that when she released them some time later she discovered a red, cruciform weal where the pendant had pressed down into her flesh.

Monseñor Ansaldo placed a hand lightly on her head. He began to pray aloud. The words were Spanish yet Roisin recognized them by their cadences and certain similarities to their corresponding English versions. They were the Glory Be, the Lord’s Prayer and the Hail Mary. The latter were repeated several times. It was as the priest intoned the final “amen” that the situation in the church changed drastically. There was a sudden scream from close at hand.

“It was the old woman,” Roisin says, and clearly, several years after the event it’s clear that the event disturbed her greatly. She fingers her Caravaca Cross nervously as she recalls it. “The woman who was lighting the candle. She let out an unmerciful screech and was shouting something I didn’t understand. Liz told me later that she was blaming us, ‘the foreigners’ as she called us, for bringing something bad into her parish church.”

The woman had left her place by the Marian shrine and was pointing upwards, above the heads of the priest and visitors. Roisin and the others followed her pointing finger.

“She was pointing up at a cloud of black smoke,” she says, “of the kind I’d seen that night when I saw the figures, the one in white being chased by the one in black. I simply knew I was seeing the same thing. It had followed me there from Limerick.

“It seemed to hover right above where I was kneeling. It was swirling around and making darting movements, like it wasn’t sure where to go. But it seemed to make its mind up and began making for the front door of the church. I heard the priest saying words in Latin or Spanish – I’m not sure which – but he seemed to be praying very rapidly. There was something frantic about the prayers and that scared me. In the meantime that woman was still shouting something.”

To everyone’s astonishment the black “cloud” passed through the stout timbers of the church door. Roisin turned to the priest.

“What was that, Father?” she asked.

She noticed that his normally dark face had gone pale. He was staring at the door and shaking his head. The elderly woman was heading for the side exit, the one the four had used to enter the church. They heard the door being shut. A stillness descended.

“I do not know,” the priest finally answered. “But it cannot harm you now. It is gone.”

The monsignor spoke the truth. Back at the parochial house he had the maid bring drinks. Nerves had to be calmed. Yet Roisin had felt a calm almost from the moment the black shape disappeared. It grew stronger with each passing minute.

She explains that the Spanish priest had no ready explanation for her ghosts. He assured her there are many “unseen things” in the world and could only advise prayer and devotion. Michael and Roisin returned to Limerick and could pick up the pieces of a life that had been disrupted by the paranormal.

“It never came back,” she tells me. She reaches again for the pendant, looks at it lovingly and kisses it. “I put it down to this cross. I’m not in the least bit superstitious or anything but I can’t deny the evidence of my own eyes. From the moment I got the cross my life was turned around. And I’m grateful for that.”

No more ghosts?

“No, no more ghosts,” she says with a smile. “They’re history, thank God.”

### **Endnote**

On the night Roisin suffered her paranormal assault, a twenty-three-year-old East European woman was murdered close by in the same street. She’d come to Ireland in

1999 and was working as a waitress.

Her killer, a fellow national, had only been in Ireland a couple of months. At his trial in November 2004, it was alleged that he was trying to persuade the young woman to become a prostitute in Dublin. Her refusal “annoyed him” and led to her death.

The victim died from strangulation and head injuries at the time Roisin McCabe suffered her paralyzing attack. Roisin continues to wear the Caravaca Cross and has had no further attacks.