

ROOM ABOVE THE SHOP

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Years later she would come to remember the events in a jumble of recollections and fragmented proceedings. Maybe it was her way of dealing with the shock. The horrific culmination occurred in the winter of 1953, although the beginnings of it actually began in July of that year; a hazy, sunny month that seemed filled with the promises of summer play and endless freedom.

The walk from the railway station was unforgettable. Halfway up the hill she would turn and take in the view across the Derbyshire dales. The billowing steam from the departing train was stark against the greens and yellows of the countryside. It was a sight that never failed to enchant. She turned, picked up her suitcase, and continued up the hill.

Her grandmother's dress shop was at the top, right next to the bakers. A hunched stone building with a sagging slate roof, the morning sun cast an acute shadow from the steeple of a nearby church. Picturesque cottages crowded around the church like eager children.

Her grandparents' house was several streets away, but Jenny knew that her grandmother would be in the shop at this hour of the morning. The gentle breeze was redolent with the smell of baking bread. She glanced at the window as she passed, a drab display of faded materials and assorted footwear, various discoloured price tags scattered intermittently. As she pushed open the peeling door, the bell above it tinkled, almost as an apology.

The gloom of the shop was quite a contrast to the summer morning outside. Mustiness choked away the pleasant smell of baking bread. The room was crowded with rails of clothes; shoe boxes piled high on a shelf against one wall. A battered cash register was balanced on a neat glass counter. The room

at the back of the shop was separated by a thick curtain, and an elderly woman drew it back and stepped through. A warm smile broke onto her weathered face as she spotted the young girl.

“Jenny! You’ve grown so much since Christmas!”

Jenny beamed at her grandmother and accepted a surprisingly strong hug.

“How’s your mother? Was the train journey all right?”

Jenny nodded. “She’s very well, thank you.” She massaged the feeling back into her hand from where the weight of the suitcase had taken its toll. “The train was really busy.”

“They must be all headed to the seaside. Can’t blame ’em, what with all this nice weather we’re having.” Grandmother lowered herself into a chair behind the counter. “Your grandfather’ll be over at lunchtime to pick up the suitcase.” The pause was momentarily hesitant. “Seen anything of your father?”

Jenny’s face was non-committal. “No, not since last time. Mother went to see him at Easter, but she’s been quite busy recently.”

Grandmother’s rheumy eyes were tinged with sadness. “It must be very hard for your mother.”

Jenny’s faint smile didn’t quite make it past her mouth. “I know.” She glanced around the shop. “Aren’t you busy?”

“Not too bad at the minute. The tourists’ll start coming on Saturdays, now summer’s here. And the market on Tuesdays and Thursdays always picks trade up.”

They chatted for a few minutes about Jenny’s schooling, her grandmother animated. At that moment the bell above the door tinkled and a middle-aged woman bustled into the shop.

“Why don’t you pop through the back, dear, and pour us both a glass of lemonade from the pantry? I’ll attend to Mrs Robson here.”

Jenny picked up the suitcase and disappeared through the blanket to the room at the back of the shop.

The back room smelled strongly of candles, even though the

shop had installed an electricity supply almost a decade ago. There were baskets of garments stacked untidily around, and the light was thin, even in here. Jenny put down the case and moved over to a porcelain sink beneath the window, the claustrophobic view of which looked out against a nearby wall. She took up a glass from the draining board. She could hear the murmur of her grandmother and Mrs Robson's conversation as she took a pitcher of iced lemonade from the recessed pantry and began to pour out two glasses.

Her grandmother was telling Mrs Robson about how well Jenny was doing at school and how it was nice to have her to visit in the holidays. Then the level dropped and Jenny strained to hear the actual conversation. She could only catch the odd fragment – *'shell-shocked'*, *'shame'*, *'giving my daughter a break'*. Then the volume rose and they began discussing an alteration to a dress that Mrs Robson was inquiring about.

Quite suddenly, from upstairs, there was a creaking and shifting of the floorboards.

Jenny's gaze snapped to the flaked ceiling. Then slid over to the corner where the dark stairs led upwards. She hesitated, considered ducking under the blanket to the shop-front, but curiosity and fear prickled her scalp. She had been in the room above the shop many times. It never failed to unsettle her.

Little more than a storeroom, the atmosphere up there was nothing less than creepy. Although it had been several years since Jenny had been up there; she remembered it as a jumble of junk and assorted oddments.

Out in the shop front the conversation was still droning on about the alteration. Jenny paused in the darkness at the foot of the stairs and listened, her head cocked. There was distinct movement from up there, not exactly footsteps, but something was moving around. As she stepped onto the bottom stair Jenny felt her forearms tingle with goose bumps. Slowly she ascended the dim stairway, sweaty palms gripping the handrail. She heard the creaking of floorboards and something shuffling across the carpet as she pushed the door open and peered in.

There was nobody in the room.

A shaft of sunlight was breaking through the net curtains at the window and dust motes were swirling in it, a visible suggestion of recent movement. There was a chipped wooden chest of drawers in one corner, upon which were piled rolls of textiles and materials of various colours. A battered gramophone stood against one grey wall. Curls of dust covered the trumpet and the records that were stacked next to it. A life-size dressmaker's mannequin stood upright in one corner. A similar mannequin – this one with an arm missing – was stored in several pieces next to a battered sewing machine. What stilled Jenny's heart in her chest, however, was the motion of the standing mannequin – a subtle rocking, as if it had stopped moving just as she stepped into the room. She stared at it for twenty seconds or so before the thing became still.

She spent the rest of the day at the cottage with her grandfather. He called for her at lunchtime and they settled her into her usual room, a haven of familiar smells and pleasant memories. In the afternoon they went for a walk and ate a relaxing picnic in the grounds of the church. The uneasiness which had begun to shift in Jenny's stomach slowly dissolved. That evening when her grandmother had closed the shop and returned home, they listened to the radio and talked about how things had changed since her grandparents had been children. The conversation was filled with pleasant memories, details of how they'd met as young adults. There was a suggestion of how Jenny's grandfather had helped ease a darkness that had blighted her grandmother's early life, how he'd enriched her once listless existence. Jenny listened with animated distraction. It was a relief to escape the anxieties of home – the pressures of schooling; her mother's detached indifference to life. The warmth that was radiated upon her by her grandparents was a welcome attraction, a respite from the void that had been torn into her family over the past few years. Jenny's mother had struggled to cope with the loss of her husband. Her visits to him in hospital seemed to chip away a

little more of her resolve. Jenny had visited her father a couple of times at first, but seeing him had left her dismayed and puzzled. He looked the same, but it was almost as if a vital part of him had been taken away by the horror of war – his eyes had lost that spark it once held, his mouth now dribbled saliva where once it smiled. His stare was vacant and haunted, and Jenny had sensed the things that he'd been exposed to had robbed her of her father forever.

The next few days were long and relaxing. She basked in the Derbyshire sun, played in the lush fields, gradually made friends with a couple of the local children who were nothing less than welcoming. It struck Jenny how much more amiable the townsfolk were here, in contrast to the faceless people of her home city. As the days drifted into weeks she almost forgot that this wasn't her home, these people were not her friends, and this beautiful summer of joyous play would not last forever.

It had rained overnight. Jenny awoke to glistening cobbled streets, slippery slates and grey swirling skies. Since the day she had arrived, she'd spent very little time in the shop. Her grandmother posed a question to her over breakfast – would she be able to tend the counter for her that afternoon? Her grandfather would be at the wholesalers in nearby Buxton all day, and she needed to attend a local chamber of commerce meeting in the village hall. Normally, the only option would be to close the shop for the afternoon, but it was shame to miss out on any potential trade. Jenny agreed without a second's thought.

It was only after the bell tinkled in the wake of her grandmother's exit that the reality of her isolation seeped over her. The rain spider-webbed the window and absorbed the pale afternoon light. Occasionally someone hurried past the door on their way to the shelter of their home. And then presently she heard the sudden scratchy jolt of music from the room upstairs.

It took her a good few seconds to acknowledge what was actually happening – someone was upstairs playing the gramophone records.

The rain had left the streets almost deserted, so she resisted the urge to bolt the door and flip over the sign to CLOSED. As soon as she passed through the blanket into the back room, the music grew louder. There was a creaking of floorboards again, the scratchy melody of Glenn Miller's 'Moonlight Serenade' drifting down.

She ascended the stairs without the apprehension that she had previously felt. A sense of annoyance that someone was playing tricks quelled her fear. She pushed open the door at the top and peered into the room.

The mannequin was standing in the centre of the rug. A grating scratch was jerking from the trumpet of the gramophone. It was this noise that caused the hairs on the back of her neck to tingle, a loud screech of the needle on the record. And then from behind her she heard a floorboard creak.

A dark shape loomed into view as she whirled round. The second mannequin – the one that had been in several pieces before – was now standing behind the door. The light in the room was incredibly weak but Jenny thought she saw an almost imperceptible swaying movement. A shuddering repulsion prompted her to defiantly jerk the arm of the gramophone needle, silencing the loud scratch instantly. As she whirled out of the room, the mannequin appeared to shrink back into the shadows behind the door.

Stumbling blindly, feet echoing in the stairwell, she heard the door slam shut behind her, its mocking crash chasing her down the stairs.

Her grandparents did not notice the mood that descended upon her for the next week. Jenny ensured that she was never alone in the shop. The time she spent in the back room was limited. She busied herself with errands in the village and

enjoyed the last few days of fun with her friends. Once, during evening tea, she brought up the subject of the mannequins.

Her grandmother laughed. "Aren't they horrible? I got them from a shop that was closing in Bakewell. One of them's broken, but I'll use the other one in the window to help display the dresses, I expect."

Jenny chewed her food casually. "They *are* creepy. Mind you, it's eerie up there in the room upstairs. Once I thought I'd heard something."

Her grandmother's voice was normal, but Jenny was perceptive enough to catch the shared glance between her grandparents, and the quick hesitation. "No, can't say I've ever heard anything – *unusual*. Probably just the building settling you heard, or the beams expanding in the heat."

Jenny nodded. "Probably."

Almost at once the summer was over. The nights brought chilly breezes. The view over the hills and fields faded to a brown copper melt, blurred with mists. Nightfall approached the late afternoon and the low sun birthed cool shadows. The apples on the trees in the churchyard shrivelled and soured, the cobbled streets were left silent by the absence of tourists, and the prospect of returning home touched Jenny like a cold shroud.

From September she endured the rigours of home life. A new school term busied her mind and the reality of dealing with the void that her father's loss had created left her preoccupied and fragile. Almost suddenly, the Christmas break was upon her.

She was glad to be free of the crowded train; the windows, fogged by the outside cold and the breath of the passengers, created an atmosphere of claustrophobia. Her footsteps crackled frost on the ascent of the hill.

The shop windows were a splash of festivities, all glitter and light. As she approached her Grandmother's shop her eyes were drawn to the darkness of the upstairs window. The net curtain was bunched around the glass like a watching figure.

Within days she had settled into the usual idyllic life of her school holidays. She quickly fell into step with the friends that she had made on previous visits. The winter break was a stark contrast to the tranquillity of the summer one. The prospect of Christmas approaching stirred excitement within her. Her Grandmother announced over breakfast one morning that her mother would be journeying up on Christmas Eve to spend three days with them. Jenny's smile masked her mild dismay.

She tried to spend as little time as possible at the shop. The unsettling occurrences of the summer had leaked into her school life these past six months, drifting around her like a disquieting whisper. If she happened to be chatting to her Grandmother in the shop, the words would be vague and detached – her attention was focused on detecting the slightest noise from upstairs.

Christmas Eve was two days away. The morning air stung her face as Jenny stepped into the enclosed yard at the rear of the shop to look for a skipping rope that she had noticed in the summer. She was searching through the coal-house, cluttered with assorted junk and oddments, when she leapt backwards with a startled cry. Beneath the debris, the upper torso of one of the mannequins rolled out at her.

She kicked out at it with repulsion, twisting it to a grotesque angle beneath the stacks of wood. A decayed cobweb shrouded the head like a sinister veil. Her final glimpse, as she slammed the back door closed, was a disdainful shake of the thing's head as motion bled away from it.

Later, over a subdued lunch, Jenny was careful to introduce the subject of the mannequin in a casual way, so as not to imply it had been brooding on her mind all morning.

Her grandmother nodded, chewing her cheese sandwich. "We got rid of one of them, yes. It's all dusty and broken up, out in the yard. Hideous, isn't it?"

Hideous was exactly the word. Jenny was peering down at her plate but she sensed the atmosphere – the silent glance – that had just passed between her grandparents. She looked up

quickly, catching the fear in her grandfather's normally relaxed face.

He ran a hand through his own white hair. "I keep meaning to throw out the other one, but I'll get round to it when we get short of firewood."

A log crackled on the fire, as if in response, catching their attention. Even though it was early afternoon, the shadows were lengthening, flames throwing hunched shapes dancing around the walls. As Jenny leaned back in her chair the creak reminded her of the sound of something moving upstairs.

Her grandfather helped her search for the skipping rope after lunch. Jenny's foot surreptitiously pushed the mannequin's torso back into the darkness of the log pile as she aided his search.

When she slipped into bed that night the cobweb-faced mannequin visited her thoughts. She drifted into an uneasy sleep. Soon she was back at the crumbling hospital where her father now lived. Jenny remembered every minute detail of the institution, the choking stench of antiseptic, distant unseen banging, the relentless chorus of manic wails.

She stands nervously behind her mother, hand resting against the silkiness of her skirt, the contact enough to offer reassurance. Her mother steps into the pale room and Jenny peers around her to the bed, to catch a glimpse of her father for the first time in four years.

There is a figure sitting on the bed, pyjama legs together, head turned slightly away. Jenny is nervous about seeing him, unsure of what he might say. Her mother walks over and speaks his name, arms outstretched.

He inclines his head, and Jenny's breath catches in her throat as she sees his face.

Some of it is familiar – a sparkling eye, the top quarter of his face, the usual parting in his hair. But the red twisted furrow of alien skin that contorts his features and pulls a frightening mask of deformity across his face leaves her trembling with horror. Her mother leans over him and they

embrace in hushed sobs. Jenny waits patiently as the grief that her mother feels is articulated in that prolonged hug.

She spends almost ten minutes in the hospital room with her parents; ten minutes that leave the anxious optimism that she once felt as broken and shattered as her father. He is alive, but in body only; his mind is damaged and altered forever by what he has experienced. Her mother realises that she has lost her husband for good, and the sobs in the room are laments for her own bereavement.

There is one short moment when his eye – the eye that belonged to the father she remembers, not the distant staring blankness of the scarred swollen mask – looks at her, and for an instant she desperately wants to believe that he recognises her, that he remembers his beloved daughter, that he will peel off the twisted veil of grotesqueness that is now his new face, and welcome her into his arms.

But then he vacantly blinks and slowly looks away and she knows he has gone.

The sobs woke her from the dream, the images and memories tangled around her like black tendrils. Fearful of dropping off back to sleep and returning to the nightmare, Jenny sighed and sat up in bed. The church clock outside chimed twice, a polite and reassuring toll. She stood and went to the window and peered out into the dark.

The winter night was harsh and clear. The moon invested the scenery with a monochrome edge; every detail was clear and specific. Her view from the window overlooked the small orchard that lay next to the church. It was alive with the skeletal shadows of bare trees. And then Jenny's eyes noticed a shape beneath the bushes.

At first she thought it was somebody lying down, crouching unnaturally, face staring back up at the window, quietly watching. She felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise and she rubbed the cold of the glass for a better view.

It was the mannequin.

The shadows were enough to throw confusion into her

understanding – *how had the mannequin crawled through the streets to her, creeping its way slowly to find her grandparent's house?* She felt her vision blur as mounting horror began to grip her body. It crept forward slightly and part of it emerged from the bushes, animal-like and vivid. Its head rolled slightly and Jenny suddenly realised that it was actually a little terrier dog. It sniffed around the bushes for a minute and then trotted off through the iron gate, vanishing into the night. It took Jenny a long time before sleep returned.

There was a bright unnatural glow to her bedroom the next morning. Even before she jumped out of bed she had a sense of the snow outside, had been vaguely aware of things whispering against the glass of her window, a smothering hush to the town. She hurried downstairs in an excited chatter, the disturbing dream and night-time vision dissolving with every step.

After breakfast she went out into the street and gazed at the white expanse of snow that covered everything. There were very few footprints to spoil the effect and the air was muted and hushed. Jenny felt like a butterfly trapped in a jar. She stood on the side of the hill and peered out across the valley, trying to discern where the white sky ended and the land began.

Her friends arrived in similar attire – boots, heavy coats and muffled scarves, wriggling their gloved fingers. Jenny commented on how quiet the valley was; how the black mouth of the tunnel seemed to absorb the life from around it. One of the boys mentioned a story that he'd heard his father once talking about; many years before, a teenage couple had been devastated when the lad had been called up to service in the war. Faced with the prospect of being separated, they'd made a pact to remain a couple forever. One morning they'd stood together on the edge of the tunnel and waited for the express to pass. Hand in hand, the plan was to leap onto the track as the train thundered towards them. At the last moment, however, the girl's resolution faltered and she fearfully stumbled back.

The inertia of the boy's movement meant that he was carried forward, and he pitched off the tunnel into the path of the train. Rumours of strange shrieks emanating from the tracks still persisted to this day.

Long after the story had ended and the children busied themselves with playing in the snow, the details of the tale lingered in Jenny's mind like a stain.

One of the girls began to build a snowman. Soon they all helped, pushing it round the street to gather body for the thing. As they began to look for pieces of coal for the features, Jenny was suddenly reminded of the mannequin and she felt a shiver of repulsion. She turned once again and looked out across the valley. A train was approaching; the black smoke of the engine was blooming into the cold air like a warning. Her heart sank slightly at the prospect of her mother's arrival the following day. The snow was becoming slushy in the clearing in which they were playing. Jenny announced that she was cold. The other children didn't seem to notice as she drifted away.

In the afternoon she was sitting next to the crackling fire, a book open on her lap. Her grandfather was somewhere in the back of the cottage, sharpening some knives. The door opened and her grandmother stepped inside, shaking the snow from the bottom of her boots. Her scarf was drawn tightly around her.

"Everything alright?" her grandfather said as he entered from the back of the house. His voice had a quizzical tone.

"The electric's gone. All the power's out in the village." Her grandmother began hanging up her coat and scarf. "Must be the snow."

Her grandfather clicked on the light switch but there was no response. "I'll fetch some candles."

Her grandmother warmed her hands against the fire. "I've closed the shop for the day – no point, if folks can't see what they're buying!"

Despite the brightness of the snow outside, the cottage was growing darker within. Her grandfather arranged assorted lit

candles around the room, balancing the shadows cast by the flickering fire.

Her grandmother seated herself in the armchair next to the fire and winked a sparkling eye at Jenny. "Can't say I'm too bothered that the power's out – gives me more time here with you both." She suddenly glanced down at her side and gave a start of annoyance. "Ah, I've left my knitting back at the shop!" She shook her head, frustrated with herself. "Never mind, it'll keep for a few days."

Jenny hesitated. She knew how much her grandmother enjoyed knitting. It was a ritual, a method by which she relaxed, and she understood that the next few days would be an irritation for her to endure. She stood up. "I'll nip back and fetch your knitting – the snow might keep the power out for days."

"Oh, that's a lovely thought." Jenny sensed the gratitude in her grandmother's words. "Thanks, love. I'll pop the kettle on."

In a minute she was dressed and stepping out into the snow-filled streets. The air was cold, her breath danced like tiny wraiths before her face. At the corner of the high street she turned and glanced back at her lonely tracks that lined the road. For some reason she felt a remote feeling of desolation.

The snow was a lake of slush around the door of her grandmother's shop. It appeared that most of the stores had decided to close up for the day, presumably due to the power failure. The road was deserted; the already darkening sky had begun to lose the whiteness that had been the promise of snow. She unlocked the door and stepped inside, almost losing her footing on the icy step.

The dark shop had an ominous atmosphere within, still and apprehensive. Jenny had a fearful sense of something waiting for her, watching her arrival. She glanced around swiftly for the knitting. It was not by the cash register, the place that she had expected to see it. A sudden sting of apprehension prickled inside her.

She closed the door quietly and stepped through the shop to the back, brushing aside the blanket that separated the two rooms. The sudden sound of laughter from the room upstairs instantly chilled her body with terror. Her gaze tentatively brushed the ceiling. The weird cackling held a sinister mocking tone, an unnatural imitation of a human voice. Jenny's legs grew unsteady as she crept up the stairwell.

The laughter suddenly fell silent as she approached the door. She paused slightly to gather her strength before pushing it open and stepping into the room.

The mannequin was standing near the window, as if hiding its face. The stillness of the air was disturbed by tiny objects drifting around like snow. Jenny stared down at a limp object lying in the centre of the floor, surrounded by a circle of dark feathers. It was a large magpie, one wing outstretched, neck twisted at an unnatural angle. She realised that the sound of laughter had been the final guttural calls of the bird. She poked the dead magpie with her boot, her eyes fixed on the back of the mannequin's head. It faced the window, silent and still. A bundle of dead birds shadowed the corner in a dreadful nest of feathers. She could see the speckles of a starling's chest and the pale broken wing of a sparrow lying in the scratches that had been torn into the dust. The dark fluffy feathers danced in the breeze that blew in through the open window.

She whirled out of the room with a shudder, stumbling down the stairs. As she burst through the blanket into the shop-front she spotted the knitting gathered together on the counter, the two needles sticking upright like skewers. She grabbed it and slid out of the door, slamming it shut behind her. Her hands shook so much she struggled to get the key into the lock.

Minutes later she was entering her grandparents' back yard. The brightness of the snow was shaded by the gathering dusk and she was thankful to return to the safety of the cottage.

The room was a warm crackle of flickering shadows. Her grandmother was visibly delighted to be reunited with her knitting. Jenny warmed her hands against the fire.

“Has it stopped snowing?” Her grandmother looked up from untangling her knitting.

A loud pop from the fire caught Jenny’s attention. She stared in horror at the flames that licked fiercely around the wooden lump in the hearth. The head of the mannequin appeared to stare into the room, orange tongues of fire dancing across the featureless face. The heat caused the pale veneer to split and curl away from the rest of the head. Where eyes might have been, the veneer bubbled and liquefied, dripping down the face like a grotesque milky tear.

Jenny became vaguely aware of her grandmother’s worried voice as she tried to snap her out of her transfixed state. She glanced over limply as her grandfather entered the room. As the darkness descended over her, Jenny’s last image was of him placing the decapitated torso of the mannequin carefully onto the back of the fire.

She was remotely aware of being roused from her giddiness some moments later, the anxious faces of her grandparents’, the cold sip of water she was gently offered. Her head ached from the shock that had caused her to faint. She mumbled something about tiredness and managed a reassuring smile, agreeing to the suggestion that she should have a lie down. As she drifted upstairs her eyes flicked to the charred lumps that were crumbling in the fire.

Exhausted, she fell fully clothed into a deep slumber. She dreamed of burning tears and heat-stripped eyes, was aware of the ticking of snowflakes against her window, white snowflakes which drifted into a sinister expanse of black feathers. The images were bloodstained, polluted with the violence of loss and isolation.

She awoke at dawn, stiff-necked and aching. She could hear the drizzle of rain against the glass. The landscape outside was watery and pale. What little snow remained was tinged with grime. The church spire was a rigorous silhouette against the relentless grey of the sky.

Jenny realised with a start that it was Christmas Eve – her mother would be arriving later – and she could smell the welcoming aroma of bacon cooking from downstairs. Ten minutes later she was washed and changed, still feeling stiff-limbed, but eager to face breakfast.

Her grandparents were pleased to see her in a much better state, relief transforming their concerned frowns into wide beaming smiles. The power had returned, and the wireless cheered the room with festive music. Jenny made an extra effort to show that the previous evening's events were behind her, feeling slightly embarrassed by the way she had fainted in such a manner. Her grandmother announced that she would be opening the shop for the morning, just up until lunchtime when Jenny's mother was due to arrive. She was excited about attending the church that evening for the Christmas service. Just before Jenny ventured out to find some of her friends, she cast a furtive glance to the fireplace. There was no evidence of the mannequin – it glowed with the fresh dry logs which had stoked it overnight. As she passed through the back yard the mannequin's absence caused her to look away with a pang of guilt.

The prospect of her mother's arrival was like a dark shadow on the horizon. It was an interruption into the cosiness of her life, reality piercing the tranquil environment in which she now existed. Only the distraction of her friends quelled the nerves that were churning inside. Within half an hour they were playing in the field – the childhood that she only seemed to experience at her grandparents' was yet again the focus.

The snow looked like it had shrunk, creeping back across the field to expose surprisingly green grass beneath. An excited atmosphere had lit the children's laughter, sparkled their eyes – that magic tingle that Christmas Eve carried with it.

It was just approaching mid morning when Jenny looked up to the sky and frowned. A cloud of black smoke had suddenly darkened the winter brightness. She turned to stare down into

the valley, heart racing, eyes peering intently for a glimpse of the train that would herald her mother's arrival.

The solitude of the valley was unbroken by any sign of a train. Puzzled, Jenny craned her neck to peer again at the smoke that was billowing into the sky. It funnelled up from behind the houses, twisting into the air like a horrific tornado. The source of the smoke appeared to be somewhere near to her grandmother's shop.

And then Jenny was running, her friends' shouts dropping from her ears like melting ice. She slid round the corner at the top of the high street, instantly faced by a thronging bustle of people.

The crowd was fluid, bodies writhing and straining to peer over each other's shoulders. There was a tangible hum of emotion in the air – an urgency, and a knowledge that something terrible was happening. Unseen hands grabbed Jenny from behind; somewhere distant a woman's mournful cry of despair rang out.

Through the crowd she saw the anguished face of the police constable, pushing back against the thronging people. And then between a tangle of figures she spotted the billowing black smoke rise from the roof of her grandmother's shop. Her scream was fanned by the uproar of the crowd, collective clamours for the welfare of her grandmother bounced around in horrified tones.

"Too late!" the constable cried desperately. "The brigade's on its way!" His voice was almost a howl. Jenny noticed the soot on his face; saw the singed flecks of his blue uniform.

The shop window was black; the glass cracked and broken. Orange flames danced in the shop display case like cruel taunting hands. Was that the frenzied cry of her grandmother she could hear, or timbers in the building groaning under pressure? Jenny screamed again and tried to pull free of the hands that were grasping her. Somewhere behind her she could hear her grandfather's desperate shouts and was aware of the crowd holding him back.

Through the pushing bodies Jenny snatched a glimpse of the upstairs window. Her breath caught in her throat as she spotted the mannequin through the net curtains. There was an ominous groaning and the building shifted slightly to one side, bricks and slates raining down into the street. It may have been the smoke in the room or the flickering of flames nearby that created the sinister illusion that the mannequin's head had developed features. At the last moment – just before the roof collapsed into the building in a roar of twisted masonry – Jenny had the distinct impression that the mannequin was grinning in triumph.