



Chapter 7

A Mysterious Invitation

After leaving the long barrow, Aveline and Harold walked back down through the snow and told Sammy they'd call him if they found out anything more about her uncle's connection to the barrow and the missing people. Then, after he'd gone, they exchanged a few slushy snowballs before heading inside.

"That was worth it," Aveline said, shaking melting snow from her hat. "We know a lot more than we did."

"Well, we do and we don't," Harold said. "Yes, we probably know what your uncle was up to, but we're no closer to finding out what exactly happened to him."

"We know it's something to do with the barrow. And we know the solstice might be connected, too. We just

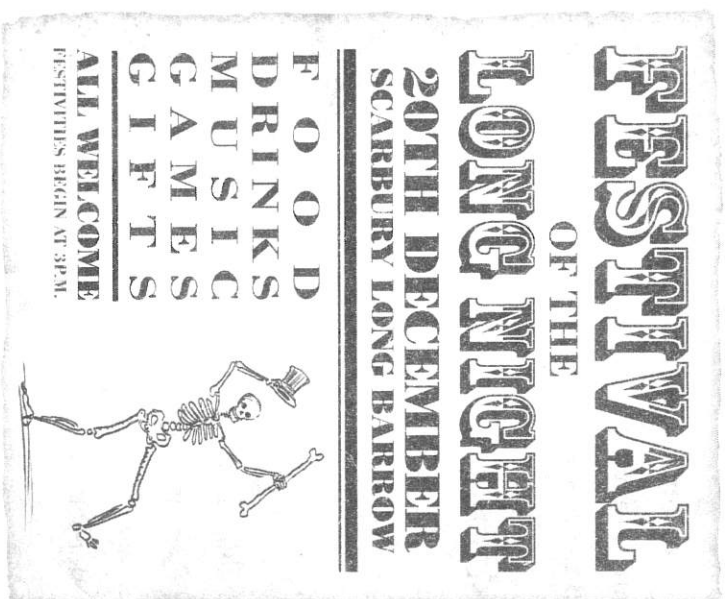
have to keep digging. Anyway, it was good to meet Sammy. I think he's going to be a real help."

"Bit of a know-it-all if you ask me," Harold scoffed. "And he had the nerve to call *us* amateurs... I mean, *really?*"

Just as they were untangling themselves from all their winter wear, they were startled by a loud, insistent knocking on the front door, followed by the sound of footsteps scampering away into the distance. Aveline opened the door and peered out.

She heard what sounded like a chuckle from somewhere along the lane.

Perplexed, she walked to the end of the path and looked down it, but there was nobody to be seen. It was only as she came back in that she saw something had been left on the doorstep. It was a sheet of paper. A breeze picked it up and it fluttered away. Aveline gave chase before clamping her foot on it and picking it up. It had a picture of a dancing skeleton on it, holding a top hat in one hand and what appeared to be a bone in the other. It gave Aveline the chills. Aveline had assumed it was paper, but it felt older, thicker and slightly greasy to the touch, perhaps parchment of some kind. Taking it back indoors, she read it with a frown.



"Strange place for a festival," Aveline said, snapping a picture of it on her phone.

"Strange full stop," Harold said, peering at it with a frown.

"I think we should go," Aveline said.

"But we've only just come back. And that hill is steep."

"Yes, but this looks interesting. It could help our investigation. We could even ask the people there if anyone saw my uncle, you never know."

Aveline's mum and aunt were yet to return, so they helped themselves to the contents of the fridge and warmed up with a hot chocolate. Through the kitchen window, the snow could be seen falling, making the garden look less like a bare patch of earth in south-west England and more like the North Pole.

They'd only just settled back down in the study when they were distracted by the sound of the front door opening. A cold blast of air rushed into the room like an excited dog.

"Aveline, Harold?" her mum called. "Are you two home?"

"In here," Aveline called.

A moment later, her mum poked her head around the door, her cheeks pinched red by the cold. Snowflakes in her hair slowly melted until they looked like droplets of glass.

"How was the long barrow?"

"Interesting," Aveline said. "How was your trip?"

"Productive," her mum said. "The estate agent said they can get your uncle's house on the market in the next few days and it would probably sell pretty quickly. Houses around here are in demand, apparently."

Aveline looked around at her uncle's jumbled study. She'd hardly scratched the surface.

"What about all this?"

"We'll just pack it up into boxes and put it in storage. Better still, we can pay someone to pack it for us. I'm keen to get back home as soon as we can."

"But, Mum, we haven't even begun to look through it."

"Best be quick then, hadn't you?" Nodding to their empty mugs, she added, "Fancy a refill?"

With the offer of another hot chocolate on the table, Aveline and Harold joined her mum and aunt in the kitchen. While there, Aveline took the opportunity to ask her mum about the festival.

"Mum," she said, adopting her most innocent voice.

"Uh oh, prepare yourself, Lilian," Aveline's mum said.

"Whenever Aveline says *mum* like that, it means there's trouble on the way."

Aunt Lilian smiled at Aveline.

"Well, Aveline, is your *mum* right?"

Aveline reached into her back pocket and showed them the flyer that had been left at the front door.

"I just wondered if we could go to this later?"

"Sounds like fun," her mum said, giving it a quick glance. "But have you been outside recently, Aveline? It's beginning to resemble Antarctica out there."

"It'll be magical," Aveline said. "Like being in Lapland or something."

"Like being stuck in the freezer aisle at Tesco more like," Aunt Lilian said. "My toes still aren't on speaking terms with the rest of my body."

"Can Harold and I go on our own then?" Aveline pleaded. "Just for an hour or so? We'll be back in time for dinner, promise."

Aveline's mum and aunt locked eyes.

"What do you think, Lilian?"

"More fool them, if you ask me, but you know what snow does to children. It drives them out of their minds. They have to be outside, rolling around in it and throwing it at each other – and it seems like a family-friendly event, so why not?"

"You'll take your phones?"

"They will never leave our hands, Mrs Jones," Harold said with a grin.

"And we'll call every two minutes to let you know our exact whereabouts," Aveline added.

"Okay, okay, I get the message," Aveline's mum said.

"You can go, back by 5 p.m. though."

"6 p.m.?" Aveline said.

"5 p.m. And no later."

And with that, the deal was concluded with everybody having got what they wanted. Aveline's mum and aunt got to stay in the warm, and Aveline and Harold had permission to continue stage two of their investigation into the strange connection between Uncle Rowan and the Scarbury Long Barrow.

With a couple of hours to kill before the festival began, Aveline and Harold returned to the study. If her uncle's stuff was going to be disappearing into cardboard boxes, Aveline wanted to make sure she hadn't missed anything.

"You know, if we're going back to the barrow, maybe I should have a look at your uncle's books about faeries?" Harold said. "I spotted a few earlier."

"So, you're finally taking Sammy's warning seriously then?" Aveline said, raising her eyebrows. "He's not got you...spooked, has he?"

Harold shrugged.

"No, but, well, he does seem to know what he's talking about, even if he goes about it in a slightly annoying way. Back there I thought he might even out-spook you for a minute."

"Hmm, no chance," Aveline said with a grin. "But you're right. It's a good idea to do some more research. See what you can find."

Setting himself among the scattered books like a cat curling up in a nest of cushions, Harold hurriedly began riffling through them. Meanwhile, Aveline continued to sort through her uncle's things. After talking with Sammy, she strongly suspected that when her uncle had referred to *them* during the séance, that he was talking about faeries. Some proof would be perfect.

After a few false starts, she found something interesting in a bottom drawer – a collection of small boxes. Inside were what appeared to be historical artefacts that her uncle had either found or bought. In one, there was a Roman coin, alongside a handwritten note that said it was “a silver denarius from the reign of Emperor Septimius Severus (AD193-211). In another, there was a small carved clay pipe, dated 1634, which had been found on the banks of the River Thames in London. In the third one she opened, there was a single nail. It was thick and made from blackened metal. Dry mud was visible in its grooves. Aveline prodded her finger experimentally against the spiked end. It still felt sharp. The note that came with it said:

Coffin nail. Iron. Circa 1700s. Oxfordshire.

“Hey, Harold, look at this,” Aveline said, holding it up. “It’s an *actual* iron coffin nail! Maybe my uncle found it on one of his digs?”

Harold glanced with an aghast expression.

“Did it come from inside an *actual* coffin?”

“I don’t know. I sort of hope not though.”

“Hang on,” Harold said, turning his eyes back to his book. “You said it was iron? That could come in handy; listen to this.” He read out loud. “*Talismans against faery folk include iron...*”

Aveline was reminded of something Sammy said, too, or rather, something he’d shown them.

“That story Sammy showed us on his phone, the one about the farmer who cut off his hand. The faery in that story didn’t like iron either. He said it gave him a headache or something.”

“Best keep the magic nail then if we’re going back up there.”

Aveline wasn’t sure she wanted something in her pocket that might have been next to a dead body, but it did make sense to keep hold of it.

“Here, Harold,” Aveline said, tossing him the nail. “You keep it. You’ve got more pockets than me.”

Picking up the nail between forefinger and thumb,

Harold sniffed at it and grimaced, before stuffing it into his jeans.

"Anything else in those books that's useful?" Aveline asked.

Harold scanned through a few more sentences.

"Well, it does mention that they don't like salt or fish either. Do you have room in your pocket for a salmon fillet?"

"Coffin nails, maybe, but I draw the line at stuffing a dead fish in my jeans."

"Fair enough," said Harold.

He scanned a few more pages.

"What it says about faeries in here is pretty creepy, actually. It's definitely more along the lines of what Sammy showed us. People being tricked or lured away and never seen again."

"People suddenly disappearing," Aveline said thoughtfully. "Doesn't that ring a bell?"

"You think Sammy was right then?" Harold said it with a note of disbelief in his voice. "I mean, yes, we've seen some pretty strange things ourselves, but I'm not sure I can swallow the faery theory."

"Why not?" Aveline said. "It's like Sammy said. These stories are always based on true events. We know that

better than anyone. I think it's pretty clear that my uncle believed it, too."

"Hmmm."

Harold didn't sound convinced but the more Aveline thought about it, the more these strange stories from the past appeared to make sense in the present, too.

"What else does the book say?" she asked.

Harold traced his finger along another few lines of text. "The places where they live are sometimes referred to as *hollow hills*. Some people say they're entrances to the underworld, so Sammy was right about that, too. Maybe the Scarbury Long Barrow is one of these hollow hills?"

Something about the term made Aveline grow cold inside. It made her think of dark, hidden places where people could get trapped...and lost. But then she reminded herself that they would be at a festival and surrounded by people and music.

They'd be fine.

Aveline returned to her uncle's desk. She still had one more drawer to go.

Inside, there was only one item.

A small metal box with a tiny padlock on it.

It was labelled, **DO NOT OPEN.**

Aveline took it out and held it up in the air for Harold to see.

"We have to open it."

"Aveline, it specifically says, *do not open*," Harold said, in the tone of a tired parent. "Why in your mind does that translate to *this should be opened immediately*?"

"So, you don't want to see what's inside?"

Harold threw down his book and leaped to his feet.

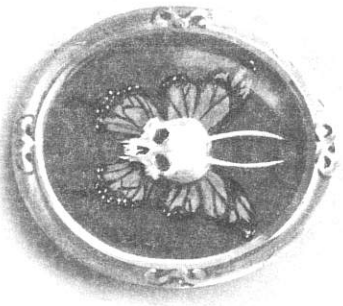
"Of course I do. Let's find something to break the padlock with."

A metal chisel in one of Uncle Rowan's drawers was selected for the task and, with a grunt or two, they snapped the fragile padlock open.

"After you," Harold said. "Might contain a booby trap."

Gently, Aveline opened the lid.

Inside was a pendant or clasp of some kind. It was silver and had a transparent oval-shaped glass cover. Beneath the cover was what looked like a tiny skull with red and black butterfly wings spread out on either side.



"Ugh, what is that?" Harold said in a horrified whisper. Aveline shuddered.

"I'm not sure I want to know," Aveline said. The pendant had a malevolent air about it, as if some kind of evil had been trapped inside.

"Imagine being chased around by a tiny flying skull."

"Feels bad," she said softly.

"Maybe that's why he kept it in a locked box?"

Aveline replaced the clasp in the box and shut the lid. The room seemed to lighten. Where had it come from? It appeared to be different from her uncle's other artefacts. For one, it had been locked and a warning had been put on the outside. Was Uncle Rowan worried that someone might open it? Or maybe it was simply very rare and valuable? That would also make sense. But she wished her uncle had added some kind of note to explain what it was.

Checking her watch, Aveline saw that they'd been in the study for longer than she thought and if they were going to make the start of the festival, then they needed to get a move on. They went upstairs to prepare. They knew it was going to be cold and so they switched into Arctic explorer mode. This meant wearing every single piece of warm clothing they had, layering on vests, sweaters, T-shirts, coats and scarves until they both

resembled very lumpy and badly made snowmen.

"Phones charged?" Aveline said.

Harold gave her a thumbs up. "Check."

"Supplies?"

Harold pulled out some granola bars. "Check."

"Compass, just in case?"

Harold pulled out an old brass one they'd found in her uncle's desk. "Check."

"Good. I'm bringing this as well," Aveline said, holding up a picture of her uncle that she'd found in his desk. It was only a passport photo, probably one that her uncle had decided not to use because he had his eyes shut. But at least it had been taken more recently than the other one she had in her bag, which showed the two of them together. The passport photo would have to do. "Maybe I can show it to people and see if they recognize him?"

"He looks like he's fallen asleep," Harold said, studying the photograph. "I can see why it didn't make it into his passport. But, yeah, it can't hurt to bring it along."

"Alright then, I think we're good to go."

They had to repeat their checklist with Aveline's mum and aunt until they were finally given the all-clear.

"Don't be late, please," Aveline's mum said. "And text me when you get there."

"We will. See you later. And don't worry, we'll be back before you know it."

It had stopped snowing when they stepped outside. The skies were clearing and a feeble, pale sun staggered towards the horizon, but there was a creeping gloom that told them it wouldn't be too long before it was dark. Tomorrow was the winter solstice, after all, the shortest day of the year, and the sun would set earlier than at any other time. Scarbury was infused with an eerie bluish twilight, ice beginning to sparkle on top of the snow. The village's frosty lanes, houses and lamp posts gave it an old-fashioned feel, as if nothing much had changed there for hundreds of years. Aveline had expected to see crowds of people making their way up towards the festival, but the lanes were quiet and empty.

"I think most people will go up later," Harold said, glancing at his phone. "It's only half-past three. You know, we're probably going to be one of the first ones there. How embarrassing!" Pausing to readjust his woolly hat, he added, "Maybe we should see if Sammy wants to come, what with us being amateurs and all that."

"Good idea," Aveline said, pulling out her phone. She fired off a quick text.

Hi Sammy, this is Aveline. Me and Harold are on our way to the festival, want to come? 😊

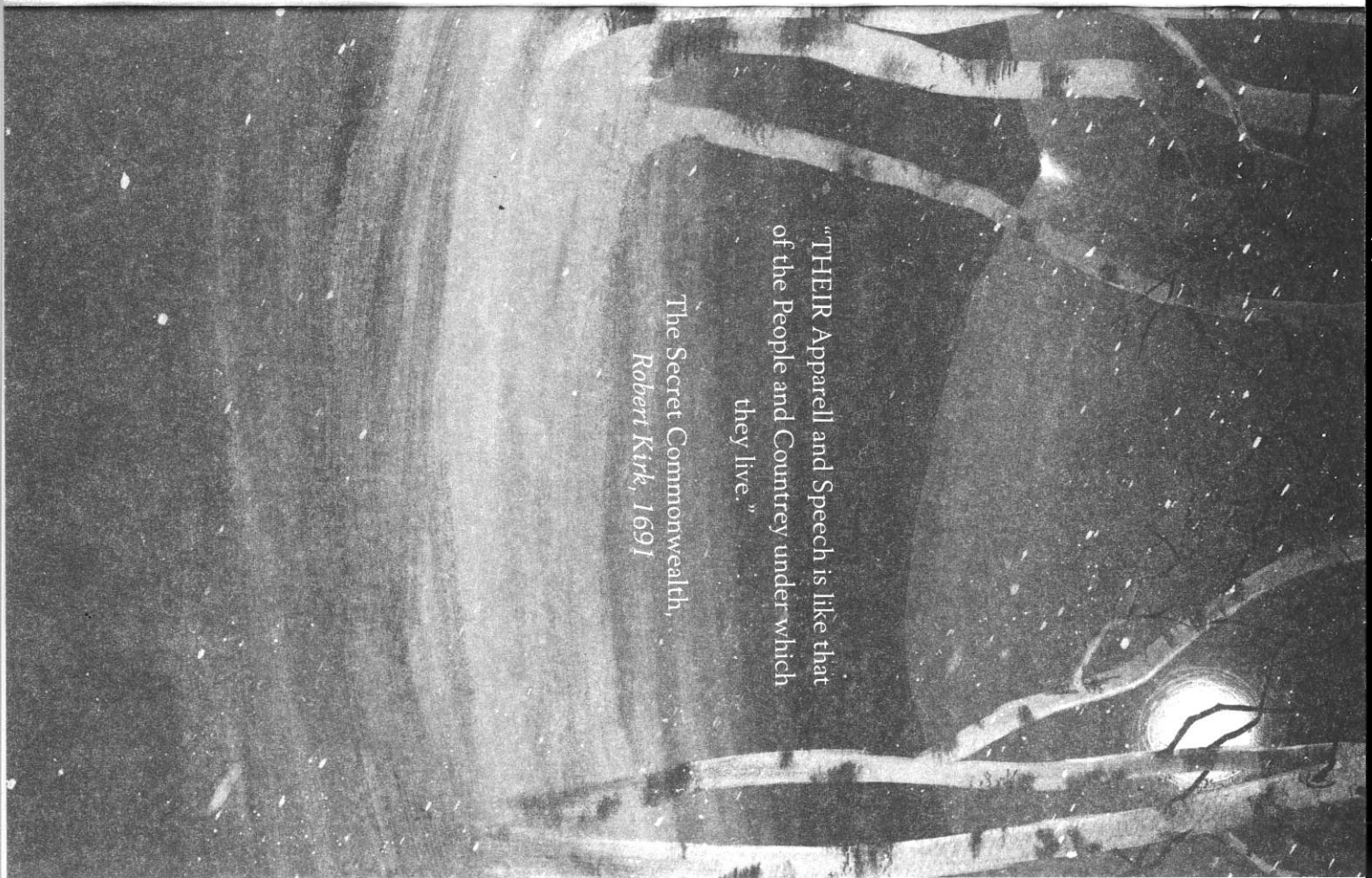
There was no immediate reply, and the phone said the message hadn't been read yet, so she pocketed it and they continued on their way. Finding the stile, they clambered over and began their ascent again. Their breaths came out in cloudy puffs. Their feet crunched through the top layer of the snow like a fork breaking into a pastry. On top of the hill, they saw a glow of firelight and heard faint snatches of music, as if a radio station was being tuned in and out.

"Looks like the festival's started," Harold said. "Wonder if there'll be something nice to eat?"

"I think so," Aveline said. "It said as much on the flyer."

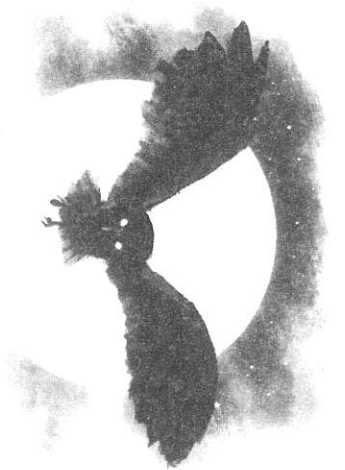
Just then, her phone pinged. It was Sammy, replying to her text.

What festival?



"THEIR Apparell and Speech is like that
of the People and Countrey under which
they live."

The Secret Commonwealth,
Robert Kirk, 1691



Chapter 8

The Festival of the Long Night

Frowning, Aveline tapped out a reply to Sammy.

The one at the long barrow? It's called the Festival of the Long Night. There's food and games and stuff. Should be good.

As they crested the top of the hill and began to skirt the wood, a rich aroma of roasting meat and woodsmoke filled the air. A large bonfire sent tiny embers spiralling up into the darkening sky. Aveline began to feel excited, yet nervous at the same time. Her phone pinged. Sammy again.

I've never heard of it and I've lived here for years???

Aveline replied.

Might not be a regular thing? But it's definitely on.

We've just arrived and it looks really good!!

Stalls had been set up in a wide ring around the long barrow, which itself had been framed with flaming torches, making it look particularly mystical and majestic. A band was performing, though their music sounded old-fashioned, played with flutes and drums and something that sounded like a bagpipe. A masked fire juggler wearing a crown of stag antlers tossed flaming torches in an arc, leaving trails of glowing orange in the darkening sky.



Everyone else appeared to be wearing animal masks, too, which made Aveline feel a bit out of place, as if they'd turned up to a fancy-dress party without making any effort. They could have at least mentioned it on the invitation. Someone in a fox mask stared at her before glancing away. A small boy – or man – in a hare mask scuttled across their path, giggling softly. Away in the distance, the horizon glowed a soft pink. Above it, the sky was turning an inky blue, the first stars sparking and sparkling like tiny shards of flint. It really did have a magical, festive feel to it.

Aveline glanced at Harold and smiled. "This is really cool!"

"I know!" Harold said, his eyes wide, trying to take it all in.

Aveline felt a buzz in her pocket.

"Hang on a sec."

It was Sammy again.

Just asked my parents and they've never heard of it either.

Aveline showed Harold, who shrugged.

"Well, we only found out it was on at the last minute.

Maybe they didn't deliver a flyer to Sammy's house? Anyway, it might not be Sammy's sort of thing. You know, *fun*."

Stiffing a smile, Aveline tapped out a reply.

Well it's definitely happening. Harold says if you come up he'll buy you a toffee apple ⁽¹²⁾

"Alright, let's go look at the stalls," Aveline said.

The first one they arrived at sold books, which immediately caught their eye. The books were old and in terrible condition, so much so that they were afraid to pick any up in case they crumbled away into nothing. Aveline and Harold glanced at a few, though they seemed to be a particularly morbid collection.

Poisonous Roots & How to Use Them

Lunar Curses: A Manual

The Corpse Roads of England

A Beginner's Guide to Creeping & Crawling

"Who'd want to read one of those?" Harold whispered, aware that on the other side of the stall, someone in an owl mask watched them with dark, blank eyes.

"Not me," Aveline said, thinking some people had really weird tastes. She felt her phone buzz again. This time it was her mum.

How's the Christmas Wonderland?

Frowning, Aveline typed back.

What?

The phone pinged again.

The thing you've gone to in the village. Has Santa arrived yet?

Aveline tapped away.

The festival isn't in the village?

"Let's eat something," Harold said, drawing Aveline's attention away, though her mum's texts bothered her. Why would she call the festival a *Christmas Wonderland* – and what did Santa have to do with it? And why did she think they were in the centre of Scarbury village?

The flyer she'd shown her had clearly stated it was at the long barrow. She wondered whether her mum and aunt had maybe opened a bottle of wine.

The next stall along sold food and Aveline felt her stomach growl. Skewers of meat roasted over a small grill. Aveline leaned forward for a closer look before quickly recoiling back. Somebody wearing a bird mask with a tangle of red hair peeking out smirked slyly before reaching out his hand and slowly turning the skewers over.

"Harold, were those what I think they were?" Aveline whispered after they'd walked on a few steps. She'd seen something on the end of the strips of meat that looked suspiciously like small wiry tails, which the flames had burnt to a blackened crisp.

"I'm not sure," Harold said. "But probably best to play it safe and avoid eating anything that looks like a rodent."

Another text from her mum.

So you're not at the Christmas Wonderland thing you showed me?

Aveline replied.

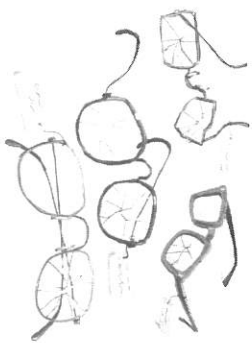
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I don't know what you mean. We're at the festival of the long night. At the long barrow.

Just for context, she attached the picture of the flyer. Her phone told her the message had been read so she assumed that was the confusion cleared up.

The next stall was another strange one.

It sold spectacles, which immediately interested Aveline, having quite a few pairs herself, because there was always room for more. Only on closer inspection, these were all broken; the frames twisted at awkward angles, their lenses cracked and stained or, in some cases, missing entirely. They had tiny labels attached to them. Aveline squinted at them.



Mining disaster, 1917.

Car Crash, 1954.

Mountaineering accident, 1923.

Train wreck, 1968.

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Did these glasses really belong to people who'd been in terrible accidents? And if so, who would want to buy such a thing? Aveline shuddered. There was something off about this place.

Glancing around, it suddenly struck her that, while there were plenty of stallholders and performers, dressed in raggedy costumes and bizarre masks, there didn't seem to be any *ordinary* looking visitors. No parents with pushchairs. No kids being carried around on their dads' shoulders. Nobody dressed like Aveline and Harold, just out for a winter's evening entertainment. No sounds of enjoyment either. No laughter or whoops or yells filled the air. Just the slightly unsettling music and watchful eyes of hidden faces. She hadn't even had a chance to show anyone her uncle's picture. These people, whoever they were, had an intimidating air to them, as if they were all part of some private club.

Another buzz in Aveline's pocket. Another text. Aveline glanced at it, before reading it a couple of times. Her mum again.

That's not the same flyer you showed me earlier?!

Not sure I like the sound of you being up there –
come home soon?

Yes, don't worry, won't be long.

Then a text from Sammy flashed up.

I think you should get out of there. I've rung around and nobody knows anything about it. Leave now and I'll come and meet you.

"Hey, Harold, look at these..." Aveline began before realizing with a dreadful, sinking feeling that she was talking to herself.

Harold was nowhere to be seen.

"Harold?" Aveline called.

Above the music and the crackling fire Aveline could hardly hear herself, so it was reasonable to assume Harold wouldn't either. Trying to stay calm, she walked on through the festival. He'd probably just got distracted by something. She sent him a quick text.

Where are you?

Stopping, she looked around. There was constant movement everywhere she turned, people in their masks with their strange, dead black eyes and odd, jerky

movements. It had a dizzying effect, as if she was being carried along on a wave of colour and sound. She tried ringing Harold next, but all she got was his voicemail.

As she glanced up, in the distance, she saw a red woollen hat with a curl of black hair beneath it.

Harold.

He was walking into a small tent that had been erected right next to the long barrow. Running to the entrance, she saw a pathway leading in. A crude, hand-painted sign had been hung by the door, painted in garish red letters.

LOST & NEVER FOUND.

It sounded like a lost property tent, but something about the sign's weird wording made Aveline glance back, suddenly aware that maybe walking in here on her own wasn't the wisest decision. The sun had dipped below the horizon, leaving behind a bloody smear. The snowy fields sparkled with scarlet fire. Taking a deep breath, she turned and walked in.

The sounds of the festival died away to be replaced by an eerie silence. Aveline shivered, despite the heavy layers she'd put on. The air had grown colder.

"Harold?" she called. "You in here?"

The entrance to the tent was narrow and winding, the canvas walls rippling in the icy winter breeze. Brass oil lamps hung from the ceiling, throwing Aveline's shadow ahead of her, so that she appeared to be following a darker, braver version of herself. She'd expected to walk into a place where people could drop off personal items that had been found, like phones and wallets and handbags. But she found herself in a tunnel that seemed to stretch on much further than it should. The proportions seemed wrong.

A glance at her phone. The bars had all disappeared. Aveline didn't like this one bit.

But she wasn't about to leave Harold. She needed to find him and get home.

Glancing around, Aveline saw that every few metres, there was a poster attached to the wall. Aveline stopped to look at one. It was a missing person poster, though unlike any she'd seen before. Usually on things like these, along with the person's picture, there would be a detailed description of what they'd been wearing, their height, build, and so on. There would also be an appeal for information with a phone number to call if you knew anything. But these posters were very different.

They had photographs, but they were blurry and dark, as if they'd been taken in a cellar. And instead of a description, there appeared to be a warning.

MISSING.

JASON SKAHILL.

Went hiking on the moor.

Got too close.

Prying eyes get poked out.

The next one along was equally bizarre.

SHEILA MCMAHON.

HAVE YOU SEEN THIS WOMAN?

No? You're not likely to either.

On and on they went. The faded faces of people she didn't know stared back at her as if she were their last hope.

MARK BRAEBURN.

LOST.

Wrong place.

Wrong time.

Now forever silent.

Aveline shuddered. The messages in these posters weren't appeals for help. They were more like the epitaphs you'd read on gravestones, except these had a spiteful and threatening tone. They didn't even seem to be a poor attempt at a joke. They were just downright nasty, like something a bully would write. She felt as if she'd stepped into something that she didn't understand – and didn't want to. Even the air tasted bitter. The sooner she was out of this place, the better. She was about to call out to Harold again when a particular poster caught her eye.

MISSING.

ROWAN JONES.

Last seen not minding his own business.

Any information on his whereabouts
to be kept to yourself.

(Nobody likes telltales.)

The poster had a picture of her uncle on it that Aveline had never seen before. He was standing inside what appeared to be a stone chamber, an expression of utter bewilderment on his face. Behind his glasses, his eyes were wide and disbelieving, as if he were seeing something he'd never encountered before.

Aveline backed away, her breath coming in short, ragged gasps. The picture seemed to capture the moment before something terrible happened and while she didn't want to look at it, she couldn't tear her eyes away. With every step, the tent became more nightmarish, and with every passing second, the festival screamed danger. In the flickering light of the lamps, shadows reared on the walls and her earlier determination quickly faded, replaced by a cold emptiness in the pit of her stomach.

Then, somewhere up ahead of her, she heard Harold's voice.

"Aveline?"

His voice sounded distant, echoey and more than a little frightened.

"Harold! I'm in here, in the tent! Hang on, I'll come find you."

Darting along the curiously long canvas corridor, Aveline reached the end and saw that it split into two. Left or right.

"Harold, can you hear me?"

"Over here!"

Harold's voice swirled around her as if carried on the wind, but it seemed to come from her left and so she went that way. As she ran, the path grew rockier

underfoot. Missing persons posters flashed by on the walls. There were so many of them.

"Harold?"

"Why are you running that way, I'm over here?"

Spinning around, she saw Harold standing a little way behind her. A flood of relief ran through her body; the only warm sensation she'd had that night.

"Harold!"

Harold's tense, pinched expression relaxed for a moment.

"Am I glad to see you," he said, jogging up to greet her.

"I must have got lost. What is this place?"

"I have no idea, only, I know I don't like it," Aveline said, breathlessly. "I saw you come in here and followed you."

Harold threw his fringe to one side in confusion.

"You followed me? *I* followed *you*. And have you seen these creepy posters on the wall?"

"Yes, you've got to come and see this," Aveline said.

"You won't believe it but there's one of my Uncle Rowan. He's been here, I know it. We were right, Harold, except I think something terrible may have happened to him."

Leading Harold back the way she'd come, Aveline expected to arrive at the point where she'd taken a left turn. But the tunnel kept going and going until, to

Aveline's horror, it ended in a flap of torn, muddied canvas that stretched out over a rocky floor. Beyond it, there was only a narrow tunnel leading away into the darkness. Aveline blanched. Attached to the raggedy flap of canvas that lay in a muddy pool of rainwater, there was one final poster.

VANISHED.

AVELINE & HAROLD.

Instead of taking the right turn.

They took the wrong one.

Now alone in the dark.

The picture showed the two of them looking scared and pale. Their clothes were the same ones they were wearing now. Harold's fringe stuck out in a raggedy shape from underneath his beanie. It looked as if it had been taken only a few seconds ago.

"What is that?" Harold said in a trembling voice.

"What's happening? I don't understand!"

"Sammy warned us," Aveline said. "He said it was dangerous and just before I lost sight of you he sent me this." She held up Sammy's texts for Harold to read. "And then my mum sent me these, which are even

stranger. She seemed to think we were going to some kids' Christmas thing down in the village. Whatever flyer she saw in the house wasn't the same thing we were looking at."

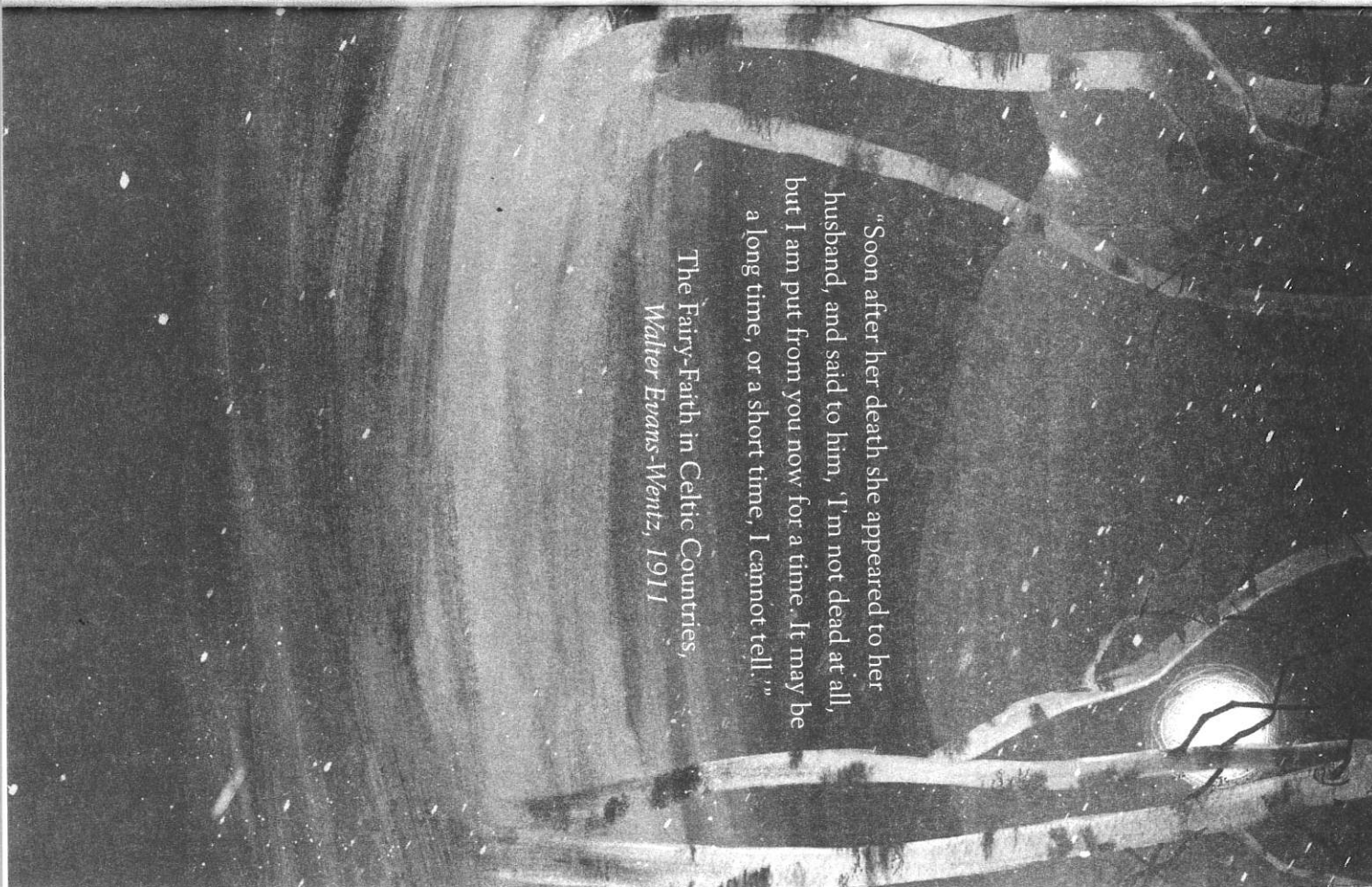
"Can you call your mum now? Or Sammy? Or anyone? My phone's got zero reception."

"Mine, too," Aveline said. "Quick, let's try the other way."

They ran in the opposite direction, now in the grip of full-blown fear. There were too many *hows*, *whys* and *whats* for Aveline's mind to consider right now. All she wanted was to feel the cold night air on her face and get back to a warm house and a mum asking her why she was late when they'd agreed she'd be back by 5 p.m.

As they fled back through the canvas tunnel, the lamps on the wall began to flicker. Grabbing Harold, Aveline pulled him closer.

A moment later, they were plunged into darkness.



"Soon after her death she appeared to her husband, and said to him, 'I'm not dead at all, but I am put from you now for a time. It may be a long time, or a short time, I cannot tell.'"

The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries,
Walter Evans-Wentz, 1911