

GETTING RID OF TEDDY

by Ben Jeapes

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Of course Colin already knew what Adam's room looked like, but going in without his brother knowing was just the adventure that a rainy morning called for. Two pairs of eyes peeked round the door at the level of the door handle.

'Adam's not here,' whispered the owner of the top pair. 'Come on, Teddy.'

Colin Deane and his teddy bear ventured forth.

It was like Colin's own room, untidy despite their mother's best efforts, but plastic aircraft hung from the ceiling and there was a different taste in posters that reflected Adam's extra three years.

The clothes and shoes that lay about were two sizes too big for Colin, and he put his foot next to one of Adam's trainers and thought wistfully of the day he, too, would be seven. Colin wasn't sure how many years lay between four and seven, but he knew it was a long time to wait. But he wasn't here to look at the clothes.

'That's Adam's bed where he goes to bed, and that's Adam's radio, and ... look, Teddy!' Colin's eyes settled on the most hallowed object in the house and his tone changed to reverent awe. The plastic fighter gleamed in its new camouflage paint and Royal Air Force decals; Adam had spent hours putting it together with parental help and it was his pride and joy. 'That's Adam's Spitfire, and you go 'eeee-owwww dakka-dakka-dakka, take that, nasty,' and it flies about-'

'Don't you dare touch my Spitfire!'

Colin spun round guiltily, still clutching Teddy. Adam advanced on him from the doorway, a blond cherub (which he got from his father) with a ferocious scowl.

'Who said you could come in my room? What are you doing here?'

Adam measured 49 inches from top to toe and Colin cowered beneath every one of them.

'Teddy wanted to see,' he quavered.

'Oh, that stupid Teddy!' Adam jeered. He wrenched Teddy from Colin's grasp. 'Stupid, stupid Teddy.'

'No!' Colin cried. Adam stalked across to the door and threw Teddy out on to the landing. Colin chased after him.

'I'm sorry, Teddy, I'm sorry,' he wailed, picking Teddy up and cuddling him.

'And stop talking to it all the time, or you'll ... you'll really be sorry!' Adam shouted, and slammed the door shut. Colin and Teddy were alone on the landing.

‘Why should’n’ I talk to ‘Teddy?’ Colin sobbed as he hugged ‘Teddy’ to him. ‘Teddy’ said he didn’t mind.

* * *

It was that time of the week when Mummy – Elizabeth Deane – entertained. It was partly a task foisted on her by being the wife of a Church Elder and partly one she undertook out of a sense of duty – the newcomer to the flock (she had been a member for some ten years now, but still felt a newcomer), paying her way. She also enjoyed the occasional break from the boys’ exclusive company and so every Wednesday the other women in the church who didn’t have anything else to do met in the Deane house for coffee.

Elizabeth was in the middle of a conversation, of sorts, with Mrs May. It could be called a conversation, but the word ‘interrogation’ did come to mind.

‘I do think siblings are such a tower of strength, don’t you, Elizabeth? Do you have any family? I mean, apart from here? Any brothers or sisters? I’ve heard your boys talk about their Uncle Bill-’

Boy, not boys, Elizabeth thought. It was Colin who doted on his Uncle Bill.

‘I’ve got brothers and sisters, but I don’t see them much,’ Elizabeth said, trying not to look as though the subject was painful. She didn’t think the people here would approve of her family. ‘Not even Bill.’

‘Oh, dear, you ought to, you know!’

‘I-’

‘I mean, a family is such a tower-’

‘Well, I have Michael,’ Elizabeth said. Everyone knew and liked her husband.

‘Oh, Michael, yes!’ Mrs May agreed, ‘such a tower of strength ... ‘

Elizabeth was spared Mrs May listing all the other towers of strength that she could think of by the unmistakable ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’ that always heralded Colin’s arrival at these meetings. Adam would be playing with the other children and the last thing they would want was a four-year-old hanging around. Colin didn’t know much about the world, but he knew when he was among friends.

‘Hello, Colin!’

‘Ah, look at his little sandals!’

‘Who’s your friend, Colin?’

Colin stood basking in the admiration, smiling shyly, with an arm wrapped in a loving stranglehold round ‘Teddy’s’ neck. Everyone but him knew he was showing off for all he was worth. Shyness eventually took over and he ran to Elizabeth and buried his face in her side. There were a few laughs and conversation went back to normal.

Elizabeth felt the tug on her skirt and looked down.

‘Can I play a game?’ Colin whispered.

‘As long as it doesn’t make a noise, dear.’

‘Can I play chets?’ A chess set was permanently set out by the window: Michael Deane, the boys’ father, was a fan of the game and hoped to teach it to both his sons. He had spent a lot of the previous Sunday evening teaching Adam, with Colin observing closely.

‘Who will you play chets with, dear?’

‘Teddy.’

Elizabeth shrugged and several people chuckled.

‘Okay,’ Elizabeth said, and turned back to the guests to talk about the slide show presentation on Africa that was looming on the church’s social calendar.

Colin grabbed the chess set with one hand; the board folded and the pieces scattered.

‘Oh, Teddy, you are so cumsee.’ A fair imitation of his father; Elizabeth half heard it and smiled to herself.

Colin put the board down on the floor and sat Teddy the other side of it. He shut his eyes for a moment, then opened them and quickly repositioned the pieces as they should be.

‘Black queen on black, white queen on white, Teddy,’ he said. He curled his fingers up into fists and held his hands out to Teddy. ‘Which one do you want to be?’ Teddy apparently chose the hand with the black pawn, even though Colin had forgotten to put a pawn in either hand at all. ‘Okay, I’m white so I go first. Now, you always move a pawn first and you can move them two squares on their first go. I’ll move this pawn here to free the bishop-’

Some of the guests seemed quite impressed; Colin’s words were sinking into Elizabeth’s consciousness over the general chatter and she was trying not to stare at him. Colin’s pronunciation was still imperfect but he was talking like someone far older.

‘One, two, and one to the side. See, Teddy? I’ve got my knights and my bishops out to do the attacking-’

Elizabeth had come over to watch the game. Colin was making his own moves and moving the pieces for Teddy without any hesitation. Sometimes he moved a piece for Teddy, then corrected Teddy out loud and repositioned it.

This game, Elizabeth had finally realised, was an exact replay, minus the pauses, of the game Michael had played with Adam, complete with Michael’s commentary. The only thing missing was what Adam had said; Teddy was silently taking Adam’s part.

‘Why don’t you move this pawn, dear?’ she said as an experiment. Colin looked up crossly.

‘No, Mummy, I move this, and Teddy moves this, and I move this-’

‘And why’s that, dear?’

‘Cos Teddy says!’ There were indulgent chuckles from the guests and Elizabeth decided the best she could do was divert attention altogether. The game was over five minutes later.

‘Shall we play another, Te-’

‘Colin, dear, why don’t you play in the garden? Look, it’s stopped raining.’

Colin’s ephemeral attention span evaporated at once.

‘Okay,’ he said happily. He grabbed Teddy and ran out, leaving Elizabeth wondering what else Teddy told him.

* * *

Teddy told Colin a lot of things. When the guests had gone he told him Adam was about to join him in the garden, so Colin looked out warily for his big brother. Adam was ashamed of his earlier temper and offered to let Colin play with him and his Mutabots. They carried on the game after lunch and spent the afternoon happily together; the rain held off and Teddy was relegated to the sidelines.

Later he told Colin that dinner was almost ready, and Colin had his hands properly washed just as Mummy called him. Mummy wouldn’t allow Teddy in the bath with him but Teddy was waiting for him afterwards, nestling against his pillow. Mummy kissed him goodnight and he fell asleep with Teddy cuddled up close to him.

Teddy was under standing orders to wake Colin up when his father got home, so Michael would have no excuse for not coming up and giving him a goodnight kiss. Michael Deane thought Colin was a very light sleeper but he always obliged; he felt guilty at having to work so long each day to pay the mortgage, which meant he only saw his sons on weekdays for a few snatched minutes in the morning. The tall, fair haired figure appearing silhouetted against the hall light in Colin’s doorway was always a highlight of the day for Colin. It reminded him of a picture of Jesus in church, and he knew that was good.

Michael always spent a quite unreasonable time talking to Elizabeth first, and Teddy told Colin what they were saying.

‘How was today, love?’

‘Oh, the children only had one fight. I can’t complain.’

Michael laughed.

‘What was it this time?’

‘Colin went into Adam’s room without telling him.’

‘Oh no! Call the Security Council! Send an expeditionary force-’

As usual, long words he didn’t understand killed Colin’s interest and Teddy had to wake him up again before Michael came in for the kiss.

Later Elizabeth put in a surprise appearance herself, but Teddy did not wake Colin because he had not been told to. Elizabeth looked down at the sleeping child and felt a tight knot in her innards.

‘Can you read my mind, Teddy?’ she thought. Teddy’s eyes stared blankly at the ceiling. Colin mumbled in his sleep and half turned over, shifting Teddy’s position; now Teddy stared blankly at her. She took a step sideways, out of the line of Teddy’s gaze.

How long had it been going on? Teddy had been a first birthday present and Colin had been talking to him for as long as he had been able to talk at all, but for how long had Teddy been answering back? She would never get an answer, knowing Colin’s sense of time, but she imagined it hadn’t been too long. Perhaps the last few months, maybe even weeks. Surely she would have picked up a clue earlier than today, if it had been any longer.

‘Daddy will blow his top if I tell him, Colin,’ she thought again. ‘That’s what you get for marrying into another religion.’ She knelt down and kissed Colin’s soft cheek. ‘And I could still be imagining it all, couldn’t I? I’ve still not got any real proof.’

But she knew, deep down, that she had all the proof she needed. Sceptics need a lot of proof and a lot of convincing. Believers need a lot less.

* * *

It was the middle of the week and Colin was playing hide-and-seek with Teddy in the living room; which is to say, he hid Teddy and then sought him. To make the game less one-sided he would look in several places where Teddy wasn’t before finally tracking him down with a cry of triumph.

Elizabeth wasn’t sure what to expect. Would Teddy scurry across the floor and hide somewhere else? She doubted it ... at least, not if Colin didn’t want it to happen.

She sat down to watch. Colin located Teddy behind the chair and shouted, ‘got you!’

‘Colin, darling, can you come here?’ Elizabeth asked. Colin obediently toddled over to her, still clutching Teddy, and she lifted him up on to her lap.

‘Oof. Heavy boy.’ Colin looked at her expectantly. Well, how should she start? Colin, darling, you’re a witch, and Teddy’s your familiar ...

‘Darling, can I ask you about Teddy?’

‘Sure,’ Colin said. Elizabeth took a breath.

‘Darling, does Teddy talk to you a lot?’

Colin shrugged.

‘He does if I want.’

‘And what does he tell you?’

‘What I ask him.’

‘Can he tell you ... where Adam is now?’

‘He’s shy, Mummy,’ Colin said.

‘Can you ask him very, very nicely? Just for me?’

‘Where’s Adam, Teddy?’ Colin said. Then, ‘He’s in the bathroom, going wee-wee.’

‘Oh. Well, um, I don’t think Teddy should look at Adam, then.’

‘Okay,’ Colin said. Upstairs, the toilet flushed. Elizabeth thought about what to ask next.

‘Can Teddy move, dear?’ she asked brightly. Colin made Teddy wave at her and Elizabeth sighed. ‘Can he move without you holding his arm, Colin?’ she said. Colin looked at her with a sad patience.

‘Teddies can’t, Mummy,’ he said slowly, and Elizabeth almost laughed. What had she expected? Movement, from a cloth bag full of acrylic stuffing?

‘So is that all Teddy can do, darling? Does he just tell you things?’ Elizabeth said. Colin wriggled, anxious to get off Elizabeth’s lap and go back to his game.

‘Yes.’

Elizabeth let him slide down and sighed. It might actually be all right. It actually might.

A short while later she heard the raised voices. She rolled her eyes to the ceiling and went to investigate. The boys stopped bickering the moment she appeared and she coaxed the story out of them.

Adam had also staked a claim to the living room and Colin was still playing hide-and-seek with Teddy. This was incompatible with Adam’s vision of the living room as the bridge of a starship.

‘All right, then,’ Elizabeth said, ‘I’ll split the room in two. Adam can have all of this bit, up to this line, and Colin can have all of this bit. Right? Now, no more arguing. Mummy’s trying to work.’

She left, thinking that Solomon couldn’t have done it better.

She didn’t see the boys go back to their respective games, pointedly ignoring each other. Colin hid Teddy behind one of the chairs, then stood in the middle of his half with his eyes shut, counting to five. Adam positioned his plastic soldiers around the room in lieu of the rest of the bridge crew and sat on the sofa. He pretended that the picture over the fireplace was the viewscreen and gave orders for warp factor seven.

‘... five! Coming!’ Colin called.

‘Warp factor seven, engage,’ Adam repeated, a bit louder.

‘Where are you, Teddy? Where are you?’ Colin said, peering behind the other chair.

‘Shut up, Colin. Shields on full.’

‘I’m in my half,’ Colin said stubbornly. ‘Are you here, Teddy?’ He peered behind the bookcase.

‘Your stupid Teddy’s behind the chair,’ Adam said. Colin ignored him. ‘I said, your stupid Teddy’s behind the chair.’

‘Don’t spoil it!’

‘It’s a stupid game!’

‘Spoilsport!’

‘Look!’ Adam crossed into Colin’s half of the room and pulled Teddy out. ‘Here it is, stupid old Teddy.’

‘Give!’ Colin shouted, jumping up and trying to grab Teddy. Adam held Teddy above his head while Colin kept jumping.

‘Please, Adam!’ Colin wailed.

‘Pees, A-dum,’ Adam mimicked. He giggled and drop kicked Teddy across the room ...

* * *

Elizabeth tore into the room, panting. Her legs had started carrying her there the moment she had heard the screams. This wasn’t just one boy tormenting the other. These screams had real, naked terror in them.

Teddy lay face down in the middle of the floor and the brothers sat in opposite corners of the room. Colin was sitting, legs straight out in front of him, head tilted to the ceiling and bawling.

Adam cowered in his corner, curled up into a ball. He was doing the screaming. He screamed even more when she touched him and recoiled from her. His face was white and his eyes were wide and staring. He was terrified.

‘Adam, darling, it’s me, Mummy,’ she soothed. Adam stopped screaming but still stared. ‘Adam, whatever happened?’

‘He attacked me!’ Adam howled, and flung his arms around her. ‘Mummy, he attacked me!’

‘Oh, darling, I’m sure Colin-’

‘Teddy!’ Adam screamed.

* * *

Later, when Elizabeth was sitting on the sofa with an arm around either boy and with Teddy a safe distance away on the floor, Adam was more coherent.

‘He turned into a thing,’ he said, in between his sobs, ‘a horrible, horrible, thing, with claws and ... and ... and it came at me, and ... ‘

‘He was horrid,’ Colin sobbed. ‘He kicked Teddy.’

An illusion? Or had Teddy really changed?

‘But did Teddy hurt you, darling?’ Elizabeth asked. No answer. ‘Darling?’ she repeated.

‘Not really,’ Adam said sulkily. Then, ‘But it happened, Mummy! It really did! I saw a horrid thing ... ‘

‘I know, darling, I know,’ Elizabeth said gently.

‘You don’t believe me,’ Adam mumbled.

Oh, I do, I do.

She was going to have to lie to her son. She was going to have to convince Adam that it hadn’t happened, and do so before Michael came home so that Adam wouldn’t mention it. He was old enough not to believe it himself, really, and perhaps he would come to think he had imagined it. Which was probably true.

But she would still be lying.

But later? Supposing Colin lost his temper again? Would it get worse?

The glory of Christ ... She knew all about that. The church taught that the gifts and talents of its members should be used to serve others, as Christ had done. But if Colin, through Teddy, could conjure up an image so powerful as to scare the living daylights out of his brother ...

You’re on probation, Teddy, she thought. *Just step over the line, one more time, one tiny step ...*

Though she wasn’t sure what she would do. What she could do.

* * *

‘Why’ve we got to go to church?’ Adam scowled. ‘It’s boring.’

‘No it’s not, dear,’ Elizabeth said firmly, straightening his tie. ‘And you and Colin can see all your friends in Sunday School.’ Colin scuttled into the room with Teddy in tow, to ask the usual question.

‘Can Teddy come?’

‘Afraid not, darling.’

‘Told you, Teddy. Teddies don’t go to church.’

And this one wouldn’t be very welcome if he did, Elizabeth thought glumly.

‘I knew it would be boring,’ Adam muttered from the back seat on the way home.

Both boys had been siphoned off to Sunday School after the first hymn, as usual, and Elizabeth felt it was just as well.

She had gone through torment and Michael had been uncomfortable for her sake, knowing her background. Ritual abuse of children was in the news as the latest media bandwagon: the newspapers were full of horror stories about children allegedly dragged into covens, forced to drink blood, sexually abused for the benefit of the forces of darkness ... Today the minister had decided to emphasise the party line on it. His text: 'thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.'

'I like Miss Day,' Colin ventured.

'That's 'cos you're stupid!'. Colin retreated in hurt silence.

'Now, boys,' said Michael from the front. 'What did you talk about, Colin?'

'Miss Day told us about Jonah and the whale.'

'That's exciting, isn't it?' said Elizabeth.

'I want to talk about witches like you did,' Adam muttered.

'Witches,' Colin said, for no real reason, and began to sing. 'Witchy, witchy, witchy, witchy ... '

'Who said we were talking about witches, Adam?' Michael asked.

'John's dad.'

'Thanks, John's dad,' Michael muttered.

'Uncle Bill's a witch,' Colin said suddenly. The car swerved slightly.

'Whatever gave you that idea?' Michael said sharply, and he saw the alarmed look on Colin's face in the mirror. 'Who said that, Colin?' he asked more gently, and Elizabeth knew, knew, without a shadow of doubt, what Colin's answer would be and interrupted before he had finished the first syllable.

'Te-'

'Uncle Bill has some funny ideas, darling,' Elizabeth said quickly. 'He doesn't understand about the church like we do. That's right, isn't it?'

'Some funny ideas. That's all,' Michael agreed.

'Uncle Bill's nice,' Colin insisted.

'Course he is, he gave you your stupid Teddy, didn't he?' Adam said. Elizabeth almost gasped. Of course he had! Uncle Bill. Why, that ...

* * *

The boys were chasing each other around the park over the damp grass, squealing happily at the top of their voices. The idea of the game seemed to be that they should play tag and Colin should chase Adam but when he caught him it didn't actually count. Colin didn't seem to mind.

Teddy was safely back at home. Colin always asked if Teddy could come when they went out, and permission was always refused. Elizabeth didn't think she could stand the results if Teddy got dropped in a muddy puddle.

Elizabeth sat on one of the park benches. She watched the man sitting at the other end of the bench throw a stick for his dog, a red setter. The dog bounded after it, ears and tail flapping.

‘The moon shines brightly over Moscow,’ the man said ominously. He had a pleasant face and was slightly taller and slightly younger than her.

‘I’m onto you, Bill,’ Elizabeth said.

‘Well, and hello to you to, Big Sis,’ the man said. The dog trotted up to them with the stick in its mouth. It dropped the stick at Elizabeth’s feet and barked expectantly.

‘Hey, gormless! How am I meant to have a clandestine rendezvous when you go and give it away?’ Bill shouted.

‘Oh, Bill, please,’ Elizabeth said. The man looked at her and grinned.

How she loved that grin. Bill alone of the Family had known just how unhappy she had been. To be in the Family and not possess the Craft, not to the slightest degree ... worse than that. To be the eldest child, the heir apparent to a line unbroken for centuries, and be Craftless ... Bill had never had any problems that way, but he had empathy and was the closest to her in age. Grandma had never understood, and her bad temper and belief in the supernatural had scared Elizabeth witless. It didn’t help that things actually did go bump in the night in their household. She had fled as soon as she could and been disinherited as a result.

To compound her crime, she had married a Christian. She had met Michael at college and his faith had attracted her right from the start. Here was she, timid and riddled with superstition, and there was he, secure and confident in the protection of his God before whom all other powers trembled. It was no contest and she had embraced that protection willingly.

Bill had been the only one of her relatives to come to the wedding, and he had had to lie about his whereabouts that day to the rest of the Family. And he had promised. He had been unwilling, he had made no secret of his disagreement, but he had promised that her children would never learn about the Craft from him.

‘Well, you started it,’ he said. ‘Meet me in the park, the bench by the bandstand’ ... very John Le Carré. When do we feed the ducks?’

Elizabeth stuck to her agenda.

‘Bill, don’t you remember the agreement? How could you do it?’

Bill looked at her blankly.

‘Could I what?’

‘You gave Teddy to Colin!’

Bill frowned, trying to remember.

‘Oh, that. Well, yes, so what? Isn’t an uncle allowed to be nice to his nephews? How does giving teddy bears constitute teaching the boys about the Craft?’ He paused, thinking. ‘Besides, I gave one to Adam as well, when he was small.’

‘I know. He shoots his air rifle at it.’

‘Really?’ Bill grinned widely. ‘That’s my boy!’

‘My boy. But ...’ For the first time Elizabeth began to doubt. ‘It doesn’t bother you?’

‘Of course not!’ Now Bill was frowning again. ‘Look, Sis, what is it?’

Elizabeth paused, suddenly feeling foolish. Maybe ... no. How could she have thought it of her brother? Of course Teddy wasn’t a Trojan Horse for the Craft. Teddy had been an innocent present from a loving uncle.

‘How are you, Bill?’ she said, changing the subject. Bill’s expression indicated that he intended to return to the subject in due course, but for now he let her get away with it,

‘Me? I’m trying to be good. I blotted my copybook in a big way ...’

‘As much as me?’ Elizabeth said ironically.

‘No way! But I’ve been doing the rounds, you see, trying to get some research going ... like, Edinburgh has quite a neat little parapsychology department, for instance, and Grandma flipped her lid when I approached them. She still insists the Craft is boring old magic. But, I recanted.’ He looked suitably repentant. ‘Fortunately the old bat hasn’t grasped the idea of PO boxes yet and I’ve had quite a neat little correspondence going, so as soon as she snuffs it, Sis, as soon as and I’m in charge, things’ll change. Drastically. The s-word will be mentioned under our roof with impunity and you’ll be welcomed back.’

‘The s-word?’

‘Science!’ Bill said dramatically. ‘Meanwhile, Sis, how’s the enemy camp?’

‘It’s ... I still find it different. But I’m very happy, Bill, very happy.’

‘The lads look happy too.’

‘They are.’

Bill’s dog put his head on Elizabeth’s lap and looked up at her hopefully. She ruffled his ears for him without thinking, then remembered and recoiled. ‘Is this your latest?’

‘Yeah, he’s great,’ Bill said warmly. ‘Old Graymalkin.’

‘Bill!’

‘Sorry, did I say Graymalkin? I meant Rufus. He’s the best yet. Just watch. Hey, stupid, look! Look stick! Fetch!’

The stick had been lying at his feet. Before Rufus's gaze it rose slowly into the air and then suddenly flew off. Rufus bounded after it.

'I'm impressed,' Elizabeth said, without putting her heart into it.

'It's all a matter of love, Sis. I love Rufus like no other, so he works extra well for me.' Bill looked at her askance, shaking his head. 'Still don't like it, do you?'

'The church says it's wrong,' Elizabeth said dogmatically. 'It's Satanic.'

'I know a lot of witches and a couple of Satanists who would take exception to that.'

'Oh ... Bill, does a familiar have to be an animal?' There was such strain in her voice that Bill looked at her oddly.

'This isn't hypothetical, is it?'

'No. No, it isn't.'

'Uh huh. Well ... I've never known one that isn't, Sis. Why do you ... ?' A look of revelation dawned like a sunrise on Bill's face, as everything suddenly fell into place. 'Not Teddy?'

'Right.'

Bill whistled.

'Well, who'd have thought it? Tell me more, Sis.'

So Elizabeth told him.

'... I mean, I've always carefully kept the house free of pets, I'm not stupid, but ... ' And she told him all about Teddy – everything that she knew. 'I mean, Colin knows things, and can do things, and the other day ... ' She described the scene in the living room with the two boys. Bill seemed awe-struck.

'And he uses his teddy bear to focus? Wowee, that little boy has got it bad.'

'But, talking to him?'

'It could seem that way to a four-year-old. Sometimes I could swear Rufus talks to me, but it's just my own thoughts bouncing off him.'

'So how did it happen?'

'How?' Bill shrugged. 'Who does Colin love more than anything, Sis?' He saw the answer in her face. 'And I know it ought to be an animal because it always has been, but ... ' He shrugged again. 'I think kids act on the bumble bee principle. If no one tells 'em it's impossible, they don't realise they can't do it. And from the sound of it ... you know, I think little Colin could wipe the floor with Grandma, when he's older.' He looked thoughtfully over at the playing boys and Elizabeth knew he wasn't just studying them with his eyes. 'Maybe he's the one who'll finally make us respectable and get the world to accept psionics as a scientific fact.'

'So what can I do?' Elizabeth said in desperation.

‘Easy. Tell Michael everything. Tell him that as well as the hair and the eyes that he’s got off you, Colin has inherited a perfectly natural paranormal power ... ‘

‘No! I mean, no. I know Michael. I love him deeply but he’ll never accept that his son is like ... like he knows my mother was. Like he knows you are.’

‘Then the answer is obvious,’ Bill said, slowly. ‘Get rid of ‘Teddy.’

Elizabeth finally decided.

‘I will,’ she said. ‘It’s the only thing I can do.’

Bill shook his head, looking at the boys again.

‘It won’t do you a bit of good, you know. Not if he’s as powerful as I think. He’ll find something else.’

‘And I’ll stop him!’ Elizabeth snapped. ‘I’ll ... Bill, get this into your head, I will not let my boy grow up as a witch!’

The tension between them, which had began to thaw as they spoke, was now crystallised in the air around them. They were on opposite sides of a vast gulf and always would be.

‘As you will,’ Bill said tonelessly. ‘But in fourteen years’ time he’ll be an adult and, if he asks, I’ll do everything I can to help him.’

His face promptly lost its seriousness, which it never held it for more than a few seconds, and he passed her a folded bank note. ‘Here, Sis. Buy the boys an ice cream or two from their Unca Will-yum, will you?’

* * *

How, how on earth do you get rid of your son’s teddy bear without him suspecting? The perfect murder must be easier to plan.

It had to be permanent, irreversible. She couldn’t just hide him somewhere – if Colin could use Teddy at a distance he would soon track Teddy down. Teddy had to be so obviously disposed of that Colin would know he was gone, and wouldn’t try and get in touch again.

But might not Teddy alert Colin to her planned treachery in the first place? No, probably not. Colin had to tell Teddy what to do, and why would Colin suspect his own mother of turning traitor against him?

There was a building site down the road. Drop Teddy into one of the concrete mixers? Visions of newspaper headlines swam in front of her and she half-smiled: Teddy Bear in Gangland Slaying Horror.

Colin started school in another month. Could she wait until then and burn Teddy while he was away?

But how could she explain it? Sorry, darling, I had Teddy in the garden with me when I had a bonfire and he slipped ...

The answer came one typically rainy day.

* * *

The day was representative of a wet summer. Elizabeth was in the kitchen, slowly stirring a saucepan full of soup without looking at it.

It could work. She would have to be careful, distract Colin for just a moment ... it could be done.

The soup began to fizzle and she realised she had stopped stirring, lost in thought. It would be burnt at the bottom.

'Damn!' she said out loud, the strongest word she had said for years. She bit her tongue. *Take it easy, Elizabeth.*

She looked out of the window at the grey day, past the drops on the glass at the faint drizzle that could only be seen against the darker bushes at the end of the garden. The rain really had lightened and would stop soon. She could put the plan into action, if she chose.

Could she do it, now it came to the crunch? Could she really take such a painful step?

'Lunchtime, boys,' she called. Colin obediently appeared a moment later. She saw Adam head past the kitchen door towards the stairs.

'Lunch, Adam,' she repeated.

'I'll just-'

'Now, Adam!' she snapped, before she could catch herself. Adam paused, looked at her face and decided whatever he was about to do could wait.

'Yes, Mummy,' he said meekly, and followed Colin to the table.

Elizabeth took a breath to ask if they had both washed their hands, then realised that of course Adam had been heading for the bathroom to do just that. She let the breath out again and turned to stove with her face burning. *Calm down, calm down.*

She set the bowls of soup out on the table and sat down herself, making a triangle around the table with the boys at the other points. All she could see was Colin's happily innocent face as he sipped away; all she could do was mentally contrast it with the sorrow that she knew would be there if her plan went through. Her son, the witch. That bolstered her a bit.

'Do you like your soup, dear?' she said.

'It's very nice,' Colin said politely.

'Would Teddy like some?' Adam taunted and Elizabeth almost slapped him.

'Adam!' She could do without the boys bickering at this moment. Colin looked comically haughty.

'Don't be dickless,' he said.

‘Colin!’ Without thinking, Elizabeth had reached across and slapped his wrist. His spoon fell into the soup and he stared at her, horrified.

‘Where did you learn that word?’ Elizabeth demanded. ‘Where did you learn that word?’

Colin’s lips trembled.

‘Where?’ Elizabeth repeated. Colin said something soundlessly.

‘What?’

‘You said!’ Colin blurted, and finally burst into tears and fled from the table.

Elizabeth threw down her own spoon and followed the sobbing. She found Colin in the living room, hugging Teddy to him.

Calm, calm, calm.

‘Colin, dear,’ she said gently, gently but firmly, sitting down next to him. ‘I’ve never said that word.’

‘Did,’ Colin said. ‘Dickless.’

‘When?’

‘You know!’

It was probably sometime today, if at all. Colin would never hang onto a new word for long without saying it out loud. Elizabeth patiently ran through the things she had said, and then she had it. Practically the first thing. She had gone in to wake Colin up; Colin had said he wanted to stay in bed forever because it was so nice and warm; she had said, don’t be-

She sighed and took him into her arms.

‘Ri-dic-u-lous, dear,’ she said kindly. ‘I’m very sorry I slapped you but you should learn to say it properly, you know. Let’s go back to lunch, shall we?’

‘Dickless,’ Colin mumbled.

‘Ridic-’

‘Dickless!’ Colin shouted. ‘Dickless! Dickless! Dickless!’

And then Elizabeth realised Colin hadn’t said anything. She had heard the words in her head but his lips hadn’t moved. He had stared defiantly at her and he had hugged Teddy just a bit harder. That was all.

She shuddered and looked out of the window. The rain had stopped completely. Looking back at Colin, it was all she could do to smile at him and keep holding him. Intensive Cuddle Therapy was called for.

‘Well, cheer up and later we’ll go for a nice walk,’ she suggested.

* * *

Don't want to,' said Adam after lunch. He had been most vocal in his complaints about having to stay in.

'Yes you do, dear. We can get some fresh air.'

They put on their coats and pulled on their boots.

'Can Teddy come?' Colin asked, as he usually did.

'Yes, why not, darling? Bring him.' Adam shot her a surprised look, which changed to veiled disgust at parental hypocrisy.

Sure enough, Adam lost his dislike of the outdoors once they were out. They headed towards the common and the boys chased each other through the puddles, throwing up miniature fountains and squealing with laughter. This was how it should be between the brothers, Elizabeth thought. It was a moment to hold in her memory forever, before what she was going to do ruined it.

'Colin, shall I hold Teddy? He'll get wet.'

'Okay,' Colin said. He handed Teddy over and went back to the game. Elizabeth held the stuffed toy and felt like Judas pursing his lips.

The common was split in two by the river and a pedestrian bridge linked the two halves.

'Why don't we go to the bridge and play Poohsticks?' she said. Winnie the Pooh's greatest contribution to Western civilisation.

'Oh, yes!' they chorused.

The river was swollen and dangerously close to its banks. The water rushed by them at speed and notices had been put up warning pedestrians to stay well away from the edge. Even the ducks had given up against the current and were nowhere to be seen.

They collected some twigs and went up onto the bridge. Elizabeth was still holding Teddy.

'Careful, boys,' she said as they leaned over the upstream rail. 'Don't want to fall in.' They held their twigs out over the water. 'Ready, steady, go.'

They dropped their twigs and hurried over to the other side of the bridge.

'That's mine!' Colin cried as his twig emerged in the current.

'And mine!'

'A draw,' said Elizabeth diplomatically. 'Let's go again.'

They went again. Colin's twig was the clear winner.

'Can we play it the other way?' Colin asked.

'Course not, stupid,' Adam said.

'Now, now, Adam. How about a third time?'

Again they held their twigs out.

‘Ready ... ‘ said Elizabeth. The boys were staring eagerly at the water. She took a deep breath. ‘Steady ... ‘

With a sob and a flick of the wrist she sent Teddy over the rail.

‘Look out!’ she called.

Teddy hit the water and spun round, floating face down. Colin stood, gaping, too shocked to howl.

‘Oh no! Quick, catch Teddy!’ Elizabeth cried, and they ran down to the bank. Teddy was a dot in the water. He bumped into a branch that stuck out from the bank and for a moment Elizabeth thought they might actually rescue him, but then he floated free again.

Sink, damn you, sink! Elizabeth was thinking, even as she was shouting encouragement. Colin had started wailing and the sound tore at her. Adam had found a long stick and was holding it out to catch Teddy, but it was several feet too short.

Then, finally, Teddy went under and didn’t come up again.

And Colin was screaming.

* * *

Oh, it was heartbreaking. Colin could not be consoled. A child’s sorrow, final and desperate, because Colin only knew how to live for the present and could not conceive of a time to come when all this would have passed and he would have something else to love. The worst bereavement. Back at the house he sat on Elizabeth’s lap with his arms round her neck and cried his heart out, and every sob was a knife in Elizabeth’s heart.

Colin was still crying when Michael came home and this added to Elizabeth’s suffering. She had to present the official version, the lie, to Michael, her husband. She knew that Michael was cross with her for taking Teddy on the walk in the first place, but was too nice to say so.

The next day Colin was listless. His face was white and he was running a temperature. Elizabeth began to worry. Had she bitten off more than she could chew? She put him to bed. Later she bought him a cup of cocoa and found him half delirious; he was tossing and turning and muttering about Teddy coming back.

She had a horrid feeling that she knew what was happening. He was trying to recall Teddy, physically, dredging him up from the river by the power of his mind. He was spending all his strength on it, but didn’t know it and would not stop until all his strength was gone.

(Could he do it, though? Would he do it? She prayed not.)

The doctor came in and was bemused. He prescribed some foul tasting stuff that Colin hated and went away.

When Michael came home on the third day he found Elizabeth asleep in a chair beside Colin's bed.

'Come to bed,' he said gently. 'We can't do anything. And look at him. He might be getting better.'

He might have been. He was lying still and breathing normally, which meant nothing. It could be recovery, it could be a relapse.

* * *

When Elizabeth went into Colin's room the next morning she was afraid to draw the curtains for what she might see. She reached out for them-

They flew apart of their own accord, hissing on their runners. She stepped backwards with a startled shout and the end of Colin's bed caught the back of her legs. She sat down with a bump. Colin was too short for her to have sat on him, she thought automatically, he only came half way down the bed ...

Colin.

Her son was sitting up, smiling beatifically at her. The colour was back in his cheeks and he looked his usual bubbly self.

'Hello, Mummy,' he said. He still sounded a bit sleepy, but was clearly pleased with himself.

'Co-Colin ... ' She gestured at the curtains. 'Did you do that?'

He caught her lack of enthusiasm and his smile dimmed.

'Didn't you want me to?' he said anxiously.

'How did you?' Elizabeth asked, dreading the answer, and Colin's smile returned to its full innocent brilliance.

'I asked Teddy. Teddy's come back, Mummy.'

'What?' Elizabeth looked round, expecting to see a small, sodden, dripping mass somewhere, perhaps lurching Karloff-like towards her and trailing weeds. Teddy was nowhere to be seen. 'Um, where is he, dear?'

'Here,' Colin said, beaming. He tapped his head. 'Teddy's here, Mummy, and he says he's all right.' He used an expression he had learned from her. 'That's nice, isn't it?'

* * *

Somehow Elizabeth returned to her own room, implications buzzing about in her mind. This was too big for her, but then, she should never have tried to tackle it on her own. Now she was going to have to swallow her pride.

Michael was awake too.

'How is he, love?' he asked.

'He's better.'

‘Wonderful! Isn’t that great?’

He frowned up at her, unable to understand why she wasn’t rejoicing too. She sat down by him and took a hand and squeezed it. She wasn’t the only one who was going to have to swallow pride.

‘Michael, darling, we’ve got to talk ...’