

In this ghost story told, as it were, backwards, a young man's search for a Michaelangelo ceiling becomes his life's work in a way he could never envisage.

Intruding

I was startled by the bald man's abrupt appearance. I only glimpsed his ashen face as he hurried away through the pergola but those eyes stirred something deep in my memory. He made no sound (there was no sound in the garden) but a mocking voice spoke within my head.

Beyond the ragged yew hedge, the limes around Prinny's Folly towered into a sky of battleship grey. I surveyed the garden, taking in the dilapidated gazebo, the overgrown borders and weed-strewn paving. Above the bench on which I sprawled, honeysuckle bushed from a massive brick wall. The wall ran the full distance to the shuttered house: Ladybower Hall. Stone steps led up to a terrace green with lichen. Hard unyielding stone — the very sight of it panicked me ...

Why hadn't I noticed this neglect before? It was as if everything had aged in seconds.

"Think man, think," I muttered. "Take it in stages. Why are you here?"

To find Prinny's Folly, of course. In 1943, on my fifteenth birthday, my uncle — who died serving with the Special Operations Executive in Vichy France — gave me a book about Ladybower. It described the folly's graffito. Legend had it that the Prince Regent himself cut it during a last visit to his ill-starred mistress, Lady Amelia Eaton. Twelve years later there I was: sitting beside the entwined monograms wolfing corned beef sandwiches and ice cream soda — and regretting that I'd forgotten my camera.

"Trespassers will be prosecuted," I read from a notice — but they wouldn't catch me!

I hid my haversack, checked my torch and stuffed it with my notebook into a trouser pocket.

The next stage of my expedition involved a difficult climb and a darkened house. Creeping towards the east wing, I remember thinking that it must take an awful lot of work to keep those sunlit hedges so neat.

Sunlit? Neat?

I frowned at the rickety archway through which the bald man had crept; how could I have regarded this garden as anything but sadly neglected — and what had happened to the sun? Why rest so soon after starting out? Can ice cream soda poison the brain? There were so many questions.

Shaking my head, I told myself to get a grip. I was here for a purpose. My visit had been planned carefully. It all started with that pre-war book which, with its coy stories of Prinny's generosity towards Lady Amelia — and her suicide — led me to a pamphlet about Italianate frescoes. They included my target: The Heavenly Ceiling. The mid-Victorian author claimed that Prince George had given 'Lady A' a fresco which had been filched from Rome — a ceiling decorated by Michaelangelo himself. And the 1936 guide book confirmed that, before the Victorian orgy of renovation, the grand staircase had boasted an Italianate ceiling. There was more evidence in the archive of the Eaton family: unsigned letters to Lady Amelia. In one, her lover described how he had been 'consumed with passion' during a ball; they had 'dallied beneath a heavenly canopy worthy of the Sistine Chapel'. Ladybower's ceiling became an obsession. As a would-be art historian, rediscovering it was just what I needed to make myself known. But there was a major problem: the house was strictly private. During the war, the estate had been used as a secret training base — hence my uncle's involvement and the set of lock picks and the sketch plan he gave me. The state apartments had been sealed but Uncle told me that trainees brought out souvenirs in a rite of passage. The War Office responded by bricking up doorways and installing locked bulkheads — which Uncle and his friends mapped.

In the ten years since the war, two owners had tried to restore Ladybower. The first made the west wing habitable and opened Repton's gardens to the public but the second was adamant that no one else would see Ladybower's splendours until he received a grant for the Hall's restoration. I couldn't wait that long.

On the terrace I stared up at my route. A less agile man wouldn't have risked it; I, however, fit from my National Service stint and fresh from a rock-climbing weekend was undeterred. Even a break in the lead drainpipe and a shower of rotten mortar didn't stop me. I'd chosen the day after seeing a photo of the owner and his family in the paper. They were boarding the Queen Mary. No doubt there was a housekeeper but at one-ish she'd be at lunch and I'd planned my route to avoid the restored wing. I reached the dormer window of a servant's room and looked down at the garden forty feet below the balustrade. On a sunlit path a black cat made its way towards the back of the house — a good omen, I smiled and then paused.

Sunlit?

Once again, I experienced that hollow feeling. No one has explained the phenomenon of *déjà vu*.

I had been this way before.

When I took out my penknife to force the window catch, the torch fell from my pocket. It bounced between the balusters and out of sight.

"You bloody fool," I groaned.

How would I find my way around the labyrinth Uncle had drawn let alone examine a concealed fresco? National Service blind-obedience training took over: I had a mission and must not give up. "Grit the teeth," I told myself.

The first obstacle was a bulkhead door but it was surprisingly easy to use the lock picks on it. A maze of sky-lighted passages led to another door. A servants' stairway took me down to the second floor — and a strange unnatural darkness. It was while I was feeling my way along a blank wall that I heard voices through it.

Although the route had taken me towards the back of the house, I didn't think I was so far west. The voices were female; one was of a panic-stricken child.

"It's locked. Oh Dorothy, we've been locked in," she wailed.

She coughed. I moved forward, collided with a door — and smelt wood smoke.

Fire! Forget Michaelangelo, I must save those girls. I recalled what the guide book said: there had been a big fire during the Victorian restoration and another in the kitchens in 1921. The next was due.

"Olive, try the other door," the older girl shouted. "Get down on the floor below the smoke."

There was more coughing.

"I can't see," Olive shrieked.

"Here, feel for my hand. Crawl on your tummy."

"I'm coming," I yelled.

Having picked its lock, I found that the door was at the head of a spiral staircase. I hurtled down to the first floor on which were the state apartments. I expected to feel ornate door cases on both sides of the corridor but, again, the northern side was a blank wall. And the smell of smoke had diminished. It seemed that the fire was now above me.

Something moved in the gloom.

I thought the face was a portrait. A round-eyed girl with short dark hair stared at me, lips parted.

I made out a second face at her shoulder. Both wore house coats.

"We know who you are," the elder assured me, "we saw you. I'm Dorothy and this is my sister Olive. We live here. Now you know who we are."

She reached out a pale hand but didn't touch me. It came to me that I'd seen the children before — though the newspaper photo hadn't been clear. "But where's the fire?" I gasped.

"Fire?" Dorothy echoed with a smile at her sister.

"I know we'll all get on together," Olive remarked lightly.

I'd jumped to conclusions. The family hadn't sailed together on the liner: the girls must have been seeing their father off. Could they have been rehearsing a play as children do in school holidays? Was the smell of burning in my imagination?

"Let's go, Dot," the younger one said quickly as if to avoid my questions.

They disappeared into the darkness.

"That's done it," I murmured, annoyed that the game was up.

Now that the family knew of my intrusion, what next?

Returned to the light, I checked my map. It wasn't far to the grand staircase if I braved it out and used the main corridor. Once on the top floor, I'd have to find a way to get above the Victorian ceiling. Michaelangelo was so close now that I couldn't give up and run away. If I moved fast, I'd reach my target before the girls found an adult to betray me to. And it was easier than I expected. I was soon staring up at the white plasterwork of a ceiling which — from its position — was false. At its centre was the gilt boss of an absent chandelier. I smiled at it, knowing that above must be the winch used to raise and lower the thing — which meant that there must be access to the space below Prinny's Heavenly Ceiling. There was a drawing in the guide book which showed the stairwell as square with windows just below the ceiling. But the west wall had no windows. Casting around the landing, I found the reason: a lift had been installed since 1936. The winding gear would be at roof level and access to the chandelier winch must be from the machinery room. I could've got to it across the roof without entering the house.

"Why did you come here?" a calm female voice asked from behind me.

Assuming that Dorothy had returned, I replied briskly.

"To look at the grand staircase. Someone told me that there's an interesting ceiling painting but I see it's been covered. I'm sorry, I should've asked properly. I thought the family was away — I'm fascinated by ceiling paintings — I just took a chance. I'll be off as soon as I've sketched it. Promise."

I moved into the unlit corridor from which the voice had come not seeing her at first. It wasn't Dorothy. This third girl was my age and stood alone in the shadows. I stopped so's not to frighten her away.

"Ah — you know of Michelagnolo Buonarroti?" she said quietly.

Having convinced myself that I would be the one to rediscover the ceiling, it was heartbreaking to know that these newcomers realised what they had bought with the Hall. Like Dorothy and Olive, she must have followed me. I shrugged; she smiled.

"Yes, I saw you too. You are welcome to stay with us," she said — and left me.

So: I could complete my 'mission' futile though it might be. I opened the lift gates and, ignoring the void beneath my feet, swung myself onto an iron ladder which led to the roof. The next stage was easy: a hatchway took me onto a planked floor over the false ceiling above which — lit by a grimy cupola — was my target. Though peeling and stained, I recognised the work of the Master. I felt as if I'd found the holy grail.

Within an hour I'd sketched details in my notebook and taken samples of the crumbling pigment. It was time to vacate Ladybower Hall.

Recalling the labyrinth, the darkness and the wandering daughters of the owner, I had to choose between risking my neck on the roof and drainpipe or descending the lift shaft to the basement and breaking out through a door or window. Having chosen the shaft, I was soon through the lift cage's trap door and in a cellar. I felt my way towards the light of a barred window at the foot of

some stairs. I climbed to a door, picked the lock and emerged, not into a yard as I expected but into a warm, carpeted hallway which was obviously in the occupied west wing. And from beyond a door I heard a woman's voice. She was agitated.

"Go away," she faltered, "leave me alone, do."

She wasn't answered but repeated the word 'no' several times with rising terror in her tone. It occurred to me that if *I* had intruded then so could burglars.

"Please," she whimpered.

Without knowing how many the woman faced, it would be crazy to burst in but I couldn't walk away. Carefully, I opened the door an inch and peered into the room. A woman in her sixties sat in a wing armchair, her back to a window, her fists pressed to her eyes to blot out whoever was threatening her. I could see no one else from that angle. I opened the door wider but still saw nothing — except that this was a bright living-room with a stove and an exterior door. The woman uncovered her eyes. She pointed at me, shrieked and fainted. I threw the door open, leapt for the poker beside the stove and sprang round like a wrestler. I was confronted by none other than the two younger sisters. They stood hand in hand, smiling demurely at me. But then my blood ran cold: there was a calendar behind Olive which was headed '1960'. I looked back at the collapsed housekeeper. Her hair had turned white; in those few seconds she had aged by five years. And there were other changes: yet again the sun had gone in and the garden had reverted to wilderness.

How had I been transported from 1955 into the future?

"Do you understand yet?" Dorothy asked me solemnly, her dark eyes wide.

The woman groaned.

"Yes, I understand," she replied before I could answer. "Oh leave me be, I never meant to start such a fire ..."

"Oh but you did," Olive interrupted. "You did it because Daddy dismissed you and your friend the gardener. And now you must pay for what you did: you must stay here until you die and never forget what we looked like when we burnt."

And before my eyes, the girls' faces blistered, their housecoats flared up and their bodies blackened, bubbled and shrank into cindered skeletons. Horrified, I began to understand.

Somehow I had intruded not only into a house but into a haunting of the future. This woman was confronted by the ghosts of children whose lives she had taken. I'd smelt the smoke and heard their last words. I had witnessed the moment of their deaths in the fire of 1921. And if these two were ghosts, was the girl who knew of the Heavenly Ceiling that of Lady Amelia Eaton? Why had I become involved in the tragedies of Ladybower Hall?

The housekeeper was still senseless. I was on my way to the exterior door and freedom when a bald man hurried past the window. It was the fellow who had fled through the ruined pergola. Clearly, he was terrified. But of what?

I backed into the hallway before he opened the door. Through the crack I had left, I saw the woman rise and point wordlessly to where the girls had stood.

"Not again, not you as well," he whined. "Why can't they leave us be?"

And then it was my turn to freeze with fear.

Something soft brushed against my shin. The door swung open a few inches. The housekeeper had reverted to her former age. My scream and hers startled the black cat which yowled and ran for the back door. I tried to follow but the man blocked my way. He had lost his timidity. He had grey hair now and was more sturdy. He fixed me with cruel dark eyes. "How the hell did you get in?" he demanded.

He grabbed the poker and advanced, waving it like a sword.

I couldn't retrace my route through the cellar: he would certainly catch me struggling through the lift cage if not before. I had to find a way through the house. I ran to a door in the hallway. Thank God it was unlocked. Soon, I was back in the main house heading for the grand staircase. What next? The labyrinth or the roof?

I bounded up the broad stairs two at a time to the lift door. The man was fit for someone in his sixties — and he knew a quicker route to the roof. It was then that I lost the evidence of the existence of the ceiling: my notebook fell down the shaft.

I couldn't stop. Seconds later I was scrambling up the steep copper tiled mansard to a leaded acreage dotted with chimney stacks and skylights. Weaving between them, I headed east but went too far; the man cut me off as I was sliding down to the head of the drainpipe I had used. We stood in silence, he smiling cruelly and jabbing with his weapon — I feeling for the balustrade. As I swung a leg over the crumbling stonework he lunged. Terrified, I stared down at the hard sunlit terrace. The man poked me viciously in the shoulder.

"I'll learn yer not to trespass," he mocked. "Feelin' brave were you. Not so brave now, eh?" And then I saw them. Three pale faces were watching us from a dormer window. I recalled Dorothy's question: do you understand yet?

The spirits of the sisters and Lady Amelia had welcomed me to their number.

The balustrade gave way.

I regained consciousness on the bench below the honeysuckle. Whether I crawled there or was carried by my attacker I don't know. I caught his eye briefly as he hurried away, bald and ashen-faced.

Questions, questions, questions took over my brain which was dull as the sky of battleship grey. And then I remembered my mission.

I shook my head, gritted my teeth and set off cheerfully again to find Michaelangelo's ceiling.

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