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# **An English Ghost Story**

Written by Kim Newman

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*An English Ghost Story*

KIM NEWMAN

**TITAN BOOKS**

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For Helen



# Spring

They would fall in a clump, like ripe apples. Mother, father, daughter, son. Touched by the charm, their persistent – though thinned – love would flare. As only once before, at the birth of baby Tim, the family would be a whole, united by fiercely shared feeling. Things that had seemed important would be trivial, and things that had seemed negligible would be potent.

The Hollow awaited the family with a welcome. It needed them. Unpopulated, it tended to drift. Without people in residence, it might disperse on the winds. That afternoon, the place was on its best behaviour, spring green promising summer gold.

When Dad bought a Mercedes-Benz A-Class hatchback, Jordan's brother Tim had called it a 'hunchback' and the car had been 'the hunchback' ever since. Dad, proud of his purchasing power, resisted the name for a while, but eventually gave in.

For the long drive to the West Country, Jordan had made a mix tape of season-specific tracks: 'April in Portugal', 'Spring Fever', 'Apple Blossom Time', 'Springtime for Hitler'. If she had to spend a whole day with her parents and brother, hitting the road at an unreasonable six in the morning, she needed a mental cushion.

On the motorway, beyond range of GLR traffic reports, Dad made a show of being willing to give her tape a listen. Jordan relaxed in the back seat, as her music opened what felt like a cage.

After a couple of tracks, mood in the hunchback turned sour.

‘No one your age can *really* like this antique crap,’ said Mum, over Judy Garland’s ‘April Showers’. ‘It’s not natural. *I* wasn’t born when this was recorded.’

Like a weasel, Tim backed Mum up, though he was really too fixated on his Game Boy to register anything outside his bubble of kill-fantasies.

‘Da-ad,’ Jordan appealed.

‘I have to concentrate, Jord,’ he said.

Aptly, Sarah Vaughan sang ‘Spring Will Be a Little Late This Year’.

‘Our daughter has the musical taste of a sixty-year-old drag queen,’ Mum told Dad. ‘One day, she’ll make someone a wonderful fag hag.’

‘What’s a “fag hag”?’ asked Tim.

‘Never mind, Timmy. I’m calling a family vote. Hands up who wants music from this decade.’

Mum put up her hand and so did Tim. Jordan folded her arms, angrily. Dad shrugged, while still holding the steering wheel. Mum declared two for, one against and one abstention. Jordan’s cassette got ejected.

As navigator, Mum controlled the in-car entertainment. She set the tuner to the kind of non-antique crap someone Jordan’s age was supposed to like.

‘This is definitely more *now*,’ said Mum, pretending to enjoy rap. Jordan thought the track was called ‘Poppin’ a Cap in Mah Bitch’s Skull’. Mum shook her head just out of time to ranted misogyny.

‘Aren’t you supposed to be a feminist?’ she mumbled.

Mum turned round and glared at her. Tim made a gun-finger and popped it at Jordan. When her little brother grew up thinking violent killer pimps were heroes, it wouldn’t be her fault.

She had known this would happen... but she’d still spent several hours compiling her spring mix.

Jordan had resisted this jaunt, but Mum and Dad made a show of including her – and even Tim – in discussions about the move out of the city. The ultimate threat was that if she didn’t take part

in viewings, she couldn't complain about the house they wound up stuck in.

Her parents were striving heroically to keep their own rows about the proposed move to a strained minimum so as to present a united front to the kids. 'You'll be living there too,' one or other of them would say when Jordan's attention wandered from the sheaves of listings provided by rural estate agents. She always had to bite her lip to keep quiet about her secret plan. She wasn't going to stay in the backwoods. Once she had her A levels, she would head back to London, get a flat with Rick and find a university place in the city. She'd secretly spent her sixteenth-birthday money on a streamlined art deco kettle. Still boxed under her bed, the Alessi would come out when she was setting up her own home. The best thing about this family exodus was that a year from September, she'd be living over a hundred miles away from the rest of them.

After turning off the motorway, they found themselves driving along winding lanes, craning to make out contradictory signposts for oddly named hamlets. The level of tension ratcheted. Dad held back sharp comments about Mum's map-reading skills. Today, they were scheduled to view four places around Sutton Mallet, a village in Somerset that was clearly marked but elusive. If you wanted to get there, it seemed you shouldn't start from here.

'This map must be out of date,' said Mum at last, giving up.

'More likely, it's too new,' said Jordan, pointedly. 'These roads haven't changed in hundreds of years. Perhaps the map-makers are embarrassed by how *antique* they are.'

Mum gave Jordan one of her cold looks. Jordan sank back, chafing her shoulder against her seat belt.

'Sector fifteen cleared,' Tim said. 'All hostiles liquidated.'

The beep-beep-beep of Tim's handheld device, a mild irritant three hours ago, was now as painful as regular tapping against an exposed dental nerve. He reported his kill-count every few minutes. His thumbs apparently made him the premier mass-murderer of the age, though he claimed his genocides were justified in a time of war.

Fifty minutes late, in a collective bad mood, they arrived at



the first viewing. They piled out of the hunchback. Jordan had chosen a sleeveless blouse for the journey. April chill ice-stroked her bare arms.

The place was a tip. Described as ‘in need of renovation’, the house was a derelict shell on a bankrupt farm. Vast sheds still stank of cattle carcasses. The business had been wiped out by mad cow disease. They stood about, depressed by the cheery chatter of Rowena Marion, the estate agent handling their first two viewings.

‘It’s ghastly,’ said Jordan, loud enough for Mrs Marion to hear. ‘Like an extermination camp for cows.’

Mum looked as if the criticism were aimed directly at her, which it was. All the places would be like this. Jordan had dragged herself out of bed before dawn for an agonising waste of time.

‘I think it’s a “no”,’ said Dad, understating.

‘Early days yet,’ shrugged Mrs Marion, who must have known the farm was unspeakable but still thought it worth showing in the hope the townies were cracked enough to go for it. ‘This is the first place you’ve seen, yes?’

Dad admitted that it was.

‘I think you’re going to love Clematis Cottage,’ Mrs Marion confided, blithely. ‘Follow me and have a look-see.’

The next viewing was a dear little c

ottage in the village itself. What the listing concealed was that there was no driveway from the road to the ‘extensive adjoining property’ and no suitable place to park within a hundred yards. They cruised past the place, momentarily struck by its picturesque qualities. By the time Dad found a half-hearted lay-by on the other side of the village green, they knew it was a loser.

Trudging back along a grassy verge, Jordan had to lean into a prickly hedge when a tractor passed. Mrs Marion, not ready to give up yet, was there before them, on foot.

The owner – an eighty-year-old keen to move into a nursing home with the fortune he had been told he would realise on his property – loitered like an eager puppy, promising tea and chocolate digestives. Jordan sympathised, but it was cruel to inflate his hopes. They were in and out before the kettle whistled.

They left Mrs Marion – the pensioner should feed her poisoned

biscuits – and had a grim pub lunch, saying little about the show so far. Dad had a pint of the local bitter, which was stronger than he expected. Mum had to take over the driving for the afternoon. Not hungry, Jordan couldn't even finish a packet of salt-and-vinegar crisps.

Next up was a new estate agent, Poulton and Wright. And a place even further outside the village than the hell-farm.

In the back of the car, Jordan looked at the photocopied listing. The property they were to see was called the Hollow. The photograph didn't give anything away; in it, she could hardly see the house for the trees.

'Don't get your hopes up, folks,' said Dad as they turned off the main road. 'This was always the long shot.'

Mum and Dad were tense after the dud viewings. Each was storing up blame for the other to shoulder. When a thing failed to work out, no matter the degree of shared initial enthusiasm, it automatically became sole intellectual property of someone else.

They drove down a single-lane road across flat moorland. From a long way off, they saw trees and what looked like the tips of towers.

A car stood on the verge by the open gate of the property. A youngish man, cagoule over pin-striped trousers, waited, leaning against the gate-post. As Mum fussily parked, Jordan looked over the new estate agent. He had spots and the too-ready smile she'd distrusted in Rowena Marion.

But the Hollow was different from Kow Kamp Funf and Clematis Cottage.

Jordan saw it all at once, from the road, and was *certain*. This was the place. It was like her first kiss, Doris Day's 'Que Sera Sera', the taste of strawberries, her car accident. Instant and all-encompassing, wondrous and terrifying, a revelation and a seduction.

*Zam-Bam, Alla-Ka-Zamm!*

The strangest thing was she knew her parents felt the same. Mum actually turned and smiled at Dad, who let his hand stray to her wrist for the tiniest of intimate squeezes. Tim looked up from his game, the Elvis lip-curl he'd shown the loser places replaced by open rapture.

‘Kew-ell,’ said Tim.

Jordan was caught up in the spell.

Just this once, nothing else mattered. Her mind was settled in. The shock passed and she got comfortable with the feeling. It was like coming home.

They got out of the hunchback in a tangle and overwhelmed the agent. If he expected city folk to keep their cards to their chest and strike a hard bargain, he was surprised.

‘I love it,’ said Mum. The shift was miraculous: suddenly, she was relaxed and open, uncontrollably smiling. ‘I just love it.’

Jordan saw she had been wrong. The spotty agent’s smile wasn’t fake. Of course, he had *known*. He had been waiting by the Hollow for a few minutes, and he was familiar with the property. He could feel it too.

The *charm*.

This was what they needed. A new place, to start all over again, to put the past behind them, to build something. Yet an old place, broken in by people, with mysteries and challenges, temptations and rewards.

They might as well cancel the remaining viewing.

‘I’m Jordan,’ she imagined herself saying to her new friends, ‘I live in the Hollow.’ No, ‘I’m *from* the Hollow.’

Was the Hollow the house or the land? The name was misleading. Weren’t hollows dents in hills or woods? The property rose a little above the surrounding moorfields. An island that had come down in the world, it still refused to sink into the Somerset Levels.

Her arms didn’t feel cold. A million tiny dandelion autogyros swarmed on warm winds.

‘Brian Bowker,’ said the agent, ‘from Poulton and Wright’s.’

His spots were mostly freckles, though some had whiteheads. He looked as if he was blushing all the time, perhaps a handicap in his business. Unlike Rowena Marion, he didn’t try to hide his West Country accent. He didn’t sound like a yokel, though; it was just a way of talking, a burr.

Dad shook hands with him.

‘This is the Hollow,’ said Brian Bowker, standing aside and making

a flourish as if signalling stagehands to haul open the curtains.

Tim had to be restrained from running. Jordan did the honours, hugging her little brother with a wrestling hold. Mum and Dad put arms around each other's waists and a hand each on a child's shoulder, as if for a family portrait.

'We're the Naremores,' said Dad. 'I'm Steven, this is my wife Kirsty, and our children, Jordan and Tim.'

'Pleased to meet you all,' said Brian Bowker.

'I think this is it,' said Mum, out loud.

The agent's smile became a grin. 'You ought to look closer; not that I should say that.'

'We will, old man,' said Dad, 'but I think Kirst is right. I can feel it. Have you sprinkled fairy dust about the place?'

For once, Jordan wasn't embarrassed by Dad. She knew what he meant. It wasn't just the spring-blossom; the air seemed to *dance*. This was the season of the songs, the happy songs about love blooming with the greenery, not the melancholy songs of faded flowers remembered in fall.

The house stood in the middle of a roughly square patch of land, boundaries marked not by hedges or walls but still ditches from which grew bright green rushes. A moat ran alongside the road and the Hollow had its own bridge, wider than it was long, for access. Mum, cautious after the dispiriting fuss at Clematis Cottage, had parked on the road. That felt wrong: they should have driven through the gate and across the bridge, up to the barn, which was large enough to garage a fleet of cars.

Apple trees grew in what Jordan supposed was a deliberate pattern. The largest lay on the ground, roots exposed like a display of sturdy, petrified snakes, hollowed-out body sprouting a thick new trunk, fruiting branches stretching upwards. Tim was enchanted by this marvel, which had been smitten but survived. He had to be called away from exploring before he disappeared entirely inside the wooden tunnel of the original trunk. A couple of trees beyond the house, at the far edge of the grounds, were too close together, upper branches entangled and entwined, like giants kissing.

'The property used to be called Hollow Farm,' said Brian

Bowker, consulting his clipboard, leading them along a paved path that wound through the trees. 'It goes back as far as there are parish records, to the Middle Ages. In the nineteenth century, the surrounding fields were sold off to one of the big local farmers and it became just the Hollow. The householders kept only this small apple orchard. You'll still get all the cookers and eaters you need.'

Jordan could hear the trees. They moved, very slowly. Each leaf, twig, branch and trunk was rustling or creaking, whispering to her. There were trees all over London, but any sounds they made were too faint to be heard above traffic and shouting. City trees were furniture, but these were living things; worlds in themselves, populated by insects, birds, squirrels.

'In the barn, there's a cider-press,' said Brian Bowker, 'disused since the thirties. It'd cost a fortune to fix, I'm told. A shame. Miss Teazle, the last owner, didn't work it, but liked having it there.'

The walk was further and the house bigger than Jordan had thought they would be. The house stood on raised stone foundations – Dad said something about a high water table and flood country – and was an obvious patchwork of styles and periods. Matched follies, the towers seen from the road, rose to either side, above a greenish thatched roof, topped by hat-like red tile cones with gabled Rapunzel windows. Aside from the towers, it was a farmhouse built at twice life-size. The ordinary-scale front door looked tiny. Ivy had been encouraged to grow, perhaps to cover the jigsaw-sections of red brick, white plaster and grey stone. Over the centuries, parts of the house had been replaced when they collapsed or people got tired of them. It had grown independent of any architect's designs or council's planning permission, evolving to suit its inhabitants.

Brian Bowker unlatched the front door.

'You might want to put locks on the exterior doors,' he said, 'though Miss Teazle never felt the need.'

Dad was horrified.

'This isn't exactly a high-crime area,' the agent said, 'but times have changed since the old girl was a young thing. It won't be a big job to make the house secure.'

Brian Bowker stood aside so they could step into a foyer. A combination of veranda and conservatory, it had a pleasant, damp straw smell. The ceiling was so low Dad banged his head on a dangling light-fixture – which would be the first thing to go. It took moments for Jordan's eyes to adjust to the green gloom. Plants were all around, some overgrowing their pots, extending tendrils across the stiff, brushy doormat. Something like ivy grew *inside* the foyer, twining around a wrought-iron boot-scraper, creeping up a trellis. A row of brass hooks was ready for a burden of coats. Several pairs of boots were tumbled together by the door. A bright yellow pair of wellies looked scarcely worn.

'Miss Teazle's things are still here,' said Brian Bowker. 'Her relatives in Australia want to throw in furniture and bric-a-brac. A lot of charity-shop stuff, but there might be treasures. She was rich, after all. Now, come on through and see this...'

He touched a section of the wall. A pair of doors slid open like secret panels, with a woody scraping sound. Beyond was cool darkness and a windowless hallway. The agent shepherded them inside and along a cramped corridor to another set of doors, which he pushed open.

As one, the family gasped. Brian Bowker chuckled.

Jordan would not have guessed a room in a private home could be so large. It was fully twenty feet high and twice that long. After the murk of the hall, it was filled with warm, wavering sunlight. Opposite the doors, French windows were inset into a panoramic expanse of picture windows. The view was impressive – not just the orchard, but the expanse of moorland. Facing away from the village, the house might have been at the edge of civilisation.

'Thanks to Dutch elm disease, you can see a long way from here,' said the estate agent. 'From the towers, you can see Glastonbury Tor. That's all safety-glass, by the way. The original panes didn't come through the hurricane in 1987.'

That night – a few years before her brother was born – was among Jordan's first memories. Waking up with the windows of the flat rattling, angry elements threatening to blow them in, roaring winds and car alarms. Snuggling with Mum and Dad

on their sofa, away from breakable glass. Then the mess on the streets next morning.

The room had a fireplace taller than Dad, several sets of upholstered furniture, a twelve-foot polished oak dining table, many nook-like retreats and hiding places. A Victorian chaise longue, with dark floral pattern cushions. Just the thing for her to be discovered draped across by Rick, transformed into her gentleman caller.

A brass chandelier hung from stout, bare beams; out of use, sconces dusty and clogged with old candle wax. Streetlight-like freestanding lamps were arranged around the space. Faded carpets, Turkish or Arabian, lay like quilt squares on the flagstone floor.

‘This is the oldest room,’ said Brian Bowker. ‘The hearth and floor are fifteenth century. So is one of the walls. The house has been knocked down and rebuilt over and over. The towers are a nineteenth-century addition. An unusual feature. The big windows were first put in by Miss Teazle, after the war. She was born in this house, never lived anywhere else.’

The last owner of the Hollow had been a writer.

‘I remember her from when I was a girl,’ said Mum. ‘The Weezie books when I was little, then the Drearcliff Grange School series. Old-fashioned even then, but we all read them. I see things in this room that were in the stories: that’s the fireplace Weezie hides in when she plays sardines. Louise Teazle must have done that when she was a girl, hidden in there. And written about it later. I expect all writers do that, fill their books with bits of their lives.’

Jordan had heard of Louise Magellan Teazle but never read her. When younger, she had read Alan Garner and C. S. Lewis. Now, she had lost the habit. There was too much else to do.

She imagined hiding from Rick in the fireplace and letting him find her. She was sure he would love this place too, when he saw it.

Brian Bowker showed them every part of the house. The two towers were the most obviously inhabited, connected to the house by the hall and four rather dark, cube-shaped rooms full of fascinating junk. These would need a lot of work to be reclaimed as guest rooms or storerooms. There were two completely fitted bathrooms, and two separate toilets – one outside, in a shed-like

structure – which made Tim ecstatic at the thought of ‘a bog for each of us!’ In the West Tower were the kitchen (she saw precisely where her Alessi would look its best), a walk-in larder that was a room in itself, a master bedroom that hadn’t been used since Miss Teazle’s parents’ day, and a maid’s garret which Tim instantly claimed for his own.

The East Tower was smaller. Louise Teazle had used the ground-floor room as a study.

‘Good grief,’ said Dad, ‘that’s an Amstrad.’

An old word processor stood on a desk between an upright manual typewriter and a daisy-wheel printer. Jordan let her fingers linger on the word processor’s keyboard and got a tiny static tingle.

‘You can tell a writer lived here,’ she said.

The walls were covered with bookshelves, and there were three old wooden filing cabinets.

Above the study was the bedroom the writer had slept in all her life. This, Jordan realised with a thrill, would be her room. It contained a canopied single bed, a frail-looking rocking chair by the window, an antique writing desk, a wash-stand with a matching basin and jug, a dressing table with an attached mirror and an odd little chest of drawers. Ancient toys and old-lady things were arranged like a museum exhibit. It should have been sad but somehow wasn’t. Jordan believed Miss Teazle had stayed keen throughout her long life, not letting her childhood dim but never finding memory a trap. The bed had new sheets and a duvet, the colourful cover clashing with the pastel designs of the wallpaper. Something to be fixed.

Brian Bowker took them out through the French windows. Neglected, wild patches had been vegetable and herb gardens. Tiny blue and white flowers grew everywhere, even from the thatch of the roof and between the stones of the paths. Was there a book in the study about which plants were which? If not, she would get one from a library. She wanted to learn about birds and butterflies too. Rick had said to look out for mushrooms, poison ones and druggy ones.

Tim ran wild like a six-year-old, flashing back a few years to



the golden age before his current personality had set in. He even swung from the low branches of a tree, as if raised in a jungle by apes. Mum and Dad laughed, relaxed, not worried about traffic or lurking paedophiles. This was what being a kid must have been like in the old days, when the Beatles were pop stars and television was black and white.

They called Tim and were shown the barn. The cider-press turned out to be a vast, complicated contraption with interesting wildlife sprouting from its innards and a wooden tub which still smelled of long-pulped apples.

A workbench was fixed to one wall. Outmoded tools were neatly arranged on hooks above it.

‘Are there power points?’ Dad asked.

The agent pointed them out. ‘Put in when they took out the old generator and hooked the Hollow up to the mains. The place didn’t even have a phone for years.’

‘Sounds heavenly,’ said Mum.

Dad laughed.

‘That’s all changed now,’ Brian Bowker assured them. ‘The utilities are all in order.’

Tim was especially taken with what looked like a child-sized tractor but turned out to be a sit-astride grass-mower.

‘We’ve tried to keep the place trim since Miss Teazle passed away. A lass from the village comes in every couple of weeks to mow the orchard and hack the weeds. This is a very fertile patch. Miss Teazle had a pair of goats to nibble the grass, but they’re gone now.’

‘Frisky and Whiskey?’ said Mum. The agent looked baffled. ‘Those were the goats in the Weezie books.’

Dad raised his eyebrows. Mum wasn’t embarrassed.

‘It all comes back,’ she said, tapping her head. ‘All sorts of things are stored away up here.’

‘Anything useful?’

Jordan tensed slightly but Mum laughed. Dad gave her waist a squeeze and kissed her.

The barn had a second storey, reachable via a wooden ladder and a hatch. They all looked up.

‘There isn’t anything up there,’ said the agent. ‘Miss Teazle was quite infirm. She wouldn’t have been able to manage the climb.’

‘I’ll do a recce,’ Tim announced. He swarmed up the ladder, disappeared through the hatch, clattered around in the dark, and poked his head back over the edge.

‘There’s a door,’ he reported, ‘in the wall, leading nowhere.’

She stepped out of the barn and saw what her brother meant. Twenty feet above ground was a wooden door, with a gibbet-like structure above it. The door rattled as Tim shoved it from the inside. It swung open and Tim leaned out over the drop, grinning broadly.

‘That was for lowering bales of hay down into the yard,’ Brian Bowker explained. ‘You might think about keeping it bolted shut to prevent accidents.’

They took the point.

‘Come down, Timbo,’ said Dad. ‘Before you do yourself an injury.’

Dad and the agent were both relieved when Tim vanished inside the barn and reappeared, dusty but unhurt, at ground level.

Brian Bowker knew he had a sale. He was talking as if there was a done deal and the Naremores were moving in a week from Tuesday.

Mum and Dad didn’t contradict him.

They all left the barn, for a last look around.

Jordan felt funny. She was – she realised with a shudder – happy. After all she’d been through these last few years, she was home. A fresh start in a new place. It felt right, in a way she had either forgotten or never known.

Her secret plan was revised. The Hollow changed everything. Rick would understand; he always let her do the forward thinking.

Afternoon sunlight made a green-gold haze about the place, an aura of contentment. Shapes formed and wisped in the light patterns. Jordan imagined they were reluctant to see her go, eager for her return.

She couldn’t wait to tell Rick about the Hollow but stifled an excited impulse to beg Dad for the car phone. The thought of calling her boyfriend now – with Tim and her parents eavesdropping –

made her squirm inside. The family had been here less than half an hour and already she knew it was where they would settle.

In the hunchback, on the way to the last viewing, to a perfectly nice house that would have no chance of winning their hearts, Tim kept on about 'his room', listing places where his things could be put, and new things he would need. Usually, when he spun methodical fantasies upon impossible premises, he would continue until one or other of the family was forced to shoot him down. This time, they let Tim run on and on. This time, they understood exactly what he meant.

Mum pressed the play button on the in-car cassette player. Music filled the car, 'Spring Spring Spring' from *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. Jordan shivered again, not with cold but love.

She looked back, out of the rear window, and kept her eyes on the Hollow, even when only the tip of the taller tower was visible. When they were on the main road, she turned around and felt the need to count heads. All four of them were in the car but it was as if they had left someone vital behind.

As soon as the family was away from the Hollow, they missed their new home, each in their different way, each feeling at bottom the same thing. But they took the sights, sounds and smells with them, to well up unbidden in their minds as the next few weeks stretched into the next two months and they impatiently went through the business of buying and selling, as if homes could be made with money and contracts.

Besides memories, the family – as a single entity and four discrete individuals – took from the Hollow something else, something subtler and more lasting, something they shared but never got round to talking about. The magic was private and should not be spoken of out loud, for fear that it would evaporate like dew in the sun. It was as if they had exchanged vows with the place, leaving something of themselves behind and taking something of it away.

At long last, after what seemed an age, summer came and the family returned to the Hollow.