



Source: Chris McGreal, 'Sympathy short-lived as rockets hit Sderot', *The Guardian Unlimited*, 13/06/06.

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'It's unnatural, said Steve in hushed tones.

'It's just a phase,' said his wife Diane.

'We should take him to see somebody.'

Diane rolled her eyeballs.

'He's not the one with the problem; it's you with your macho pride.'

Brian knew the bickering was his fault, but he couldn't help it. He was playing on the living room floor with his Tonka truck. At the wheel was a floppy-limbed cloth doll with red woolen hair and three orange freckles painted on each cheek. Her eyes were large and round, almost Manga-like. Her mouth was a line of crosses stitched in red. Brian had claimed the doll that morning at a jumble sale, and christened her 'Wee Annie.'

Diane looked over to their son and gave him a strained smile. Steve clenched his jaw. Brian had taken that damned doll out of the truck now and was rocking it, whispering lisply into its cloth ears. Worse still, he was cradling Wee Annie tight against the nylon nightdress he'd taken to wearing. The nightie had belonged to his sister Helena, only she had never worn it. 'Too frilly!' she'd explained.

They all still ached for Helena. Ten months ago, she had undergone heart surgery. The surgery had been successful, but then the doctors had misjudged the level of medication she would need to keep fluid from building up in her lungs. 'I don't feel well, Mummy' she had whispered, before climbing into bed with her parents. Lying between them, she drowned peacefully in her sleep.

After the funeral, Helena's room had been painted white and refurnished. It was called the guest room now, although no one had ever stayed there. Diane still hadn't been able to pack away her daughter's clothes. Last Saturday, when Brian was supposed to be getting ready for bed, she'd found him in there, trying on the frilly nightie.

Steve had taken Brian out earlier that day. Diane sometimes needed time off to crumble. Steve took Brian to a new tourist attraction in Edinburgh, described in the brochures as 'Scotland's Pompeii'. Under the City Chambers on the Royal Mile, a lane called Mary King's Close had been sealed off back in the seventeenth century, to keep its plague-ridden inhabitants quarantined. Recently, re-opened to the public, it was drawing visitors in droves.

Hand-in hand, Steve and Brian tagged along with a group of tourists. They were half-way through the tour, standing in a room with waxworks of plague victims throwing up into a bed pan, the artificial odour of vomit being pumped into the air, to bring the scene to life. A middle-aged American named Hal was bombarding the tour guide with questions. 'Likes to hear the sound of his own voice,' muttered Steve. Brian slipped his hand from his father's and wandered off.

A few doors down the lane, Brian found a small room filled with dolls. There were Highland dancers, like you could get at the Castle gift shop, new dolls of all different skin tones and old dolls, grubby and worn out from being loved. The low lighting reflected in the eyes of those rows of dolls made them appear to be staring at Brian. He didn't like it. He was on the point of leaving, when a roll of blue paper tucked into the bonnet of a Highland dancer doll caught his eye. 'A fiver!' he called out as he grabbed for the money. Just then, the light bulb popped.

In the dark, he felt a coldness creeping along his arms and

legs, right down to his fingertips and toes. He felt sad—just like in the days after Helena had gone; when the house became still and quiet.

'That's mine!' a girl's voice said.

Brian clutched the £5 note tighter and looked around. He felt a pawing. Streaks of white light were darting aggressively around his arm.

'Finders keepers...' he shouted out in panic.

'The money is mine,' said the voice, reverberating stronger now between the stone walls. Brian dropped the banknote. The darts of light subsided, then re-emerged as a large, looming mass before him. Brian could make out the features of a sad little girl, older than he was...perhaps six like Helena had been.

'Are you dead?' asked Brian.

'Yes.'

'So's my sister.'

'I know.'

'Do you know her?'

'Yes. She said you have to let me go home with you.'

'But I don't like you.'

'That's not nice,' retorted the ghost. 'Helena says so too. She's angry with you now.'

Brian's eyes started smarting and his lip quivered. The little girl drew closer, and wrapped her arms around him.'

'You're too cold,' whimpered Brian.

'If you let me come home with you, I'll warm up.'

'Who are you?'

'My name is Annie. My Mummy and Daddy left me here, all alone. I got sick and I lost my dolly. I told one of the visitors once and she told the others. That's why they keep leaving dolls here. They don't want me to be lonely. Do you get lonely sometimes?'

'I miss my sister.'

'You can't have Helena back, you know.'

'I know. She's in heaven now. Why aren't you in heaven?'

'I was being pulled that way, but I clung on. I was waiting for Mummy and Daddy to come back. I don't think they're coming back. Can I please come with you?'

'I don't...'

'I'll be your new sister. You won't feel lonely.'

Brian thought for a moment. He thought of Helena, playing with Helena, the fun of laughing and even fighting together.

On uttering a quiet 'yes', Brian felt his body become rigid. Annie walked into him, smiling. The light disappeared; her voice no longer filled the room. Then she spoke to him again, because he was afraid of the dark. He realized her voice was inside him, and that he could answer silently. They talked until his father found him. He no longer felt alone.

'What's a vessel?' Brian asked, as they re-surfaced from Mary King's Close.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Tessa Wallace.