

The Stump.

By: Paul Worthington.

Part One: The House.

The houses in that part of Conservative West Wales were lavish and decadent, each property a mansion to the eyes of young travellers. Gardens the size of playing fields and twisting gravel driveways that snaked away from the main road were a regular feature. The nearer they drew to the Atlantic the sparser the properties became, such were the expanses of land that surrounded each grandiose building. Hedges were expertly pruned and lawns trimmed crisp and flat as though ironed by the almighty himself but at the late Uncle Ivor Shenkin's property things were very different.

Thickets and bushes grew with wild with volume and old knotty trees leaned at odd angles as though ready to fall at the slightest breeze. The driveway consisted of jagged uneven stones that put the suspension of the Flynn family saloon through its paces, pushing the French made components almost to breaking point. Neither the lawns nor the driveway were flat which resulted in sporadic pools of stagnant water that teemed with thick, green algae.

The house itself had once been grand but now appeared shabby and in chronic disrepair. Window shutters hung precariously from just the one hinge while the once ornate stone carvings had been worn by years of rough coastal weather. Even the blanket of ivy that scaled one face of the house had gaps and missing slices as though someone had hacked at it with a machete.

The Flynn children Iwan and Izzy gazed at the creepy wreck of a house in horror as every ghost story that had ever frightened them came flooding back from the dark recesses of their memories. Their father Derek saw the anguished look on their little faces and guessed at once where the looks of foreboding were aimed, even he had thought 'bloody hell!' when he first caught sight of the old house. To try to allay their fears he dragged their attention from the gruesome façade by calling to them "It just needs a lick of paint and it'll look fantastic but don't worry about the outside I'll bet the inside is real fancy" he hoped it was going to be anyway but he had his doubts. Neither child seemed appeased by the hollow promise.

The rotting wooden steps groaned under each foot that the family gingerly placed upon them, trying in vain to avoid the treacherous patches of moss that had accumulated during the years when there were no comings or goings. The net curtains were black with mould as were the glass panes which made visibility from outside nigh on impossible. Derek and his wife Ingrid tried to peer inside but to no avail, the only route of investigation left was to swallow hard, take a deep breath and just go inside. Ingrid and the children formed a tight knit group, their suitcases held up as rudimentary shields as they shuffled through the front door behind Derek. The patriarch stood out front to absorb the full brunt of whatever horrors lay within!

The house reeked of musty damp and soggy old dust and the stale air that greeted this next generation of Shenkin's was cold enough to illicit goose-bumps from the quartet of visitors. Even the whining creak from the front door hinges sounded tortured as the door was slowly opened and slammed shut behind the weary travellers. Derek could feel the other three members of his family glaring at the back of his head as they all saw that the interior was in no better shape than the outside. Keeping his promise not to swear in front of the children he muttered a few obscenities under his breath at a barely audible volume. In stark contrast, Ingrid walked right through an elaborate cobweb and began screaming like a wild animal "Aaaarrgh Christ...shit...get it off me!"

A roaring log fire, built and ignited by Derek whilst in full survivalist guise, spread some warmth through the whole house while at the same time making the place seem not so bad. The main sitting room was in the worst state but even that didn't seem too bad once bathed in a warm orange glow, especially after Ingrid had done the rounds with a feather duster. She had expected the house to be in a fairly bad state and had known that the kitchen would more than likely be bare, being a well-prepared woman she had insisted on bringing a heavy cardboard box full of food from which she prepared the family's first meal in Ivor's old house. The plan was for Derek to fix up the old place so that the property could be sold and a good price agreed, maximising the profit and adding to the family fund for a move to New Zealand. While the repairs and decorating were being performed the other members of the family were going to have to live in the house and maybe even help out.

Iwan and Izzy were assigned bedrooms that had been scrubbed clean by their mother, the beds kitted out with fresh linen that Ingrid had brought from home. The kids naturally entered into a competition as to whose room was the creepiest, denouncing the merits of each other's glaring portraits that hung on the walls. Izzy was older than her brother by two years and was a lot more into the dark side of life than Iwan, a little too much into ghost stories and serial killers for a twelve-year-old. Iwan's room contained a closet, the door of which was in the wall at the foot of his bed and was made of nailed together planks that had warped overtime causing wide gaps between the boards. The boy's face turned an ashen pale when his sister teased him that a monster was in the closet and would watch him fall asleep through the cracks and then come out and devour him while he slept! He tried to act tough and dismiss her tall tales but the fear in his eyes always gave him away, letting her know that she had the upper hand in their good-natured sibling rivalry.

After a generous plate of Ingrid's speciality Spaghetti Bolognese and a hot bath in a less than welcoming bathroom, the kids drank warm milk in front of the fire while watching Freeview television and complaining about the lack of satellite t.v. that they had become accustomed to. Eventually their ceaseless complaints became too much and the worn-out parents escorted the mouthy pair to their respective beds. As they neared the rooms Izzy called to her brother "Sleep tight", he in turn took a big gulp as he crossed the threshold into his new bedroom. After a kiss on the forehead and a tousling of the hair, Derek left Iwan alone in the strange bed while he casually strolled out, flicking off the light before he closed the door tightly.

With no comforting night lights available and no street lights for about half of a mile the room fell into a pitch blackened state that young Iwan had never experienced before, not just dark but rural, country dark. His eyes had been fixed upon the closet door but now all he could see was a blanket of black, as though he'd been plunged down into the deepest coal mine and left there with no lamp light. The rain tapped against the window and the old wooden shutters swung back and forth in the blustery conditions, each sound caused the boy to jump and flinch and added to his overall uneasiness. A vision of some ungodly creature bursting forth from the storage space and leaping onto the bed forced its way into Iwan's thoughts and would not go away. In a blind panic, he sprang from the bed and scampered across the worn carpet to the light switch.

As the dusty 40-watt bulb sprang into life, vanquishing the oppressive darkness, Iwan's eyes were already fixed upon the closet door. A sigh escaped from his lips when the light revealed that he was still the only living thing in the room. He knew that he was going to have to sleep at some point and so the only possible course of action was to investigate the closet to make sure that nothing sinister resided within. His bony legs shook as he approached the makeshift door and the fear he felt manifested itself in the form of an uncomfortable lump that started in his stomach but was soon trying to force itself up through his throat. The handle moved easily and the door almost fell into him as he pulled it open, the hinges screamed as the rust encrusted metal parts grinded against each other, the harsh sound sent a shiver across Iwan's skin.

Inside the cupboard there were only bare floorboards and damp plaster walls and absolutely nothing else at all. He felt relief at the fact that there were no monsters or bogeymen but a little let down because there was nothing else of interest to be found within the small space. No intriguing messages scrawled onto the bare walls or long forgotten chests that contained a raft of ancient treasures, nothing. A sense that he was not alone suddenly occurred to Iwan and he involuntarily froze with fear, an incapacitating sense of dread crawled over his skin and bubbled in the pit of his belly. A hand slapped down heavily on his shoulder from behind, the fingers dug into his bony frame roughly. Iwan spun around urgently to see who or what was assaulting him.

“Izzy!” snapped Iwan as relief replaced the fear that had been rising within his young form, she cackled mischievously at the sight of her clearly terrified sibling.

“Not planning on sleeping in there, are you?” joked Izzy, a remark that elicited a grumpy frown from her little brother.

Iwan yanked the closet door that had closed under its own weight back open and gestured wildly at the space inside “See there’s nothing in there you’re a liar!”

Izzy stepped toward the cupboard and her triumphant brother in order to make a detailed inspection, or so he thought, but when he glanced away from her she gripped him by both arms and shoved him inside. She was about to slam the door shut and trap him inside to really scare him but something unexpected happened that stayed her hand.

Iwan let out a high-pitched scream but only for a split second, when he realised that he was safe from mortal danger he switched back into macho mode, or as close as he could get to that state of mind anyway. The floorboard under one of his feet had given way and his left leg had fallen into the cavity, the house had swallowed his foot up to the ankle. Sisterly love overtook the usual sibling rivalry as Izzy rushed in and helped Iwan to pull his foot out from the rotten wood, not stopping until he was clear of the closet altogether. The two children sat on the threadbare carpet gasping as though they had just survived a close call with the grim reaper. The door swung shut under its own steam again as though warning the precocious pair to keep out.

Izzy was exactly the sort of child to openly flout a warning of any kind and wasted no time in diving back into the closet to inspect the hole that had been made by her brother’s foot. With a total disregard for the risks of rogue splinters she picked at the chewed, rotten wood until she had access to the cavity below. When she thrust in her arm like a vet attending to a pregnant cow Iwan demanded “What’s there Izz? Come on don’t mess around just leave it alone!”

Izzy turned to her concerned brother and proudly placed a dusty wooden box on the carpet in between them, an old looking thing with foreign writing on and about the size of a VHS case. The children’s eyes were bright and wide as though Santa Claus himself had left the box there for them to find. Christmas had come early for the young pair.

Part two: The Garden.

The wind shook the branches of the overgrown trees and flapped the leaves wildly while the rain hammered into the muddy ground relentlessly. A cloudy sky obscured the moonlight ensuring that there was a murky atmosphere on the ground in the forest-like garden of the Shenkin’s estate. Iwan turned around to look at the house and could just barely make out the exterior, all of a sudden he longed to be back on the inside with his parents, safe and sound. A sharp shove in the back turned him back away from the house and into the blinding light of Izzy’s torch that was shining straight into his eyes.

“Come on” she ordered “Don’t get lost out here in this weather, we’ve got treasure to find!”

“How come you get the map and torch and I get all the heavy stuff?” protested Iwan.

Izzy huffed “Stop whining Iwan and get moving, I’ve got the key as well but that’s because you’re a baby and stupid and I’m older and far more mature...”

“Like a cheese?” interrupted Iwan to which his sister huffed again and ordered “Come on!”

Awkwardly clutching a spade and a pick that were too big for him to handle comfortably, Iwan stumbled along through the mud and the slippery grass in pursuit of a torch beam carried by his sister. A beam that alternated between a crudely drawn map of the estate’s grounds and the actual path itself. With no fear of the dark or of the unknown she tore through the overgrown grounds with her labourer/younger sibling in tow. Not even their bright raincoats or garish wellington boots would highlight them amongst the gloom if the torch should fail. Finally, when Iwan felt closer to Cardiff than he did to the coast of West Wales given how far they had walked, Izzy finally came to a stop and announced “I’ve found it!” she gave the map no credit whatsoever and took the glory in its entirety.

The ‘it’ that they had found was an old gnarly tree stump that had rotted to a grotesque shape and had been just a stump for some decades, there were no other trees growing for at least ten feet in all directions. Iwan dropped the tools on the ground with a clang and eyed the large patch of clear ground that surrounded the old stump, “Where do we start?” he asked.

Izzy stuffed the map into her coat pocket and with torch in hand she stalked around the stump like a T.V. show detective searching a crime scene for clues, all she needed to complete the look was a magnifying glass. After several laps, she pronounced a loud “Ah-ha” before pointing triumphantly at a three-inch carving of a crucifix that had been cut deep into the bark.

She pointed at the ground adjacent to the carving and announced “We dig here, let’s get on with it!”

The adult tools were ungainly and tough to handle for the young siblings but with some cajoling from Izzy they stuck to the task at hand and began moving the soil at a decent rate, even with the rain hampering their progress by adding weight to every spade-full. With a decent pile of Earth building up next to the hole the rapidly tiring pair began to grow weary of the night’s endeavour, something Iwan verbalised at every opportunity. The hard work and unhelpful elements combined to test the siblings to breaking point and after a while even Izzy was ready to head back to the warmth of her bed.

Just as the words ‘Let’s call it a night’ were beginning to form inside her mouth, the tip of Izzy’s spade struck something hard and the sound of squelching earth was replaced by a metallic ‘Ding!’ As if to further encourage the amateur archaeologists, the rain began to ease and the wind began to calm a little. Almost as though some higher power desired them to finish what they had started.

Iwan stood in awe, with a look of excitement and wonder spread across his face as he watched Izzy scrape the spade across the surface of something large and metal. With her tongue poking out to aid concentration, the young girl worked feverishly until she had found all four corners of the box lid. The next step was to free the age-old padlock from the mud that had caked all over it, a swift strike of the spade did the job nicely. The key was stiff to turn but after a jolt using all the force she could muster the sturdy old lock finally disengaged with a welcome ‘clunk’. The lid was hinged at one side and so with the help of the spade, Izzy lifted the lid so far and then a combined effort by both children flipped it right over. All four eyes were on the inside of the treasure chest before Izzy had chance to shine the torch onto the intriguing contents, when the light was cast on what was inside both children had to stifle screams and hug each other tight.

The beam of light had landed on a face, an ugly misshapen, grotesque head that had on it a face that neither child had ever seen the like of before. The children shivered as they gawped at the emaciated, pale blue face of this thing they had just dug up from under the earth. Their terror soared to

new heights when the eyelids cranked open to reveal a bulbous set of hideous eyeballs that flitted to and fro from brother to sister, leering at the shell-shocked pair.

Iwan tried to pull his sister from the abomination that they had dug up but she would not run back to the house and hide, she was far too indignant to take such a cowardly way out. The strange thing began to cough and splutter but that did not deter Izzy from beginning an interrogation with “Why are you in this box?”

It exhaled in a raspy tone before answering “The old man Ivor put me in here...”

“When?” barked Izzy interrupting.

Without missing a beat ‘It’ answered “Nineteen sixty-three, the third of March to be exact” it’s voice was harsh and filled with bitterness and sorrow.

The children looked at each other as if to check whether they had heard that date correctly, once they were sure that they had Iwan asked “How have you survived for fifty-seven years and why haven’t you escaped?”

“Escape with what!” came a stern reply.

Izzy moved the beam of the torch down from the head of the ‘man’ and to his torso but that and the abdomen was all that she found. The arms and legs had been neatly removed and were not in the box with him, he was just a stump!

“Where are your arms and legs?” asked Iwan in the carefree innocent way that children usually broach awkward subjects.

“The old bastard sawed them off and sewed me up before he put me in this box!” growled the stump.

“What’s your name?” demanded Izzy to which the stump answered “Radu.”

The children gazed at Radu incomprehensively, the looks on their faces prompted him to explain “It’s Romanian, it is my name I promise you!”

Izzy again demanded “Why are you lying about out uncle he wasn’t evil he’d never cut someone up and bury them in his garden, and why are you...”

“Did you ever meet him? Your sweet old uncle Ivor...eh, did you?” interrupted Radu.

Both children’s faces told him the truth before their mouths could tell any lies, they had never heard of uncle Ivor until he had passed away.

“You look a bit thin but why aren’t you dead?” asked Iwan.

Radu smirked a devilish smile and explained “I cannot die I am too stubborn, my spirit would not let my heart stop beating.”

“Really?” asked Izzy sarcastically.

“Believe what you will” dismissed Radu “Perhaps I am a monster!” he then roared mockingly and began laughing hysterically.

“A m-monster he said he’s a monster!” cried Iwan, his face a mask of terror as he slowly began back-tracking away from the freshly dug hole.

Izzy turned to her brother “You can’t run away we’ve gotta clean this mess up!”

“I want my bed” whimpered Iwan.

“Well you can’t, not yet!” snapped Izzy “We have to put him back in the ground!”

Radu flew into a rage at this and began yelling and cursing in Romanian, spit streaming from his thin, curled lips and from his jagged teeth.

Iwan took another step back “I can’t stay here Izz I’m too scared I have to go!” his eyes were wild and filled with fear.

The boy attempted to take another backyard step but found his retreat blocked when Izzy caught hold of his sleeve and snapped “You’re helping me and that’s that!”

Iwan pulled back whilst scowling at his overbearing sibling but her grip was too strong and he could not get away. He pleaded “Please Izz, I can’t do this” but she would not let go of his coat sleeve.

They both pulled back and forth while Radu looked on with interest but said nothing. Izzy dragged the younger, lighter boy toward the hole while he tried desperately to pull away. He could gain no purchase in the wet mud however, and slowly found himself approaching the box and the stump against his will. His coat sleeves were wet and mud splattered which was unfortunate for Izzy as her hand slipped off her brother’s sleeve. Now it was her eyes that were filled with terror as the torch fell from her hand and she tumbled backwards from the ground and into the hole. All Iwan heard in the darkness was a loud metallic clunk.

Against a soundtrack of muffled screams and bumping and banging, Iwan searched on his hands and knees amongst the disturbed earth until he found the only source of light, the errant torch. He leapt to his feet and shone the torch into the hole, there he was confronted with the lid of the box, when Izzy fell she must have dragged it closed on top of her...and Radu!

Iwan struggled in the mud with the torch in one hand whilst trying to lift the heavy lid with the other hand but his puny arm could not lift the thing. After much slipping and sliding and puffing and panting he had to jam the torch between his teeth and wrench open the lid with both hands, he just possessed enough strength to get the job done. What he saw inside chilled him to the bone!

Izzy lay slumped across Radu, her eyes wide open but devoid of any direction or indeed any life at all. Her throat had been reduced to a gnawed mess and laying under her with blood soaked lips was Radu, his bulging eyes shot straight to the boy at the sight of the torch light. An offensive cackle sprang from Radu’s grotesque lips as did a spray of blood and gore from his twisted teeth. Iwan stood for a moment white with shock with his mouth hanging gormlessly open until the gravity of the situation hit him full in the face. With tears streaming from his eyes the boy screamed “That’s my big sister!”

Radu laughed heartily “She’s my dinner now boy ha ha ha, the last meal I had was your auntie Gwyneth! That’s why your uncle put me in this box and why he cut my arms and legs off, he knew I couldn’t die and he didn’t want me to, he wanted me to suffer year after year! And I did...until today that is ha ha ha!”

Iwan threw the key into the box and looked coldly at Radu “This is the last face you’ll ever see monster...enjoy your meal, try and make it last for the next thousand years!”

Radu screamed “Wait boy wai...” the lid slammed shut before he could finish but as he lay there drenched in the young girl’s blood he could hear the spades of sodden earth landing all around as he was slowly buried alive again, this time for a grim eternity.

The End.

Books by Paul Worthington

A Dozen Tales of Misfortune



Amazon Reviews

If you want murder, mystery, horror and sorrow all in one book then this is for you. Every story is full of intrigue, mystery and a twist you will not see coming. A few times reading this in bed I did get a bit freaked out as the imagination runs a bit wild when helped along by this book. A must read for anyone after a thrill.

Inventive, original and genuinely creepy stories. Strong narrative and dialogue that pulls you into the plot I thoroughly enjoyed this book. Paul Worthington is an emerging and exciting talent and one to watch for the future. Move over Stephen King!

This book is a must read for anybody and everybody who likes thriller / horror stories. It's thrilling from the first story to the last , well written , exciting and original. A MUST read ! Worth every penny, u will not be disappointed !

Excellent short stories from Paul, the stories really drew you in with each twist/turn and counter turn, Can't wait for his next book, Superb!

Brilliant read. Keeps getting better with every story u read.