

The Assembly Room

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The Assembly Room
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For Terence John Cundall
(13.06.1934 – 14.03.2011)

*‘...as if some busie men had made use of
some ill Arts to extort such confession...’*
(Notestein, 1911)

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“Witchfinders, A Seventeenth-Century English tragedy” by Malcolm Gaskill (John Murray Publishing 2006)

“Witches in and around Suffolk” by Pip and Joy Wright (Pawprint Publishing 2009)

“The Witchfinder and the Devil’s Darlings” by Simon Peters (Lucas Books 2003)

1

Looking back, Merryn wished she had trusted her instincts when she first saw The Assembly Room. She should have yelled at her father to turn round and take them back to their miserable rented house, in the most miserable estate in town, back to her miserable school. She should have told him that she could cope with her damp, tiny bedroom and the booming of music rattling pictures off her wall. She should have said that she could put up with the rubbish teachers who had given up on the idea of discipline, the gangs of children that had more power than the teachers and the universal mockery of her ambition to be a teacher.

Instead, they were stuck behind a tractor on a Suffolk country road for the third time in half an hour. She gazed out of the window looking at the area that would be her home; there was not much to see, however, if you didn't like fields, hedgerows and more green stuff, punctuated with a quaint house here and there. The place they were currently crawling past would never have made it onto the archetypal chocolate box. It would have been better placed on a trailer for 'Ghost Hunters' or 'Most Haunted'.

"I pity anyone who lives near that place!" Merryn muttered.

"What's wrong with it?" her father, Matt, asked with exaggerated indignation.

"What's right with it, more like? It's a dump!" Merryn retorted. She looked in distaste at the dirty, ramshackle building with its leaning porch and corrugated iron roof. It was a rectangular, one and a half storey structure with double Gothic-shaped entrance doors on a small side facing the road. By the side of each door was a long, arched window covered from the inside with an assortment of wood cut-offs. Above the doors was a wider window, again shabby yet heralding an ornate arch. Its name stood out proudly in brick pattern: The Assembly Room.

"I bet it's haunted," Matt continued to tease earning a glare from his wife.

Merryn took the high ground well trodden by fourteen-year-olds and chose to ignore that comment, preferring instead to tut loudly and roll her eyes. "Mum," she said. "Can you turn the heating up? I'm cold."

As Rosie, her mother, reached down for the knob, her father interjected. "How can you be cold? It's the middle of April, the sun's out and it's boiling in this car. Mind you, if you will go out without a jumper..."

Putting as much venom into the word "Dad" as she could, Merryn turned to look out of the rear window. She may not have physically increased the distance between herself and her ridiculously annoying father, but at least she had made a statement. It was fortunate that she could not see the grin on his face.

The tractor slowed to a near halt as it began to negotiate an awkward right turn and Matt was forced to stop. Merryn decided to turn round to take a final look at the run-down building. She found the ugliness of the place strangely interesting as though there was some story to be told behind those crumbling walls. As she cast her eyes over the dereliction, Merryn caught a sudden glimpse of movement at one of the boarded windows. She blinked hard and narrowed her eyes to get a closer look, but it was no use. The tractor was gone and her dad was speeding away; The Assembly Room was disappearing out of sight.

"Merryn, we've got to go to the shop first to pick up some bits. Do you need anything?" Rosie asked.

"Chocolate," said Merryn automatically. She was still thinking about that revolting old building, and whether she had actually seen something. Probably just some wildlife, she surmised with no enthusiasm at all. Now they were living in the country she would have to get used to being surrounded by all things bright and beautiful...and deadly boring.

Two minutes of following the main road through Hitcham brought them to the little village shop. Merryn wandered up and down the two long aisles that stocked everything from electrical fuses to cheap toys to baked beans. Her parents stocked up and chatted to the lady behind the counter but she paid no attention to

the conversation, preferring to look at the surprisingly ample selection of magazines.

“Where are you moving to then?” asked the nosy assistant.

“Bramble Cottage opposite the Brettenham turning,” announced Matt proudly. “It was my uncle’s place but I guess I was the favourite nephew. Actually, that’s not true. I was the only relative! Do you know where I mean?”

“Oh yes,” replied the assistant. “Everyone knows Mowles’ Corner.”

Matt waited for her to carry on but her light-hearted gossip stopped. Instead, the woman just looked at him with a mixture of distrust and anger in her eyes. Merryn had heard people talk about cutting the atmosphere with a knife, but, until now, she did not know what they meant. It was as though someone had hit a pause button and no one was sure how, or indeed whether, to restart. Matt broke the awkward tension. He fumbled around in his pocket for his wallet, then struggled to pull out his bankcard. Clutching the bags, he muttered a dispirited goodbye to the glaring woman.

“She was a bit weird wasn’t she? Don’t know what I did wrong,” he said to Rosie, ignoring the eyes burning holes in his back.

“Maybe they don’t like new people here. Or maybe we have to pass some sort of initiation test. Not a good idea to upset the locals on our first day here, though. They might come for you in the middle of the night and sacrifice you to the gods of the harvest or something,” Merryn teased, and the sombre mood was broken as her dad mock-punched her arm.

They got into their car and went back the way they had come. Very soon, they were pulling into a gravelled driveway that led to a communal parking area. Suddenly, a flash of sunlight dazzled Merryn and she had to shield her eyes. It was so intense that she could only squint at what was directly in front of her. She could see three houses: two were big and modern, painted in traditional, pastel colours and one was a beautiful Victorian farmhouse. Her heart started racing as she waited to be told which one these mini-mansions was to be her new home. But her parents were facing another direction. They were pointing towards a pair of ancient semi-detached cottages with timber frames, and dormer windows poking through threadbare thatch.

“That’s ours!” Matt pointed to the first of the thatched cottages; the one with the leaded, arched windows and the Suffolk pink rendering. Merryn was speechless. It was disgusting. The windows were thick with dirt, and weeds had turned the front garden into a jungle. It was like a ‘before’ in a television property programme; the sort of place the presenters would not go into for fear of messing up their hair or make-up. But she managed to force a smile and grunted some sort of encouraging sound. She could not bear to dent her father’s boyful enthusiasm.

For months, he had talked of nothing but their fantastic new life in the country and his amazing, lucky inheritance. This was going to be their forever home, the solution to all their problems. He promised Merryn that he would be a ‘proper dad’ and give her a better life, and it seemed as though he loved doing it. Matt would drop cryptic hints about his plans, set teasing quizzes and wind up his daughter to frustrating levels. He had even refused to let Merryn and Rosie visit the ‘dream house’ he bragged about because he did not want to spoil the surprise when they finally moved in.

His enthusiasm even managed to sweep away the few secret misgivings Merryn had about leaving the civilisation of a town. Despite her unhappiness, she protested initially and said that she would rather run away from home than move into the middle of nowhere. Then her father’s infectious seeds of optimism started to spread and she began to get slightly excited at the thought of living somewhere totally different, somewhere that promised peace and quiet, somewhere she could start again with a new set of friends who might be more than just people she saw at school. Merryn would never admit that to her dad, though. With an exaggerated sulk, she accepted his promises of unlimited car rides to towns whenever she needed retail therapy and his offer of a greatly raised allowance.

“Actually,” he continued, “there’s more. Jump out of the car and I’ll show you.”

Merryn was still cupping her hands around the sides of her eyes as she grudgingly followed Matt to the front of the cottage. He was obviously not affected by the near-blinding glare as he was standing with his chest out, his shoulders back and turning his head to survey his new empire. He put his arm around Merryn and said, “We own the adjoining cottage too!”

How could he be so proud? Merryn thought as she gazed in horror at the wreck of a house. It should have been a mirror image of the house next door, but it was even worse. The rendering was broken and hanging in tatters around the wooden framework. There was no glass in any of the windows and the front door hung desolately off its hinges. The only thing that was holding that place together was faith. Those same property people would have advised demolition, and it probably wouldn't take anything more powerful than a child's plastic hammer to destroy the place. She thought of her old cornflake packet house, with its paper-thin walls, its anti-social neighbours and views overlooking a paint factory, and yearned to return to her former uncomfortable life.

"That's my pension project," her father said as Merryn began to feel slightly nauseous. "And, as for that place, that's ours too. Mind you, I've no idea yet what I'm going to do with it!"

The piercing glare of the sun vanished suddenly and Merryn could see again, though that was not a good thing. How had she not noticed that thing when they pulled into the driveway? Surely even her temporary blindness could not have hidden that hideous monstrosity. It was the awful building they had passed earlier; the building worthy of a leading role in a horror movie. Instinctively, she took a step backwards and drew her arms around her body to contain the shudder. She wanted to drag her eyes away, but she felt compelled to keep staring, to take in the aura of dereliction and neglect.

"We can't live here, Dad!" she cried.

"Oh, Merryn," soothed Matt. "I know you'll miss your friends and the old place, but this opportunity is too fantastic to pass up. We'll soon get it straight and you'll soon settle here." In true dad-style, he said what he thought were the correct words for what he thought was the problem, and shushed away her protestations. If only he had really listened.

"Go and get Snowdrop from the car. She'll be wondering what's going on, but don't let her out of the basket yet." He continued shouting instructions but they were ignored as Merryn ran back to the car, climbed in and slammed the door shut. Then she dragged her white cat out of the basket and cuddled her so tightly that she got scratched.

2

Merryn chose the smallest bedroom of the three, the only one at the back of the house. She mumbled something about the amazing views over the garden and the fields beyond, and she claimed to have fallen in love with the small cast-iron fireplace. Matt and Rosie chose not to question her choice, knowing better than to argue with their hormonal daughter, but they could not understand it. Her one stipulation on moving was that she got a big bedroom – this one was about half the size of what she was used to. Merryn could not tell them that she did not want to be facing The Assembly Room.

The rest of the upstairs contained two large double bedrooms and a bathroom that Rosie said must have been a later addition. Merryn did query the ‘later’ as it was most definitely Victorian in its fittings, down to the ornate clawed bath. The toilet even had its cistern attached high on the wall with a long chain to pull. Still, it seemed clean enough in its ancient beauty.

Merryn gasped with delight when she walked into the enormous kitchen. Again, it was very dated but beautiful. There was a butler sink underneath one of the windows, and recessed into an inglenook fireplace was a large black stove. Next to the stable door leading to the garden was a row of pine dressers, the wood chipped and smoothed with age but all the more homely for its domestic scars. It was Merryn’s dream kitchen, and, as an added bonus, it was also at the back of the house.

The front door was in the centre of the house and either side of that were two equally sized, dark and dingy rooms. Matt allocated one for a study and the other for a lounge, but Merryn doubted she would use that much. She pictured those overpaid TV presenters wandering around this house, waffling about original features then simpering about the kitchen being the heart of this house.

Within an hour of their arrival, Merryn lost the luxury of wallowing in delight and fear over her new surroundings as the

removal van turned up and chaos ensued. Hundreds of boxes, a mountain of confusion and several expletives later, the empty shell of their new home began to breathe life.

In her bedroom, Merryn managed to squeeze a chest of drawers next to her single bed, and tucked her desk under her window having sacrificed her wardrobe to the spare room. She brought Snowdrop in with her and opened the basket, but the cat refused to get out. Merryn knew that her pet would be reluctant to explore, but she had not been prepared for the swearing and the hissing. She had certainly not anticipated the sudden lunge of razor-sharp claws and the blood drawing scratches as Merryn reached an arm inside to soothe the fractious cat.

Going downstairs to clean the cut, she shut the door on the grumpy feline. Her mum and dad were discussing their adjoining property.

“Do you want to come over with me now and have a look?” asked a very enthusiastic Matt.

“Not at the moment,” came a much less eager reply from his wife. “I’ve got to attempt to make some sort of meal from these packets. Whose great idea was it to live in a place with no takeaway? Besides, it’s dark and there’s no electricity in there.”

“I’ve got a torch in the car,” he pleaded.

But Rosie was adamant so her sulking husband turned to his daughter. “Please, please, please. I need someone to hold my hand in case there’s something in there like...I don’t know... a spider.” He pulled what he thought was a pitiful face and knocked his knees together in mock fear, provoking no more sympathy than an exchanged look of exasperation between mother and child.

Merryn groaned, “Okay. I’ll come next door with you but I won’t go into that other place.”

“The Assembly Room? Why not?”

“Because it’s...it’s disgusting and it’s falling to pieces. And I bet it’s haunted or something – that’s why not!”

Matt laughed. “Don’t be so ridiculous - I was only joking. There are no such things as ghosts, especially not in there. No self-respecting ghost would want to go in that dump. Seriously, though, it may be better if you don’t go in there until I’ve worked out how safe it is. Right then, let’s go next door and watch out for the ghosties.”

Ordinarily, Merryn would have rolled her eyes at her dad's stupid ghost noises and wonder out loud if all fathers were as embarrassing. But she was too busy telling herself that The Assembly Room was only spooky because it looked so bad; that there was nothing to be afraid of. Science over superstition, she whispered over and over again. Wasn't she the one who would shout at the film, 'Paranormal Activity', saying it was all a fake?

In fact, science won the battle as they pushed open a front door that creaked and swayed on one hinge. At every step, Merryn expected some part of the house's structure to come crashing down on her head but the house would not even grant her that amount of excitement. Matt's halogen torch illuminated a downstairs that was identical to its neighbour in layout. The only other similarities however were the windows and the deep fireplaces. Elsewhere, all the oak beams and original features that were exposed in their house were hidden behind shoddy boards.

While her dad raved about what a fabulous place it was, its potential, its beauty, Merryn just saw neglect. It was an unloved wooden shell that had not been touched in centuries. It smelt of damp and decay, and had absolutely no feeling or atmosphere about it. Nothing had lived in it for centuries – not even a foolhardy field mouse. The house was dead.

"Well?" Rosie asked thirty minutes later as they sat around the kitchen table with their tea of cheese sandwiches, crisps, chocolate biscuits and coke.

"It's going to take a lot of work," sighed Matt. "I haven't got time at the moment, which is such a shame as it could be a really lovely house. But it's structurally sound enough and it's not going to go anywhere, so it will just have to stay like that for a few more years."

Matt and Rosie continued to discuss possibilities for both houses, while Merryn drifted into thoughts of her own. She had avoided looking at The Assembly Room as she walked the twenty steps between the two front doors, but she still felt its presence. She felt stupid admitting this even to herself. However, she could not shake a weird sense of foreboding. It was as though something was waiting there, watching and waiting. Merryn resolved to avoid that place at all costs. A difficult task considering how close the building was to her own front door.