

Haunting Genevieve's Reach--Excerpt from the Novel

By Joan D. Cooper

The Haunting—late October

By late October, the first full month that she lived at Genevieve's Reach, the manor house drew Kylie's attention more every day. Sitting high on the hill some distance from the cottages, the building appeared tall with its fieldstone foundation, the two stories capped by attics, and a widow's walk. Standing in its shadow in the garden, Kylie noted the decaying shutters leaning away from the brick face, the sagging windowsills and broken glass of some of the windows on the second floor. The first floor windows were boarded up haphazardly so that the face of it seemed to be winking and the wide porch boards buckled in places. She heard sighs as she walked closer. The reflections in the remaining glass in the windows caught her eye when she hung the sheets on the line beside her cottage. She wandered closer to the mansion every time she hiked out to the gardens after some rebuff from Michael.

She found herself standing in its shadow one mid-afternoon on a bright blue sky day with a light breeze moving through the trees. She had suggested that Michael sit outside in the sun while she cleaned. He had been particularly irritated when Kylie offered for the second time help him down the cottage steps. He had insisted, "You're done for the day. Stop badgering me to go outside, eat, sleep, everything." As she had hesitated in the doorway, trying to see him sitting deep in an armchair tucked into his usual darkened corner, he had yelled, "Are you deaf, woman? Get out!"

She allowed frustrated tears to erupt once she retreated to her own cottage. His dismissal should have been a boon—the whole afternoon off to write another chapter. The quiet of the Reach was perfect for the novel; it seemed to fall off her fingers onto the page in this place. The story usually created a little vacuum that the anger inside the other cottage couldn't penetrate. That day her little cushion was punctured by his sharp words, so she left her writing to wander the footpaths and idly work in the garden until evening.

Old Mr. George, the Trident's gardener, was due to arrive later, and she wanted to ask him questions about pruning a vine that had strangled one rose bush but obviously yielded huge flowers based on the drying husks. During his visit the previous week, he had asked, "Did they hire ya ta mind Mr. Trident or work the gardens?" He reviewed her work on the first section nearest the tool shed and helped her name a few of the bushes and remnants of flowering perennials on the rough map she'd drawn.

As Kylie sank into the deep quiet of the manor, she found it busy with the past. She noticed sounds, fragrances and fleeting glimpses of other lives that disappeared when she turned toward them. She couldn't remember feeling so aware of both the present and the past since she stayed on her grandparents' farm as a child. Particularly in the mansion's garden, ribbons of lives from the past converged with hers.

Once during a visit to her grandparents' old place when she was seventeen, Kylie had experienced a startling episode. Her grandmother's memories had played out like a film that she stood just outside watching. Kylie had attributed the vividness of her visions to her grandmother's presence as her grandmother's post-stroke brain accessed the memories of kisses under the hanging laundry or a declaration of love made by her grandfather among the shadows inside a grove of lilacs. The scenes had been transmitted through memories sixty years in the past and conjured by her grandmother brain. The doctors had told them that short term memory might never return along with speech and the full use of her right side. Kylie had held her grandmother upright as the scenes bloomed, played and diminished. Kylie closed her eyes and imagined the grove of lilacs, the sheets stretched on lines between pear trees, and the happy couple learning to love each other on a spring day so long ago.

She opened her eyes to reexamine the ruined garden, the hulking mansion and the three cottages in the distance on a warm autumn afternoon. The odd hot spots of gathering energy at Genevieve's Reach were strongest in the old garden at the back of the mansion.

On that bright October afternoon, Kylie first saw the child in the window of the mansion's second floor bedroom, but she was not unduly alarmed. She had felt someone watching her before she raised her eyes to the face of the mansion. She had cut away overgrown grass from a metal grate and paused to pull out her makeshift drawing of the garden. She had tapped the toe of her boot on the edge of the grating and it had shifted. She heard the plop of debris landing in water a long way down and smiled because she had found a well.

Something fluttered in her periphery as she pulled the drawing out of her pocket. She glanced up toward the movement and stilled. High up on the second floor, a girl looked down at Kylie. Her long curls of blonde hair hung over a white cotton nightgown as if she was sick and was going to bed early. Kylie stared up, and the child stared down.

Kylie blinked, looked at the outline drawing in her hand and glanced back up to the window. High up on the second floor, the young girl remained standing and looking down from the large, open window. Kylie folded the drawing and slid it into her pocket. She raised her left hand to wave, and the girl looked startled but waved the fingers of one hand.

The windows were open with the curtains blowing out, so Kylie shouted, "Hello there! It might be dangerous to be in the house. Why don't you come down?" She stepped closer worried that the girl was a mirage though the day was clear. The sky was deep blue and dotted with puffy clouds, and a little breeze shook the trees free of the leaves still clinging to charcoaled branches.

The girl was immediately gone from the window, and Kylie waited at the steps to the porch for her to reappear at the front door. She heard a sighing that was not the wind and the snatch of music occurred to her. No one appeared, so Kylie ventured up the creaking stairs, across the wide porch, and through the front door which offered no resistance. She was impressed with the quantity of dust, pollen and leaves on the floor as she entered. It didn't look like anyone had been in there for years.

She walked through the foyer and into a narrow hallway calling out, "Hello?" The quiet inside the house gave no answer. On her right, an intricate series of stairs with a wide landing led to the upper floors. The wallpaper was foiled a silvery green and decorated with delicate birds and stalks of bamboo. She climbed the twisting stairs, testing each one as she remembered George's warning. From the first landing window, she could see the cottages at the back of the property looking distant and small. She advanced gingerly to the second landing and the bedroom at the front of the house. Music threaded through her mind—a piano piece that she didn't know. She listened for footsteps or a voice but nothing could be heard but the music and her own breathing.

After Kylie stood in the open window for ten full minutes, absorbing all the feelings swirling about in the vacant bedroom, George arrived in his truck and saw her brightly-clad figure framed by the large window. Kylie's hair was loose and flowing out the window with her head bowed, eyes closed, and her skirt and blouse flirting with the breeze as she stood as if considering a leap from the building.

Kylie imagined he swore as his blood ran cold, and he drove directly to the front door of mansion house. He leapt from his truck and shouted to her, "Come down from there!" She whispered his automatic prayerful curse as he crossed himself shivering all over like a wet dog. She opened her eyes and took a step back.

George shook Kylie slightly by the shoulders after she descended the last stair. They stood at the foot of the stairs with the floorboards creaking. He held her hand as they hurried through the house to the front door. Once outside and beside his truck, George said, "You are forbidden to enter the house again. Understand?" His face creased into an acre of frowning wrinkles, and he pulled on his beard as he glanced back at the house. Then George abruptly reached forward and hugged Kylie to his chest as if she was a child who needed comforting. She felt his confused, worried affection for her.

While he was befuddled, Kylie whispered, “George? There was a girl in the window. She had long, blonde hair. She saw me.” His arms dropped and he stepped away from her. Kylie waited a beat for his dismissal then added, “There is no sign of anyone in there but me.” She pointed at the door, “Our footsteps were the only ones that have disturbed the dust on the floor; there have been no other visitors for quite some time.”

Kylie felt his mind shutter against her. He shook his head, stepped back, and then turned to get his toolbox from the truck. Kylie watched as George nailed the front door shut. He checked the back to see that it was secure, and then stomped directly across the overgrown field and into Michael Trident’s cottage to rouse him from a deep sleep. Kylie followed closely—she did not glance back at the mansion but shivered until her teeth chattered.

Cottage

Genevieve

First impressions. The golden one with her aura of good. What is insanity? Keep those you love safe? Keep those you love close. Keep those you love? Keep. Keep.

One hundred years of staring and the girl has returned. Her memory bounces in the words she fails to say. There was a girl. In the window. Watching all that time.

I knew. I stared back and she did not move. One and two. Three. Four and five. Six. Seven. Seven. Eight and nine like afterthoughts.

Shut her up. The golden one laughs. She has been hiding all this time. Who is this child? This spirit so old, so light and golden?

Kylie?

The Interview

In slow motion, George strode across the drive between the main house and the cottages as Kylie battled the urge to turn around walk the old paths she was slowly beating down. Thinking time after such an encounter was mandatory. She entered the larger cottage to hear George calling for Michael.

George half-yelled, “Michael? Mr. Trident? I have to talk to you about Mrs. Timmons here.” Kylie passed him in the kitchen and stepped into the living room where Michael’s hulking form was absent. She moved back down the hallway to the bedroom.

Michael half-rolled on his better side to rise. He demanded, “What’s happened?”

Kylie remained silent but moved to his side. She helped Michael up from the bed, tied his robe closed, and offered him the crutch. He settled into the large armchair in his small living room, wincing at the bright daylight, so she closed the drapes that she thought she had pulled together at his bidding that morning. Even the sheers were pulled back to the edges of the windows.

Michael rasped out, “What’s all this about, Mr. George? What has she done now?”

George voiced his worries. “I found her inside the main house—upstairs in the window. The place might be dangerous; no one’s lived there for years—before I was born. She says she saw something.”

Kylie interrupted, “A girl in a long white gown.” She bit her lip when Michael made a noise that sounded like a rasping bark. She blinked at him in the shadows and realized he was laughing.

She turned away and went into the kitchen to boil water for tea. She pushed her bangs off her forehead and found them damp with perspiration. A shifting noise at the back of the cottage caught her ear, as she readied

the teapot, and she caught a shadow in her periphery hanging in the doorway that lead to Michael's room. She shook her head over her fanciful imagination, as the conversation between the two men disassembled into terse snatches of irritation.

George insisted, "Send her away immediately—you can find someone else to clean and cook." George stood there twisting his hat in two large hands as Michael shifted in the shadows of the curtained living room. Kylie saw George sniff, and she wondered if he could smell the damp rot in the cottage like she could. Had he ever seen the little girl at the mansion?

She started to ask when Michael interrupted, "I understand your worries, Mr. George. I'll speak to her." When the older man began to protest, Michael groused out, "Please leave."

Kylie beckoned George into the kitchen. She poured him tea and prepared it like he had on his previous visit to her cottage. "I promise not to go looking for the little girl again, George. Don't worry—it frightened me that someone was in the house—I won't do it again."

George sipped at the tea and examined Kylie's face. He rubbed his whiskers in an indecisive gesture. "Let me talk to my wife. I don't see why we can't let you stay with us. You could drive here every day if you wanted." Kylie watched him glance in the direction of Michael's bedroom. She imagined his literal interpretation of the shadow in the hallway.

Kylie's eyes watered in the effort not to begin babbling about the recurrent foul smells, the shadows and noises in Michael's cottage. If she didn't watch her words, someone would contact her family with their worries. She shook her head. "If I left him on his own, no one would be here to watch out for him. If the weather turned bad, he'd be cut off from everyone. I promised his grandmother that I'd stay. It's better that I stay and stick to what the Tridents asked me to do. I promise not to go inside the mansion, George."

George called out to Michael in the direction of the bedroom, "I'm going, Michael. You call if you need me."

The old man jumped when Michael's voice answered him from the living room where he still sat in the armchair. "Thank you."

George grasped Kylie by both arms and whispered, "Let me take both of you back to town tonight."

Kylie shook her head and stepped back breaking his hold. She walked him out to his truck and thanked him with tears in her eyes. "I can't tell you how relieved I am that someone else senses whatever it is in his cottage." She rolled her eyes when George tried to bluster and deny he understood her.

"You thought Michael was in the bedroom again. You could smell whatever it is in there when you were talking to Michael. I saw you."

George shook his head. He rubbed his chin and glanced back at the cottage. "You have too much imagination, Kylie. We were both creeped out by the mansion today. You'll have me seeing faces in the shrubs on the way back up the lane. It's all suggestion, girl." He was almost angry, but Kylie nodded and let him go.

She had too much experience with disbelievers and the fearful. She sighed before she lost sight of George's truck trundling over the twisting path back to the country highway. There were faces in the twisted Osage orange trees that canopied the long drive. George had mentioned them without her prompting.

She reentered Michael's cottage to weather a tirade he delivered concerning her place at the farm. She bowed her head to hide a smile over his delivery. Her sighting of the child and trespass into the mansion was the impetus for Michael Trident's first real lecture to Kylie on her role of employee and servant. She reflected that he must be a persuasive representative in court if he could compose a scold this fierce in the few minutes since George had left.

She listened closely and heard, behind his spoken words, his true worries. The real reason for his exasperation was the constant pressure to improve and heal as she wandered in and out of his solitude and wrecked it. Michael's fondest desire was to wallow and fester in the bitterness that memory and pain had become since the hospital. Kylie's presence pulled him out of it even if it was just in irritation.

He paced behind her slowly with the crutch and unwieldy cast while she sat with hands clasped and head bowed. He interpreted her agreement and acceptance due to her silence and lowered head. She realized that he expected her to cry because he frightened her or she was sorry. Kylie opened her eyes wide and fell into his opened thoughts. She hadn't experienced this level of telepathy with another person since her grandmother after the woman's stroke left her unable to speak.

She felt him note, as he paced, how thin and fragile she appeared with her clasped hands marked by dirt from the garden folded over a thin, cotton skirt. Her hair, as it fell forward because she looked down, was a sun-streaked blond that barely brushed her shoulders. He wondered over his mother hiring this girl to take care of him alone at the farm. He'd heard tears in her voice when she'd spoken to him today after he yelled to leave him alone. Michael felt cruel when her voice fell to that huskiness. He ended by winding down to one question, "Why should I keep you here?" Out loud he uttered, "If you are going to be a nuisance about seeing spirits and ghosts, please leave."

She wasn't worried by his tirade; she needed to revisit sighting the child in the window and the girl's startled response to Kylie's wave. The vaporous child had seen Kylie as surely as she'd been seen by Kylie. She discarded Michael's unreasonable anger as she sat and meditated on the white bedroom in her repeating dream, the brown stain under the bed and the smell of roses—the white nightgown the child wore; it was all connected. Kylie bore his lecture without response because she could read his thought so clearly. On another level, she was bemused by recalling the appearance of the girl, the feeling of George's fright and concern, and the old man's awareness of another presence in the cottage. Kylie experienced the satisfied vindication of being right though no one had admitted to any of the truth.

The place was haunted, and she knew it to be fact. She had no fear of the dead. What damage the dead had done followed them into the afterlife but rarely reemerged into the present. The presence in Michael's cottage niggled her instinctive fears, but the child in the mansion was no threat.

She forced a huge breath into her lungs, held it and then released on a breath that she imagined blew away in frost. Kylie blinked and captured one more unasked question from Michael's mind. As he tried to remember her name, he had found that he could not. The haze from the painkillers he took robbed him of all short-term information. She let the name "Kylie" resound in her own brain lick of music and bright fire. She smiled into her clasped hands and allowed a stab of cruelty.

As he wound down, exhausted by the exertion of talking so long to a silent figure, Kylie rose and revealed her smile. As he stared at her in surprise, she reminded Michael, "My name is Mrs. Timmons." She raised a brow and looked directly up into his eyes to share the humor of the deletion of her first name. He recoiled into the shadows again.

She grinned at his self-protective stance though he was close to an angry explosion. She told him, "You can't fire me. I am employed by your mother." Kylie started to leave the cottage as he sputtered. She stopped at the door and looked back. "Michael," she chided, "I do promise to keep your ghosts to myself."

Then she left him to flail around in his cottage by himself. She imagined the shadow in the hallway seeping back into his bedroom to wait for him. Kylie made dinner that evening, wondering why she had never studied herbs like a white witch her father had once accused her of becoming. She imagined that the rosemary she used with the chicken dish she prepared had soothing qualities. She made a note on one of her lists to look up the herbs for healing unsettled minds.

Cottage 1

The golden one is digging in the garden. Kylie. Why? Snow is threatening and she is humming through Bach. Angles of light. Etude.

She picks up a white pebble and examines it. Eyes sea green look into the past. Blink. She snatches up a morsel. Released from the pit. From the abyss of blue above and slime on all the brick walls.

She holds it in her hand and warms it dry. The gold inside her fuses to the garden. Leaves her alone with the morsel of bone in her hand.

Bring me inside with you, golden one. Deliver me home.

Arrived.