

WILLIAM BEDFORD

## SHRUNKEN HEADS

THE WOMAN WAS STANDING BESIDE HIS BED, like the figures who had come to him in childhood nightmares. She had lank, greasy hair hanging down to her waist, and her mouth and eyes were closed. She could have reached out and touched his hand, but she was facing the blank wall where his reproduction of Picasso's *Le Hibou* hung. She was small, like a child, but smelled of something old. He could see in the pale light from the window that her mouth and eyes were closed because they were sewn together.

He rolled to the other side of the bed in a panic, grabbed his clothes, and ran down the darkened stairs. He jammed a chair under the door handle in the kitchen, turned on all the lights, and waited for her to follow. His body was shivering, and sweat was running down his face. It was midsummer—one of the hottest in years—but the house felt cold. Making a pot of tea, he leaned against the sink with his back to the window so that he could keep an eye on the door. His heartbeat slowed, and the house was silent, but he was too shaken to go upstairs to wake his wife.

When Sally came down for breakfast, she was already dressed for tennis and in a hurry. She played tennis most Saturday mornings with one of her friends. She'd been out late the night before and had overslept. Glancing at him, she saw the state he was in and sat down at the table.

"What's on earth's wrong?"

He shrugged. "Nothing. Just a bad dream."

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not. Are you ill?"

"No."

"You're white as a ghost."

"Very funny," he said.

"I'm not being funny."

He closed his eyes, and he was in one of the cafés in St. Giles, waiting to

see a student. A cold November fog hung motionless in the narrow streets, and he could scarcely see across the road. Then his mother was suddenly there, walking past the café, using her shopping trolley to prevent her falling, staring ahead with that same grim determination he had known all his life.

When he opened his eyes, his wife was watching him, and he realized that his hands were trembling.

“Are you going to tell me?”

“It’s nothing.”

“For heaven’s sake, Stephen . . .”

“All right! It was my mother.”

“Your mother?”

“Yes.”

She took a quick breath, biting her lip. He could see she was irritated, the colour flushing to her face. “That’s probably it,” she said briefly, pushing her hands back through her hair, glancing at her wristwatch.

“It?”

“Like you said, it was probably just a bad dream. You’re still upset about your mother.”

“Right,” he nodded angrily.

“I’m sorry, Stephen. I have to go. I promised Sam.”

“Then go.”

She got up to make herself a coffee. He noticed that the neighbour’s cockerel was making its dawn racket, but it was already after 9am. The bird must have been crowing for hours.

As the days passed, Stephen became convinced that his wife was right. His mother had only been dead since last winter, not long after the morning he saw her in St. Giles. Given how he hated her, she was bound to return in his dreams just to be sure of his misery. She needed more time to rest. And there was something else he had forgotten. Visiting a friend in Keble College only the previous week, he had glanced at the Pitt Rivers Museum and smiled at the queues of tourists waiting to half-frighten themselves to death in the gloomy display area where the curators kept the shrunken heads. The eyes and mouths of these heads were sewn together, like those of the woman he saw standing beside his bed. As the truths gathered around him, he began to forget the feelings.

In the long summer months, he and his wife rarely talked about that night, and an edge came into Sally's voice whenever he mentioned it. There were parties and a week away in Sorrento. When they got back, he had a paper to finish on Coleridge, and Sally was playing in local tennis leagues. She taught in one of the city's choir schools and had lessons to prepare. She certainly wouldn't have welcomed a visit from his mother. "Dead or alive," she once joked. They always hated each other. His mother never liked any woman he loved, and when she derided Sally as a "bloody blue stocking," she made no secret of her own contempt.

"A psychotic, delusional hysteric," one of his mother's psychiatrists had written in his diagnosis. Medication made no difference. Nobody could control her—least of all Stephen's gentle, faithful, but dim father. One evening, when they'd gone to his parents for a meal, his mother sat down afterwards and told Sally she'd had a dream. Stephen's heart sank.

"It was the strangest thing," his mother said innocently, as if she were talking about a trip to the supermarket. "You would have known, Sally, you're so clever. I was in bed with Stephen, and I heard these footsteps on the stairs. I knew it would be my father, and he would be angry with me. I was frightened. It was really odd. We weren't doing anything wrong. Then I woke up."

Stephen remembered his father busying himself in the kitchen, pretending not to listen. "We ought to be going," he said, getting up from his chair and smiling at his mother, but he was too late. Sally was never forgiven for laughing. As far as he could remember, his mother never spoke to her again. There was no way he wanted to resurrect all of that, and by the time Michaelmas term began he was irritated with himself for behaving like a frightened child. Neither of them mentioned the nightmare visitation again.

Two years later, Sally's father died. Frederick had been an actuary at Lloyds, and before that he'd been a lieutenant colonel in the guards, stationed in Palestine and Kenya. He was one of the least imaginative men Stephen had ever known, perfectly happy to walk through graveyards at midnight or sit down with African witch doctors in the bush. Sally inherited his gift for mathematics and his impatience with astrologists and stories of vengeful magpies. During his funeral, when the choir was singing Fauré's "In Paradisum," he was surprised to see her calmly listening to the music as though they were at a concert.

A few days after the funeral he came home to find her crying. She tried to hide her tears, shrugging his hand from her shoulder, but he sat down beside her, refusing to leave her alone. As he poured them both a drink, she told him it had nothing to do with the funeral or her father's death. It was the night of his own upset, when he had woken to find a nightmare figure standing beside his bed.

"I saw the same thing," she said quietly, looking away from him.

"Thing?"

She nodded unhappily. "Two years ago. I saw your mother. It was your mother."

He felt his mouth dry. His pulse was racing. He thought she was making it up, but that was ridiculous. Why would she do that? She believed in nothing she couldn't understand.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"I didn't want you making even more of a fuss," she said furiously, then cried again when he tried to hold her, pushing him away as if she resented his sympathy. When she calmed down, they talked for a long time, going over the arguments that had helped him forget his own upset so quickly and their agreement that he had been disturbed by his mother's death and confused her with the shrunken heads in the museum. His hatred of her would explain a lot of things in his life, including that nightmare.

"It's just a coincidence," he tried to reassure her. "I didn't know what I was saying two years ago. I must have given you the idea, and you imagined you'd seen her too. Couples do share experiences sometimes. Your father's death brought the memory back. That's all. Who knows what the mind can imagine?"

"Yes," she said after a long pause, emptying her glass and washing it in the sink. "But I have no reason to confuse his death with a tale you told me two years ago. I know you hated your mother. I hated her too. But I loved my father. He was a good man. He would have laughed at this conversation."

She was right about her father. Now that he was gone, Stephen wished he could just pick up a telephone and find comfort in his father-in-law's good-natured, kindly skepticism. In Frederick's world, there were no problems that couldn't be solved with good will and sensible reasoning.

They were having supper with a couple of friends that weekend and knew they would have to talk about what had happened. Philip was a philos-

opher who believed anything that couldn't be verified must be nonsense or rather "non-sense," as he said pedantically. His doctorate had been an early study of artificial intelligence, and he was often consulted by government agencies involved in research and development. Carrie was a criminologist with emphatic opinions about the causes of crime.

Stephen tried to blame his father-in-law's funeral for what they were experiencing, but Sally cut him short. "My father was still alive when your mother visited you," she said coldly. There was an awkward silence after that, as Stephen was irritated at the "visited you," and Philip and Carrie were confused and trying to hide their amusement. Sally then told them that she'd had the same experience, but her dry sarcastic tone seemed to suggest she'd never believed it, which gradually relaxed their friends. Stephen resented the betrayal, as if a secret were being shared with people who were never going to understand it.

It was Philip who spoke first. "It didn't happen," he smiled.

"Then why do we still remember it after two years?" Stephen asked.

"That's a different question," Philip pointed out.

"You think it's just a dream?"

"I didn't say that. There's no such thing as 'just a dream.' Have you seen your doctor? Your mother's death was a shock, regardless of whether you hated her—or, more likely, because you hated her."

"And Sally?"

"Coincidence," Carrie interrupted.

"Both of us?"

"That's what coincidence means."

"I know what coincidence means. How about synchronicity?"

Carrie spoke quietly, and her style of argument was to alternate long silences with patient explanations, which always sounded patronizing even if they weren't.

"Not Jung again, Stephen," she sighed.

"He wasn't an idiot."

"You're both beginning to sound like idiots," she said with a good-humoured laugh. "There's always an explanation. Even the worst psychopaths have reasons, like something in their genes or their environment."

"Like hating your mother," Stephen glared, feeling attacked.

Philip did his best to sound reasonable and calm things down. "Tell us how you explain it," he said cheerfully, leaning forward and helping himself

to more wine.

“The ghost in the machine,” Stephen said angrily.

“Goodness,” Carrie laughed.

“The strange thing that happens but nobody can explain.”

“Like electric sparks in the sixteenth century,” Philip smiled. “People thought they were witches’ familiars, like cats or fleas. Several thousand women were burned alive because they didn’t know about electricity. We might prefer something like couvade syndrome, where men experience vomiting and mood changes when their wives are pregnant.”

“Partners,” Carrie corrected him.

When their child appeared in the doorway, Carrie said they had to stop talking about silly ghosts. By the time she went back to bed, Stephen said it was time for them to be going, as he had a lecture to give the following morning.

Sally’s mood changed after the dinner party. Whenever Stephen tried to talk about that evening, she was too busy or too tired. Her coldness surprised him. Even if she didn’t mind hearing Stephen made fun of, he thought she would at least be upset at having her own experience ridiculed. But the fact that Philip and Carrie both found the idea of ghosts ridiculous reassured her, and her indifference became aggressive, as if she were annoyed with his mother and with him for going on about her. He realized that she unconsciously blamed him for whatever they had gone through together, but he was too busy himself to go on arguing.

In the third week of Michaelmas term, one of his students knocked on his study door and asked if she could see him about something personal. Louise was a third-year mature student, in her late thirties, who was hard-working and well-prepared in tutorials. She had short-cut dark hair and wore expensive clothes that looked vaguely ethnic, though he wasn’t much good about clothes.

“You’ll think I’m crazy,” she said when he asked her to sit down, “but I’ve wanted to talk to you since my first year.”

“You see me every week,” he laughed.

“Yes.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

She remained still for a time, and he sensed a watchfulness in her that refused to be hurried.

“I think you need help,” she said finally.

“I do?”

“I know somebody close to you died.”

“That’s no secret.”

“She came back.”

He smiled, thinking he must have misheard. “What do you mean?”

“She came back.”

There was a pause as the clock in the quad chimed the quarter hour.

Stephen stood up and started rearranging the papers on his desk. “I think you should go.”

“She is trying to reach you. She tried before, but you wouldn’t listen.”

“I said leave,” he repeated angrily.

She looked up, and for the first time he noticed the darkness of her eyes and the paleness of her skin. She wore no make-up or jewellery other than a small cross on a silver chain around her neck.

“She frightened me,” Louise said, “like one of the shrunken heads in the museum.”

He stared at the papers in his hands: old exams, a tutorial essay on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a memo from the Dean about arrangements for finals.

“Frightened you?”

“I saw her.”

Stephen sat down suddenly, jarring his arm against the desk. In the morning, there would be a huge bruise. He stared at her, waiting for her to go on, but she closed her eyes. She seemed finished and exhausted.

“I’ll come back tomorrow,” she said without opening her eyes.

When she stood up, he made no move to prevent her leaving. He could have called for help, but there was no point. He knew that she would keep her word. It was like a promise that couldn’t be broken.

Louise continued with her weekly tutorials and made several surprise visits, usually after formal hall when he was packing his briefcase to return home. Problems with Old English grammar was the usual excuse, but she always asked how he was before she left, watching as he laughed at her concern. One evening he asked if she had decided to become his guardian angel. “You already have one,” she said and then left before he could ask her what she meant.

In the last week of term, unusually for her, she came early one morning without books or essay notes.

“I feel as though I’m being pursued,” he said.

“By me?”

“No,” he answered, then sat down abruptly at his desk, caught off guard by his own words. “Of course not. I don’t know why I said that.”

Loud voices came from the quad as the crew of the college’s first boat returned from early-morning training.

“It’s as if she’s trudging through frozen mud,” Louise said without waiting for him to explain. “She refuses to look at me. It isn’t me she wants.”

“Louise . . .”

“She can’t pass on.”

Stephen was too tired to argue, so he told her she should leave. “Go home and enjoy Christmas. When you come back, this nonsense stops.”

As he spoke, he studied the owl model he kept on his desk. It was the symbol of Minerva, the Greek goddess of wisdom. A student had bought it for him when she graduated, enjoying the fact that wisdom was female. Holding the model, he suddenly remembered the Picasso silkscreen beside his bed.

“I’m not coming back,” Louise said. “I’ve asked to be assigned to another tutor.”

“Liar!” he said without stopping to think. “I’d have been told if you’d made such a request.”

“You refuse to listen to her.”

“I refuse to listen to *you* when you’re talking such nonsense. My mother has been dead for two years.”

“She wants to say, ‘I only tried to protect you from your father.’”

“That’s enough!”

He was trembling as he pushed back his chair and stood up. He felt the urge to hit her, but she was already leaving.

“I had to tell you,” she said. “She won’t come back now.”

Then she was gone.

“Why are you so incensed?” Sally asked.

“I only tried to protect you from your father,” he answered, repeating the girl’s words.

“You know it’s nonsense,” she said as she stared out the window at the



snow falling on the garden. They hadn't talked about his mother since the evening with Philip and Carrie.

"Protect me from my father," he said hopelessly.

"Yes."

"Protect *me* from *him*," he pointed out, wanting her to react.

She was still watching the snow.

"Sally!"

"But you loved him."

"Yes."

"You know it's just more of your mother's malicious lies."

"Yes."

"Evil."

"Yes."

"A lie so evil it could only have come from her?" She phrased it as a question, but she knew what the words meant.

Stephen waited. Louise knew nothing about his childhood or his father—nobody did. He said nothing.

"Yes," Sally said finally, answering her own question. She leaned back in her armchair with her hands clenched, the nails digging into her hands. She refused to look at him, and he thought she might never look at him again. She knew what he was avoiding, but he didn't want to hear the words.

They sat for a long time waiting for the snow to stop. It didn't stop. By the time they drew the curtains, the sundial was buried under frozen snow.