

Ginny

A Short Story



Photo by Piers Rowlandson

The Pink House

Cowes

Isle of Wight

1st September 2021

Dear Grandad,

Where did you go, Grandad? I know you drowned when your old fishing boat sank. But where are you now? I so want to see you. You can't just leave us like this. Mum keeps bursting into tears. It's like she is waiting for you to come through the door. Dad looks so helpless. He doesn't know how to comfort Mum. She's the strong one in this family, or so I thought, but it turns out she depended on you entirely. She's lost without you. We all are. So where have you gone, Grandad? Please come back.

Love

Ginny

PS I've got school tomorrow, so please wish me luck.

-§-

“Ginny, are you asleep?”

Tori pushed the door open a fraction and peered into her daughter’s bedroom.

“I can’t sleep, Mum.”

“Are you worried about school?”

“No Mum, I’m feeling sad. Amelia said ghosts are real and if we believe in them they will visit us.”

“Grandad?”

“Yes, Mum. I was hoping if I thought about him very hard that he would come to see me. I never said good bye. He vanished so suddenly.”

“I know, my darling. It’s hard for all of us.”

“I’ve written him a letter Mum but I don’t know his address. So I can’t post it.”

“Oh, Ginny, that’s sweet of you. We’ll burn your letter and add it to the ashes in the urn. Then, when we scatter them on the Downs, they will fly up and perhaps he’ll be able to read your letter.”

“That’s a great idea, Mum. Can we do that tomorrow?”

“We’ll have to wait until the weekend. Can I read it?”

“No, please don’t. It’s private.”

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Next morning Tori dropped Ginny off in Newport to catch the bus to her school in Ryde. It was lunchtime before she could speak to her cousin.

“Have you ever seen a ghost, Amelia?”

“Oh yes! It was in the woods by Newtown Creek.”

“Who was it?”

“A drowned sailor. You know that stone monument on the shore just outside the harbour entrance?”

“Yes, we had a picnic on the sandy spit just a little way from there with Mum and Dad, last summer.”

“It was one of the boys.”

“How do you know?”

“He looked all bedraggled, like he had been washed up on the beach.”

“Did he say anything? Did he speak to you?”

“Yes, his voice was very weak and faint, like he was trying desperately hard to get a message to me. It seemed it took all his energy to gasp out a few words.”

“What did he say?”

Amelia fixed her green eyes on Ginny and, in a hoarse whisper, said. “*Beware the Hamstead Ledge.*”

“Oh,” said Tori. “Didn’t he have any message for his surviving relatives? There must be quite a few here on the Island.”

“No,” said Amelia. “He just faded from sight.”

“Did your mum or dad see him?”

“No, they were too busy with the barbecue.”

“Do you think, you could summon him? I so want to see a real ghost. My mum could take us down to Newtown Creek. Mum likes sailing with Uncle Ben.”

“In Patience? I love that old boat.”

“Yes. I’ve sailed on her nearly all my life. I was only eighteen months old when we went cruising down to Falmouth, with Grandad”

“Could we spend the night at anchor?”

“I’ll ask Mum.”

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“Ginny, it’s time you got dressed. Your uncles will be here in a minute.”

“Oh Mum.”

It was Saturday morning. Ginny was having a lie-in after a busy week at school. They had burnt the letter and the ashes were in the urn. Tori had invited her brothers to lunch. Ben had returned to the Island and now lived in Ventnor in a house overlooking the sea, once owned by Paul and Tori. Harry was coming down from London. He arrived first. The front door was never locked during the day so he entered the house and stood in the hall calling out.

“Hello, Tori, hello Paul! Where’s my favourite niece?”

“Here,” said Ginny as she descended the stairs, her long blond hair hanging in wet rats tails around her shoulders. Her brown legs and bare feet stuck out below a cotton dress she had only just pulled over her head. Harry stooped down and kissed her damp tresses. Amelia came barging into the house. “Hello Uncle!”

“Ah, my favourite niece!” said Harry.

Ginny went over to Amelia and whispered in her ear. They turned, looked at Harry and burst into giggles.

“You’re my favourite niece,” they chorused.

“Well, you are both my favourites,” said Harry.

Angelica and Ben followed close behind their daughter and Tori came out of the kitchen.

“Lunch is nearly ready. We’ll have it in the dining room as there are so many of us. Go through to the garden. Paul will fix you a drink.”

Judith was holding a bunch of flowers, standing behind Harry, looking lost. She didn’t really know Tori and her family. Tori watched the rest of the party disappear into the garden and then stepped forward to greet her brother’s latest girlfriend.

“Good of you to come down, Judith. I know it’s a trek getting to the Island.”

Paul had brought a table out of the summer house and loaded it with drinks for his guests. Now they stood about the lawn. Ginny and Amelia were on Coca Cola. The adults were drinking wine.

“I hope Harry explained that we’re going to scatter father’s ashes from the top of the Downs, Judith,” said Tori.

“Yes he did, I’m not sure I’ll make it up the Downs. I want to be supportive, but I don’t want to be in the way.”

“You won’t be in the way, not at all, but I can see it’s awkward for you as you didn’t know my dad.”

“I might stay here and read a book.”

“I quite understand. It’s a nice walk along the front to Gurnard, if you feel like a breath of sea air.”

Judith smiled. Her pallor and stick like figure suggested that she might be one of those London girls who are allergic to the seaside.

Tori shepherded her extended family through to the dining room. Betsy had helped her lay out a cold buffet. The brothers and Paul were discussing the city; Tori and Angelica were discussing the arrangements for getting Ginny and Amelia to the next Oppie event, which left Judith rather isolated. The girls were whispering, their heads nearly touching, the salmon left untouched on their plates.

Suddenly, Ginny called out. “Who here believes in ghosts?”

Everyone stopped talking and looked at her. Amelia smiled and put an arm around Ginny.

“I do,” said Ben.

“I think we all do,” said Tori.

Paul and Harry looked sceptical.

“Depends what you mean,” said Paul diplomatically.

“I don’t,” said Harry. “When people say they’ve seen a ghost, there is usually a perfectly rational explanation.”

“I think people from the past can suddenly pop into your mind when you pass a place that was especially significant to them,” said Ben.

“But can you actually see them?” asked Ginny.

“Some people can,” said Tori.

“I can,” said Amelia. “I saw a ghost in the woods by Newtown Creek.”

She squeezed her cousin.

“Can we sail there next week end?” asked Ginny.

“I’ll be back in London, I’m afraid,” said Harry.

“I’ve got a lot on just at present,” said Paul.

“I’d love a night in Newtown Creek,” said Tori.

“I’ll come with you,” said Ben.

“I’ll stay at home,” said Angelica. “I’ve got things to do.”

“It’ll be just like the old days,” said Tori.

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They parked the cars behind the Albion Hotel and walked up the narrow path to the gate that leads out onto Tennyson Down. It is a very steep climb. Harry was panting before they were half way up.

“Judith made the right decision,” he gasped.

The girls and their mothers were striding ahead.

“You’re not fit, bro,” said Ben. “Too much good living,” and offered him his arm.

Harry said something rude and Ben jogged after the girls.

They arrived at the Celtic Cross, the memorial to Alfred Lord Tennyson, and waited for Paul to catch up with them. Tori surveyed the scene. The Solent was laid out beneath them; tiny sailing boats seemed to be hardly moving. To the west, in the far distance, the Purbeck Hills were lost in the haze. To the east St Catherine's Lighthouse was a mere dot on the headland. It didn't seem that long ago that they had stood here with Father and scattered Mother's ashes to the wind. Was it really eight years? She handed the urn to Ginny who removed the lid and cast the first handful of ashes into the air; they swirled away towards Freshwater.

"Goodbye Grandad," she murmured. "I'll see you soon," she said under her breath.

Amelia gave her a look, as if she had heard. Then she threw more ashes to the wind. Paul and Ben followed, then Angelica, Harry and finally Tori:

"Rest in peace, Dad."

"Amen," the family responded.

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As they were walking back down the hill, Ginny put her arm around Amelia and whispered. "He can't rest in peace until he's come back to see me, so I can say good bye."

"That's right," said Amelia. "Ghosts walk the earth until they have performed all the tasks they left undone when they were alive."

"I'm sure Grandad will come back to see me," said Ginny and a tear rolled down her cheek.

Tori caught up with her and held her close. "Don't cry, darling. He had a very happy life."

She was crying herself.

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With Tori at the helm of Patience, the old gaff cutter, they motored down the Medina River and out into the Solent. She pointed the bows into the wind; Ben went up to the mast to hoist the main. As the sail rose into the air, the brightly varnished spars swung to and fro.

“Mind your heads, girls!” called Tori. But the girls were already crouched down, waiting for the command to sheet in.

They bore away past the Royal Yacht Squadron heading for Newtown Creek. The girls winched in the staysail as it unfurled and finally set the jib.

“No point in hoisting the topsail,” said Tori, “with the tide under us, we’ll be there in no time.”

She was right. Ben hardly had time to make tea for himself and his sister, before the crew were busy again, furling the head sails and flaking the main in the lazy jacks.

Tori guided them through the narrow entrance. They turned to port and anchored in Clamerkin Lake. Ginny heaved the tender out of it’s locker and Amelia helped her to inflate it.

“Don’t go far girls. I’ll start supper in about half an hour.”

“We won’t Mum.”

They sat side by side on the centre thwart. Each took an oar and they rowed away towards the mouth of the Creek to where a sandbank divides a deep pool from the Solent. It was the place where Tori and her family had picnicked earlier in the Summer. They rowed to the end of the inlet and pulled the tender up on the pebbles.

“It’s just along here,” said Amelia and led the way to a low stone monument hidden in the coarse sea grass. Beyond this point, dark woods crowded down to the water’s edge.

The girls looked at the names.

“I wonder which one you saw,” said Ginny. “There’s one here called Robert.”

“Yes,” said Amelia. “I call him Bob.”

“Did he say his name?”

“No. But I had a very strong feeling that we had met before, in another life. I knew it was Bob.”

“What were you before... before you were Amelia?”

“I was a French pirate, called Amelie.”

“Were there other wenches on the pirate ship?”

“Oh yes! We were all armed to the teeth. I fired my pistol at anyone who threatened us.”

“Did you kill any dastards?”

“Not as far as I can remember.”

Amelia started giggling and Tori joined in. They sank onto the shingle rolling about with laughter.

“Oh dear, Amelia, for a moment I believed you,” said Ginny at last.

“I do believe I had a previous life. But I only know fragments. They come to me in dreams.”

They walked back to the dinghy and pushed it into the water.

“If we come back tonight, when the grown-ups are asleep, do you think Bob’s ghost will appear?” said Ginny.

“It’s quite likely.”

“And will I be able to see Bob and talk to him?”

“I hope so. It’s possible. I will intercede for you if I can,” said Amelia.

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Tori had cooked bangers and mash. As a treat she added a fried egg on top of the potato.

“Hurry up girls, yours is getting cold,” she said.

“Where have you been?” asked Ben.

“Only to the spit where people barbecue,” said Ginny.

After supper, when the washing up was done, the girls disappeared into the forepeak.

“Don’t stay awake all night talking,” said Tori and climbed up into the cockpit where Ben was refilling their glasses. Brother and sister sat on opposite sides of the cockpit and watched the sun go down behind the trees where the rooks were coming in to roost. The swans glided away when they realised that they were not going to be fed. Peace descended on the Creek.

“I think this is the hour Dad loved best,” said Tori.

“He did.”

They were silent, remembering the old sailor.

“Let’s turn in. I’ll sleep in the saloon if you take the aft cabin,” said Ben.

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The girls took off their shorts but did not get fully undressed. Ginny set her alarm for midnight and put her watch under her pillow so that only she would hear it. She opened the forehatch to its fullest extent and locked it.

“I hope it doesn’t rain in the night,” she said.

“No chance,” replied Amelia.

Ginny thought she would never get to sleep. She lay awake listening to Amelia’s regular breathing. She was dreaming of her Oppie when the buzzing of the alarm woke her. She shook Amelia who moaned at first but came to at once when Ginny put a hand over her mouth. They slipped into shorts and jumpers and climbed out of the forehatch, tiptoed down the deck and cautiously lowered themselves into the dinghy. Ginny cast off and sat down beside Amelia. They rowed towards the sandbank that they had reconnoitred earlier. A gibbous moon shone a weak light on the scene from a cloudless sky. It was low tide and the girls struggled to drag the

boat up the beach. Tori took the fisherman's anchor and let out enough warp to embed it in the grass on the top of the bank.

"She's not going anywhere, no matter how much the tide comes in," said Ginny.

They paused and looked around at the calm sea reflecting the starlight. The seaweed left by the retreating tide gave a salty tang to the night wind. The ebb and flow of the tide sucked at the shingle.

"Shiver me timbers," said Amelia.

"What?"

Ginny turned and looked towards the gravestone. The phosphorescence gliding over the water could almost be mistaken for a human shape. At that moment the sea made a gurgling sound, like someone heaving a deep sigh.

"Beware the reef."

"Bob? Bob is that you?" whispered Amelia.

Ginny shuddered and grabbed her cousin's hand. She was about to ask Bob if he had seen Grandad when the stillness was broken by the distant thunder of powerful marine engines. The girls looked up to see a motor cruiser ablaze with lights heading towards them. It was still several miles off but it was travelling at speed.

"What's that gin palace doing here?" asked Amelia.

"People who own that sort of boat often party all night. I expect they're coming back from Lymington," said Ginny, hoping her cousin would be impressed by her intimate knowledge of the party set. Amelia didn't have time to call Ginny's bluff.

"It's heading straight for the reef!"

"I'll get the torch, Mum always keeps one in the dry bag." said Ginny and raced back to the dinghy.

She opened the bag, grabbed the torch and ran back along the spit. Amelia took it from her and started flashing out an SOS.

“It’s the only signal I know. At least it should make them stop and think.”

“That’s if anyone is looking out.”

“Right! If they’re on autopilot, they’ve had it!”

The roar of the massive diesel engines grew louder every second; the lights blinded them as the enormous vessel came closer and closer. It clipped the Hamstead Buoy with a clang that echoed across the Solent and woke Tori in her bunk. Then it hit the ledge with the noise of metal being torn into strips by an enormous force.

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The girls stood stock still and stared as the cruiser came to rest on its side, half out of the water. The lights went out and there was complete silence. Then, as their night vision returned, they saw two shadowy figures emerge from the water and struggle up the beach. Ginny felt Amelia grip her hand. She stifled a scream.

“Oh my God,” whispered Amelia.

“Ghosts?”

“Bob?” called out Amelia. “Is that you?”

“No, it’s Christine and Mandy. Please help us. Please.”

“Come back to Patience and we’ll call for help,” said Ginny. “We can’t do anything here.”

“Come on,” said Amelia and took Christine by the hand. “We need to get you back to the boat as quick as we can.”

With Christine in the bows and Mandy perched on the transom the girls rowed as hard as they could.

Ginny held the dinghy steady while the two shipwrecked girls climbed aboard Patience. She handed the painter to Amelia who made fast.

“Mum,” she shouted.

“Dad,” shouted Amelia.

“Emergency!” they both yelled at once.

Tori and Ben appeared in the cockpit.

“What the hell...” started Ben.

“Where have you come from?” asked Tori.

Ginny was already at the VHF radio. “Mum we have to put out a Mayday. A cruiser has hit the ledge and these people swam ashore. But there must be others... maybe trapped...”

Tori took the handset from her.

“Mayday relay. Mayday relay. Mayday relay. This is Patience, Patience. My position is Clamerkin Lake. The casualty is on Hamstead Ledge. Over.”

Christine and Mandy were still in their bikinis. They were shivering, teeth chattering. Ben ushered them below and started handing out dry clothes. He put the kettle on the hob.

“Patience this is Solent Coastguard. Name and position of boat in distress. Over”

Tori looked at the two teenagers.

“Name of your boat?”

“Bat Out of Hell,” answered Christine.

“Solent Coastguard, Patience. Bat Out of Hell. On the Hamstead Ledge. Over.”

“Patience. Solent Coastguard. Number of people on board? Over.”

Again Tori looked at the teenagers.

“Hundreds,” answered Mandy.

“No, not hundreds. Maybe twenty. Certainly more than ten,” said Christine.

“Solent Coastguard. Patience. We have two of the passengers on-board Patience. There are between ten and twenty people left unaccounted for. Over.”

“Patience. Solent Coastguard. Please stand by the casualty and listen out on Channel 16 for further instructions. Lifeboats are on their way. Over.”

“Listening out,” replied Tori.

Ben handed round mugs of tea. The two older girls sat side by side on the Ben’s bunk. Ginny and Amelia sat opposite them. Mandy stopped shivering and stared back at Ginny.

“What are you looking at?”

“Sorry,” said Ginny. “I was just wondering why you were in your bikinis in the middle of the night? Did you plan on going for a swim?”

“The same thought occurred to me,” said Ben. “What were you doing on that boat?”

“Modelling. That’s what we do,” said Christine.

“Fascinating. But we’ll have to hear all about it later,” said Tori. “We need to up anchor and stand off Hamstead Ledge as the Coastguard instructed.”

Leaving their guests in the saloon, Tori and Ginny started the engine while Ben and Amelia went forward and worked the windlass.

“It’s up. You can motor forwards,” Ben called to Tori. “We’ll leave the muddy deck for now,” he said to Amelia.

They stood in the bows shining the torch to help Tori avoid the mooring buoys in their path. Patience negotiated the narrow channel and motored towards the cardinal mark well to the east of Hamstead Ledge buoy. They could see the wreck only a few hundred yards away. The Yarmouth lifeboat was already on the scene. As they watched, the Cowes inshore lifeboat arrived.

Tori got onto the VHF. “Mayday relay, Solent Coastguard this is Patience, Patience. Over”

“Patience. Solent Coastguard. There are multiple casualties still on-board the Bat Out of Hell. It’s too shallow for the Yarmouth boat to approach the vessel so the inshore lifeboat will be transferring them. If your two passengers are stable then proceed to Yarmouth where ambulances are gathering. Over.”

“Solent Coastguard. Patience. Understood. Proceeding Yarmouth. Listening out on Channel 16.”

Two heads appeared in the companionway.

“May we come up, please?” said Christine.

They squeezed into the cockpit. Ginny moved up for them and Amelia sat down opposite. Ben was keeping a look out, Tori was at the helm.

“I’ve never met a real model,” said Ginny. “Do you often have to do it at night?”

“Yea,” said Mandy. “Sometimes at night, sometimes at midday.”

“Sometimes on a beach in the sun and sometimes on a yacht at dusk,” said Christine.

“It’s whatever who’s paying wants.”

“And whatever he thinks will sell the clothes, swimsuits, whatever,” said Mandy.

“You two should try it when you’re a bit older,” said Christine.

“It pays well, if you play your cards right,” said Mandy.

“Oooh,” said Amelia, “that sounds interesting.”

The two survivors of the shipwreck looked at each other and started to giggle. To Tori they didn’t seem much older than the girls.

“It’s a job not without it’s dangers, I should think, judging by what happened tonight,” she said.

“You’re right there,” said Mandy. “If we hadn’t crashed I was thinking of jumping overboard when we stopped.”

“Is that why you were still in your bikini?” asked Amelia.

“Partly,” said Christine, “and partly because the men had thrown our clothes overboard.”

“Oh gosh! Why did they do that?” asked Ginny.

“They weren’t very nice,” said Mandy.

Tori interrupted before anymore revelations could surface. “Lucky the girls found you. I still don’t know why they were on the spit when you came ashore. What were you doing, girls?”

“Amelia saw a ghost,” said Ginny.

“Yes,” said her cousin. “I knew we would. It was just before the crash.”

“Really?” It was Mandy’s turn to look surprised. Her eyes were huge. She lent forwards. Christine looked cool. Ghost stories were clearly not her thing.

“I was going to ask Bob if he could put me in touch with Grandad,” said Ginny.

“And did he?” Mandy seemed anxious to know.

“There was a strange light on the water. It looked like a person,” said Ginny.

“Then I heard his voice, and I knew it was Bob,” said Amelia.

“The boy who drowned on Hamstead ledge years and years ago,” explained Ginny.

“What did he say?” said Mandy.

“*Beware the ledge*,” said Amelia. “It’s like he tries to warn sailors to avoid the ledge.”

“But often, they ignore him, it would seem,” said Tori. “Now girls get ready to moor up. We’ll be port side to.”

They rounded the end of the pier and glided into the harbour. The flashing lights of three ambulances were illuminating the quay in cold blue colours.

All four girls jumped up and the cousins got warps and fenders out of the cockpit lockers.

“Can we help?” said Mandy.

“What shall we do?” asked Christine.

“You ladies just sit still until we are safely tied up,” said Ben.

The girls took the ropes and secured them to the cleats on the pontoon while Ben went to talk to the paramedics.

“Well ladies, it seems the paramedics have orders to take you to casualty for a check up. I did tell them that you seem remarkably fit to me. But it seems orders is orders.”

The rescued girls started to undress.

“Please, no need, you can keep the clothes. They’re only old boating rags,” said Tori.

“We’re not as mean as your boyfriends on the gin palace,” said Ben.

“Boyfriends!” said Mandy. “They thought they had got us trapped! Thank goodness for that great big rock.”

“Yes. Yes. You’ve escaped with your virtue intact. It been nice meeting you, now follow Ben he’ll show you where to go,” said Tori.

As Mandy stepped ashore she whispered to Ginny. “If you do find your grandad, please let me know. I just lost my nan and I so what to see her again for one last time.”

Ginny nodded. “I will.”

With Ben back on the boat, they slipped the lines and motored back to Newtown Creek.

“Now girls we’re going to have a nice long lie-in in the morning,” said Tori.

“And no more ghost hunting,” said Ben.

“Promise?” said Tori.

“We promise,” said the girls.

But they did look sad, Ginny especially. They crept into the forepeak, undressed and got into their bunks.

“Good night, Amelia,” whispered Ginny.

“Sleep tight,” came the muffled response.

Ginny lay staring into the darkness for a few minutes before exhaustion overwhelmed her.

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The darkest hour is just before dawn. The cabin was stuffy; Ginny was restless, half out of her sleeping bag. She rolled over and nearly fell off the bunk. Strong hands pushed her back into the middle and tied up the lee cloth.

“Good night, my bird,” whispered a gravelly voice. “I’m watching over you. You did well to rescue those two wayward creatures. I won’t say good bye as I’ll always be around, just out of sight, so don’t be sad.”

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The pale light of dawn filtered into the cabin. Amelia stirred.

“Hey Ginny, when did you put up your lee cloth?”

Ginny’s tousled head appeared over the canvass.

“What? I never did that. But I did have a lovely dream. Grandad came and spoke to me. He said. *Well done for saving the girls.*”

“And tied up the lee cloth,” said Amelia.

She climbed out of her bunk and got in with Ginny.

“Ghosts really do exist, just as I said.”

She smiled and gave Ginny a kiss.

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It was hours later when Tori peered into the forepeak. The girls were fast asleep. As she bent over them, Ginny opened one eye.

“Morning, darling.”

“What time is it?”

“Ten o’clock. You’ve been asleep for hours. Did Amelia spend the whole night in your bunk?”

“No,” said Amelia. “I got in when Ginny said she’d seen a ghost.”

“Yes, Mum. I really did see a ghost.”

Tori sat down on the edge of the bunk, smiled and prepared to listen.

“It was Grandad. I was falling out of bed. He pushed me back in and tied up the lee cloth, so that I’d be safe.”

“How do you know it was Grandad?”

“It wasn’t me,” said Amelia.

“He said, *Good night, my bird*. Grandad is the only one who ever called me that.”

“Did he say anything else?” asked Tori, blinking away tears.

“Yes, he said, *I’m watching over you.....don’t be sad.*”

“He said, *Well done for saving those two girls*. Didn’t he?” asked Amelia.

“Yes he did,” said Ginny. “It was his voice alright, low and gravelly.”

Tori leaned forward and hugged Ginny, Amelia tried to put her skinny arms around both of them.

“Oh darling,” whispered Tori. “I wish I could have seen him.”

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The smell of frying bacon filled the boat. Ben put his head through the door.

“What’s happening here? Has someone died?”

“No Ben, we’re remembering Grandad. His spirit seems to haunt this old boat,” said
Tori.

“It was the thing he loved most. No doubt about that,” said Ben. “Come along and have
breakfast. I’m sure that’ll make you feel better.”

“Thank you, Ben,” said Tori.

“We’ll never sell Patience, will we, Mum?”

“No, never, darling. How could we?”



Photo by John Green, Cowes.

THE END