

(1500 words)

It began with a rumour, whispered conversations circulated like myths, legends, nonsense - told almost like a joke. But with every ghost story there comes a spark of fear, no matter how irrational.

“They say that the castle ruin, just south of our village out on the marsh, was once a medieval prison. Hundreds of prisoners were killed there or left to die from starvation.”

Eliza craved stories like this, despite being only eight years old - the curiosity inside her was ignited by the tremble in the woman’s voice.

“It’s said,” the woman paused, leaving her young audience hanging on her words like spiders on a strand of web, “That the prisoners’ ghosts haunt the ruin - angry, thirsty for vengeance upon anybody that dares enter.”

A few children squealed, some burst into tears, but Eliza’s blue eyes widened into whirlpools, swirling with awe. A troop of mothers swooped in, some laughing, some rolling their eyes, some glaring disapprovingly at the old woman who enjoyed scaring children.

But as her mother led her away with a hand firmly on her back, Eliza’s brain was busy fizzing with electricity, the excitement of an adventure on the marshes. After all, her family were only staying in the country for a week before returning to the dull, confining city so she may as well make the most of her freedom.

The moment they arrived back to their holiday cottage on the outskirts of the village, she thundered up the stairs to the room she shared with her twin brother. Henry was perched on the tip of his bed flicking through a fairytale book.

“Ghosts! Castle ruin on the moor!” Eliza burst out, her words disjointed with gasping breaths. “We have to go and see!”

Henry peered through his thick round glasses, far too big for his tiny button nose and frowned distrustfully. He was used to his sister’s reckless explorations and didn’t wish to be dragged into another one after last time at the beach...

“But shouldn’t we ask mother and father first?” he replied, his brow furrowed deeper with uncertainty but knowing he wouldn’t be able to resist his sister’s strong will for very long.

Eliza groaned dramatically. “No, we’re old enough now - practically double figures! Don’t act like such a baby. We won’t be gone long, apparently it’s not far from here.”

Reluctantly, Henry resigned himself to the role of accomplice in their mission and followed her instructions.

They dressed in trousers and boots (Eliza’s silk petticoats scornfully discarded) and Henry was dragged out the back door, urged to be quiet so their parents wouldn’t catch them.

The village faded away, the houses disappearing like evaporated water, and the children found themselves wandering sparse wasteland. The sky was a murky grey all around, a giant bubble encasing Eliza and Henry alone on the marsh, cut off from humanity.

Everything seemed lifeless, tangled with skeletal thorns and gorse, but it wasn't the emptiness of the landscape that scared Henry: it was the spinning, dizzying fear that the landscape wasn't as dead as it appeared. Like there was a hidden underwater current waiting to sweep him under.

After trampling over the wasteland for what felt like hours, Eliza cried out triumphantly - the castle ruin was in sight. She clambered over some boulders to enter the main section of the ruin. The air was damp and stale as if final breaths of dying prisoners still lingered. Henry stumbled after her, tentative as if the stones were broken glass.

When they both stood in the centre of the ruin, gazing up at the remains of the walls, there was a sudden rumble of thunder: lightning illuminated the walls. Henry clasped his hands into fists to stop them shaking but Eliza was oblivious, transfixed by the sight of bones in the corner.

"Henry, look! Medieval prisoner bones! People would've said their last words, last prayers here before being killed."

Henry whimpered. "I don't like it here. Something isn't right."

Ignoring him, Eliza wandered around the walls which would've separated prison cells, her mind spinning an intricate web of stories of the lives of those who died here.

But Henry stood paralysed and stared up at the sky, squinting as rain began to spot his glasses like specks of blood. The sky blackened as if night was falling rapidly, despite it being the middle of the day. His stomach ached with unease and the urge to run, to hide, but he couldn't leave his sister. Her curiosity made her a danger to herself. And others.

The weather quickly accelerated into a storm, unnaturally quickly, unnaturally violently. Henry pressed against the wall, breathless as the rain cut his face and the wind beat at him.

"Eliza!" he screamed, his voice small and frail, easily cracked and stolen by the wind. "Help!" He needed her beside him, to hug him, tell him it would be okay, clasp his hand and pull him away from the castle.

But Eliza gazed up at the sky, splintering with lightning. Her face mirrored it with a splintering grin. "Oh Henry, look! Ghosts, real life ghosts!" She knew she should be afraid - her heart clawed frantically at her ribcage - but adrenaline coursed through her. It was thrilling.

"What?" Henry cried, blinking upwards and seeing nothing but sheets of rain.

Eliza watched the swirling shapes like liquid silver as they seeped down towards her. For a girl so young, bravery grasped her firmly for a long time until she saw the faces close up: pits of empty blackness for eyes; despairing, screaming expressions; clawing hands that she could feel scratching at her small body, flocking around her like wild animals.

"Get off! Henry help!" she wailed, trying to throw the ghosts off as she started to panic.

Some of their faces turned towards Henry so Eliza took her chance, fighting away from their grip and running towards the gaping hole in the ruin: her escape.

“ELIZA!” Henry roared, his voice breaking with fear as the grey shapes wrapped around him.

“No!” Eliza cried, her face streaked with tears. But she was too far away. She couldn’t save him. Terror paralysed her to the spot behind a boulder, outside the ruin.

The dark greyness of the castle began to flush with red like blossoming roses carried by the pooling rain. The last thing Eliza saw was a small crumpled corpse on the floor as the rain soaked his clothes. It wasn’t the empty, lifeless look of him that scared her. It was the spinning, dizzying fear that he wasn’t quite as dead as he appeared. That he was still suffering.

She didn’t think anymore. Turning, she ran back across the marshes and by the time she reached the village, the storm had ceased as swiftly as it had begun.

Almost as if it had never happened at all.

She burst through the cottage doors and fell into her father’s arms as he sat beside the kitchen table, his look of bewilderment staining the cosy, domestic scene. Eliza’s mother crouched beside her daughter and wrapped her arms around her for a moment. Then she grasped her shoulders, turning her so they were face to face.

“Elizabeth what happened? Are you all right?”

“Henry,” Eliza sobbed.

“Yes, I know sweetheart,” her father soothed, frowning at his wife with a tired look of concern.

“No,” Eliza said frustratedly. “The castle, the ghosts with no eyes, they took him, they- they killed him... I couldn’t- I didn’t- save him.”

“Darling, slow down,” her mother said gently. “I know this has been so hard for you. But your brother passed away three months ago. Remember?”

Eliza violently shook her head, shaking the thought from her mind. What are they saying?

“No, you- you don’t understand, the ghosts...”

Her father sighed and swept his daughter up onto his lap, kissing her hair. Her mother’s face was crumpled with tears. Crumpled like Henry’s corpse.

“Eliza,” her father began slowly. “You have been... imagining some things lately. When somebody dies it can be difficult to understand what has happened, what is real. But your brother drowned three months ago. At the beach, remember?”

The memory struck Eliza like lightning, his writhing body, her standing frozen in the shallows, too scared to cry for help. It was her fault. And she just chose her own life over her brother’s once again, even if it wasn’t real.

Eliza squeezed her eyes shut, tears seeping out. Just like when they had to try squeezing the water out of Henry's lungs when his body was dragged out of the water. But that couldn't fix him, just as tears can't fix her now.

It ended with a rumour, circulated in hushed conversations: Eliza Hughes grew up in a lunatic asylum, talking to her long-dead brother. I've seen her many times, seen the scars she claims to have attained from her ghost attack in the castle ruin, swearing ghosts are real.

Nobody believes her, but I do. Of course we're real.