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Lights Up

All theatres are haunted. Manchester's Theatre Royale was haunted by a dead opera singer known as Cold Annie. Actors complained of an icy, creeping dread whenever they used the dressing room that had once belonged to her, and stagehands avoided the places she was said to roam late at night. Rumour was that if she appeared before a performance, it was sure to go horribly wrong.

But Tig Rabbit wasn't scared.

She liked to imagine that Cold Annie simply loved the theatre, and had decided never to leave. Sometimes, when Tig was waiting alone in the dark to lift the curtains, or tidying the costumes away late at night, she had the sensation that Annie was nearby. It made her feel less lonely.

She'd mentioned this once to Gus, the carpenter's boy,

who was two years older and considered himself superior. This was a mistake. Ever since, he'd teased her about how stupid it was to believe in ghosts. Still, Tig noticed he never went into Annie's dressing room, and he was nowhere to be found when it was time to go into the dark auditorium to light or extinguish the lamps.

That was why, even though Gus was supposed to do it an hour ago, Tig was lighting the lamps herself. The new act would be here any moment, and they'd all be in trouble if the job wasn't done. Typical of Gus, the coward, to shirk his duties. She'd get him back for it.

In the blackness at the edge of the stage, she set her foot on the bottom rung of a ladder which stretched up, taller than a house, into the rigging above. The auditorium was so quiet Tig could hear the flicker of the tiny flame at the end of her long lamp-lighting stick. There were no windows in the cavernous room so although it was early afternoon dark stillness wrapped around her like a blanket, pushing against the feeble light.

Tig didn't mind. She could do this with her eyes closed. Carefully she climbed, one hand clutching the light-stick and the other keeping her balance on the rungs. Thirty-two steps to the flies, where long beams spanning the width of the stage held a complicated web of ropes and pulleys. Dizzily high, hidden from the sight of the audience – this was Tig's world.

Some days she felt like a ghost herself, inhabiting the secret in-between spaces of the Royale. She walked through

the walls, crouched behind the scenery, crawled beneath the seats. If needed, she could travel from basement to roof without being seen by a single living soul. It made her feel like she belonged, that she was a small part of the theatre magic – that she was home. A home full of long hours and hard work and a frustrating boss, a home very different to the one she had lived in before her father died, but a home all the same.

Reaching the top of the ladder, she pulled herself up onto a narrow walkway, holding the light-stick ahead of her as she found her footing.

The stage lights were the pride of the Royale. New-fangled gas lamps – the first theatre in Manchester to install them. They were brighter, and far easier, than lighting the place with candles, but there was a knack to it. There were two rows of five lamps – one at each side of the stage. Tig leaned over the edge of the walkway and used the clover-shaped hook on the end of the light-stick to twist the valve, allowing gas to flow down the long, shiny pipes and ooze out of each lamp.

Now she had to be fast. She touched the flame of the light-stick to the top of the first lamp and with a pop and a flare of heat it burst into life. She ran to the next light. Pop. Two flames lit.

Every wasted second let gas seep into the air, the eggy sulphur smell warning Tig to act quickly. If too much gas escaped it might cause an explosion, and the whole theatre would go up in smoke. She ran along the line, her footsteps

on the metal walkway echoing off the high ceiling, pausing briefly to light each lamp in turn.

One side done. Already the theatre was transformed. Warm, yellowish light washed over the stage and painted Tig's shadow as a giant on the wall behind her. The glow spilled out beyond the edge of the stage, catching the golden scrolls and vines that decorated the royal boxes and illuminating the first few rows of empty seats.

Her stomach fluttered with anticipation as she thought about the new performer who was arriving that day. Different to the usual acting troupes and opera singers, Professor Faber had come all the way from Vienna with his greatest invention – a machine that could speak with a human voice. The thought alone sent a shiver down Tig's spine. What could be more magical than that?

Now to light the other side. The proper thing to do next was to climb down, cross the stage, and go through the Green Room – the actors' waiting area. Inside was another ladder that led to the walkway and the gas valve for the other set of lights. But distant voices and a scuffling sound were coming from the front of the building. The professor must be here already! Mr Snell, the theatre manager, would be furious if the lights weren't lit. Tig would have to take a short cut across the girders.

Careful to keep the flame of the light-stick away from her clothes, she ducked under the railing and stepped out onto one of the narrow metal beams that reached right across the

stage. A glance down at the hard boards far below made Tig feel queasy.

Walking across the girders was not allowed – it was much too dangerous, as one slip would be a disaster. But Tig knew she could do it, and there wasn't a second to waste.

Chin up. Eyes on the end of the beam. She held her light-stick horizontally with both hands, using it to guide her balance, just as she had seen the acrobats do on the tight-rope a few months before. One foot in front of the other. Step. Step. Step. Simple. She kept her eyes fixed on that one spot where the girder met the walkway on the opposite side and in a matter of seconds she was almost at the end. The air was cooler here, away from the burning lamps. She looked up.

Cold Annie.

Tig shivered as though she'd been doused in cold water. The ghost was standing on the walkway, right at the point Tig needed to climb through the railings. Tig's heart beat a little faster, and she gripped the light-stick tighter. Of course she wasn't *afraid* of Annie, but a ghost is a ghost, and Tig had never seen her so clearly, or so close, before.

She was a slight figure, older than Tig but not much bigger, dressed in a high-waisted gown. She wasn't white or see-through as ghosts were often described, but a soft milky blue, hair, face and clothes alike. She appeared solid enough that Tig might bump into her, but the wall behind her showed only Tig's shadow. Annie's left eye was bright and sharp and fixed on Tig, but the right eye looked closed. No – it was missing, the eyelid sunk back a little way into her head.



The ghost made no sound but tilted her head to the right and squinted, as if wondering who Tig was.

‘I’m lighting—’ Tig’s voice came out quiet and cracked. She swallowed hard. ‘I’m lighting the lamps.’

Goosebumps rose on Tig’s arms from the chill Annie radiated.

‘I need to get past,’ said Tig, suddenly remembering that she was very high up indeed, and balanced on a narrow beam, and that Mr Snell and the professor would be here any moment and the lamps weren’t lit . . . ‘Can I come up?’

For a second, it seemed Annie understood as she glided slightly backwards. Tig took a tentative step forward. Her hands shook, just a tiny bit, but she painted on a smile to show she was friend, not foe.

A bang.

The doors at the back corner of the stage had been flung open. They were here.

Tig held her breath. She couldn’t stay here – it wouldn’t take Snell long to notice only half the lights were lit and as soon as he looked up, she’d be caught. He’d be furious with her. Mr Snell believed children should be neither seen nor heard, and he didn’t like them to interrupt while he was showing off to a new guest, either.

But Annie was still blocking her path. Tig nodded and waved at the ghost, urging her out of the way, but she didn’t move.

Mr Snell emerged onto the stage, followed by two furniture movers buckling under the weight of something almost as big

as a piano. It was wrapped tightly in woollen blankets held in place by thick straps.

The talking machine.

Tig was torn between keeping her eyes on Cold Annie and watching what was going on beneath her. She had been dreaming about the talking machine for weeks, ever since she'd heard it was coming, and couldn't bear to miss the first glimpse.

'Careful! Careful with her!' A fourth man followed the movers in. In contrast to their sturdy corduroy overalls and caps, this man wore a top hat and a black suit. 'Watch the legs!'

Professor Faber, surely. His accent was unfamiliar to Tig, the words angular and staccato.

'Gently!' The professor moved in quick, sharp gestures and shouted his instructions at the men, who looked thoroughly fed up of it. 'Lower to the ground very—'

They dropped their burden with a great thud and a metallic clang.

The professor groaned. 'Useless! Why do you send me such men?'

What was Tig going to do now? The talking machine was almost directly below her. Mr Snell would surely see.

'Thank you, gents,' said Snell, handing over some money to the movers, who scurried off as quickly as possible.

'Yes!' shouted the professor after them. 'Be gone, fools!'

'May I say what an absolute pleasure it is to have you at the Theatre Royale?' Snell cleared his throat and stepped forward, holding out his arm for a handshake.

'You may.' The professor ignored the handshake and walked directly to his machine. He began methodically unfastening the straps.

'I'm sure you'll be most happy here,' said Snell. 'Humble though it is.'

The professor stopped for a moment and glanced around.

Please don't look up!

'It appears adequate.' He turned back to his machine.

That was close. Tig had to move now. The beam was too narrow to turn around, and besides, walking all the way back to the other side was risky – her footsteps might give her away.

'You have followed my instructions, yes?' said the professor. 'I have appropriate lodgings here in the theatre?'

'We've made up a bed for you in the Green Room.' Snell dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief. He always got sweaty when he was flustered, which was most of the time. 'Though I must say, it's most irregular, Mr Faber.'

'Professor.'

'Professor Faber, most of our guests prefer the comfort of the Golden Lion Hotel to—'

'The machine is too delicate to be dragged through the streets. I do not leave my machine; therefore, I do not leave the theatre.'

Tig swallowed hard and took another slow, small step towards Annie. Surely she would move – or perhaps Tig would pass right through her like smoke? Either way, Tig had little choice.

‘The machine will be perfectly safe here in the theatre,’ Snell continued to protest, his face now as red as the velvet curtains.

‘Leave me now.’ Faber gave a dismissive wave.

‘Perhaps you’d like a tour of the building? I’d—’

‘I would not.’

Tig was almost at the railing now. She stretched to grab it and as she did so, Cold Annie reached out a hand towards her.

Tig gasped as cold fingers brushed hers. She yanked her arm back and felt the toes of her left foot slip over the edge of the beam. She wobbled forward and fell onto one knee, letting go of the light-stick to save herself.

Too late, she realized her mistake. The stick performed a perfect somersault as it fell, the wooden handle hitting the top of the blanket-wrapped machine before clattering onto the boards of the stage.

‘Euphonia!’ cried the professor.

Snell looked directly up at Tig.

She glanced up towards Annie, as if the ghost might somehow save her, but she was gone.

There was a painfully long moment of silence as Snell drew breath, then bellowed, ‘How dare you?!’