

The Engineer's House

"Look at this!" Donna yelled. She brought her bike to a halt outside a house they'd raced past hundreds of times.

David and Jeremy skidded to a stop. They looked up at the house, made to look taller by its stance on a slope.

"What?" said David.

"Look!" Donna said, pointing at an upstairs window. A boy was staring down at them.

"What's he looking at?" Jeremy sneered.

David stuck two fingers up at the boy.

"Nothing," he said, kicking his pedal round and getting ready to go.

"Wait a minute," said Donna, "what if he's been kidnapped?"

"Don't be daft," Jeremy said.

"He *could* have been! Why else would the owner have this?" Donna rattled the padlock on the gate.

"No one lives there, dummy," said David.

"If no one lives there, why is he - " Donna glanced upwards. "Hey, he's gone!"

David and Jeremy looked. The window was empty.

"He probably went to tell his mummy that I flipped him the V," David smirked.

Donna unfastened a hair grip from her pony tail and poked it into the keyhole.

"What're you doing?" David said.

"We have to check he's okay," Donna said.

"Don't be stupid," said Jeremy, "you'll never break a lock like that with a crappy pin."

Donna let the padlock crash against the iron gate as she replaced her hair grip.

"You're right," she said. "We'll have to go over the railings."

"They're too high," David said.

“We have to be in at half past,” Jeremy added.

“Fine, I'll go by myself.”

Donna had always been more of a boy than the boys. She shinned up the railings and dropped into the garden with only a hushed curse to show it wasn't as easy as she made it look. She ran through the garden and disappeared around the side of the house.

The boys got off their bikes and peered through the railings.

“Should we go...?” Jeremy checked.

“Nah...only if she screams,” said David.

She was gone a long time. David looked along the wall to check if there was an easier way in. There wasn't. To the other side of the house was the museum, with its tall chimney. He wasn't sure what was in the museum, but he was sure they kept it locked at night and there would be no way of sneaking in through there. Although the house looked neglected, there was a plaque fixed to the railings that read *The Engineer's House*.

The boys felt a tap on their shoulders and whirled around. It was Donna, her hair streaked with cobwebs.

“There's an easy way in around the back. I'll show you tomorrow – we'd better get home now.”

“Did you see anything?” asked David.

“Loads of stuff! But not the boy. Didn't look like anyone was home. We'll look again tomorrow.”

They went back the next evening. Donna was right, it was easy to get in round the back, if you didn't mind sliding between a rotting fence and a dilapidated shed and then crawling on your hands and knees under a bush. It brought you into the overgrown back garden. Trees huddled over it, as though they were keeping what was underneath a secret.

Spying through the windows at the back, they saw derelict rooms.

“No one lives here,” said David.

“So what was that boy doing?” asked Donna.

“Maybe he was a tramp,” said Jeremy.

“No way,” Donna said. “He was only a kid.”

“Maybe he ran away from home,” said David.

There was a back door to the house, but it was locked. They tried the front door, careful not to be seen from the road, and all of the windows. There was no way in. They decided that the boy must know some way in and out and, if they could make contact with him, he'd show himself. Following David's suggestion that he must be a runaway, they left him some food. All they had between them was a twistpop and packet of chewits. The following day, the sweets had gone.

“He's afraid to come out while we're all here,” Donna concluded. “We'll take it in turns to wait.”

Sitting alone on the doorstep in the shadow of the old house and the creaking trees wasn't attractive, but neither boy felt like saying so.

“I'll go first,” said Donna. “Wait on the road. We'll swap in fifteen.”

Donna sauntered down to find them exactly fifteen minutes later.

“Nothing,” she sighed. “I reckon he's more likely to come out if he sees another *boy*. Who's going next?”

The boys each waited for the other one to volunteer. Jeremy sighed.

“Me,” he said.

When Jeremy came back, something was wrong. There was a stiffness in the way he walked and, as he got closer, they realised he was looking straight ahead rather than at them. If David hadn't grabbed Jeremy's shoulder, he would have continued walking.

“Hey! What's up?” asked David. Jeremy's shoulder felt rigid.

“Did you see him?” asked Donna.

Jeremy carried on staring, even when Donna waved her hand in front of his face. They tried shaking him, but he was so stiff he hardly moved, and nothing would induce him to make a sound.

“Should we go and - ” Donna began, looking over her shoulder at the house.

“No!” said David, and for once Donna didn't push against her brother's lack of nerve. “Let's go home.”

When they reached Jeremy's house, he got off his bike and wheeled it down the drive without a word or a look to the twins.

“Should we tell his parents?” Donna said.

“No way, we'll get in trouble,” said David. “I say we go home and go straight to bed before his parents call ours.”

Jeremy's parents did call, but by then the twins were already feigning sleep in their bunk beds. Their father put his head around the door, but didn't wake them. They listened to him walk back downstairs.

“Donna?” David whispered. “Whaddaya think happened to Jeremy?”

For once, his sister didn't have an answer.

The doctor found nothing wrong with Jeremy, and suggested some kind of shock that he would shake off in a day or two. At school he was in his own world. His mum, looking pale, dropped him off and picked him up. He got in and out of the car like a robot, not saying a word to her.

It was getting dark as the twins rode back from school. The Engineer's House was en route home, and they lingered by the railings. Other houses and the museum had lights on. The Engineer's House stood silent and dark.

“Donna!”

The twins heard a boy call out. Their eyes went to the upstairs window, but there was no one there. Besides, the voice had come from higher up and further away than that.

“Donna!”

They stood closer together and scanned their surroundings.

“I'm up here, Donna!”

“Where's it coming from?” Donna asked.

David gripped her hand. "Dunno." He glanced at two adults walking a dog on the other side of the road. The adults weren't reacting to this loud call, although the dog looked up and whimpered. David and Donna followed its gaze. It was looking at the chimney that rose out of the museum.

"It's coming from the chimney," said Donna. Before David could agree, they heard the voice again.

"David!"

They swung round. It was behind them. On the other side of the road, right where the adults had just walked by.

"David! Over here!"

"It's coming from the river," he said. The adults didn't flinch. Their dog was turning its head to look back.

The twins' attention was snatched by a light in the upstairs window of the house.

"He's back!" whispered Donna.

But there were two boys at the window, and the new face looked familiar.

"Jeremy!" said David.

"But we saw him get into his mum's car," said Donna.

"What do we do?" asked David.

"We go to the nearest place with lights on and an adult around," Donna said.

They wheeled their bikes inside the museum gates and charged through the door, grateful for the abundance of light and a man sitting behind a table.

"I'm just about to close up," he began, peering through his spectacles at the twins. "Gosh, you two look as though you've had a fright. What's the matter?"

David blurted out: "Do you know anything about The Engineer's House?"

"Yes, I do. The man who once ran this place used to own it. What do you want to know?"

The twins hesitated. They didn't want to explain about Jeremy or admit they had been snooping. The man continued anyway.

“Do you know what this place was before it was a museum?” he asked, forgetting about closing up. “It was a steam pumping station. That's why the museum is full of old engines, you see, because folks like to come and see how it worked. Before the pump was built, sewage used to flow down the river.”

“What, poos and stuff?” asked David.

“That's right! Must have stunk, eh?” laughed the man. “So they built a pump to drain the sewage out of the river. It was powered by nine furnaces, which men had to shovel household rubbish into all day long. You can imagine why we needed such a big chimney! And every day, a metal cage was lowered into the river to catch anything that would have clogged up the pump and stopped it working.”

“What kind of things?” Donna asked.

“Things you wouldn't believe,” the man replied. “They used to throw all sorts in the river in those days – even dead bodies.”

The twins shuddered.

“The man who ran the station in 1900 was called Albert Pleasant, and he lived in The Engineer's House with his wife and three sons. Albert's wife died of dysentery, from the filthy water. Boys didn't stay at school so long back then, so Albert got his eldest two, who were twins, to help him out at the pumping station. They were only thirteen, which nowadays we'd think was too young to be mucking about near all that machinery, but Albert didn't know what else to do with them.”

“What kinds of jobs did the twins do?” asked David.

“Well, not many, as it turned out,” the man said. “They both died in terrible accidents. Albert let one of them help shovel rubbish into the furnaces. He fainted with the heat and fell into the fire. And the other twin was found in the cage as they winched it out of the river one night only two months later. They thought he'd been trying to fix one of the chains that had come loose, and got sucked under by the current.”

“What happened to the other son?” said Donna.

“Well, Albert was so terrified something would happen to little Timothy, he wouldn't let him out of the house. He kept him locked in a bedroom. The boy went mad with loneliness. All he could do was look out of the window. He must have longed to have his brothers back.”

“What would you do if you thought you saw the boy in the house?” asked David.

“Oh, I wouldn't be too surprised,” said the man. “Folks who lived in that house after the Pleasants always said it was haunted. Station went through owners like nobody's business for the next few years until, in the end, they couldn't get anyone to live there.”

“Have *you* ever seen or heard anything?” asked Donna. “In the house, or where the twins died?”

“No.”

“And what would you do if you *did* see something, and you thought maybe it had taken your friend?” said David, his voice faltering before he could get the whole question out.

“Now, that sounds serious,” the man said, leaning forward and looking from one twin to the other. “It sounds to me like one of your friends has gone into that house and not come out. Am I right?”

The twins nodded.

“Don't worry, I won't get you into trouble,” he promised, “but I can tell you how to get your friend out of there.”

Donna and David listened as he told them what they had to do, and thanked him before they left. They fetched their bikes. They knew their parents would be worried when they didn't show up, but they had more important things to do. They set off for Jeremy's house.

Getting him without his parents knowing proved hard but Donna's adeptness at scaling drainpipes came into its own. While David distracted Jeremy's parents by knocking their bin over the lawn, Donna got Jeremy over the fence. They took the back roads. They didn't want anyone finding them and dragging them home before they could carry out the plan.

“Are you sure about this?” David asked, as they reached The Engineer's House.

“We want him back how he was, don't we?” said Donna. “That boy in there has taken the bit that makes Jeremy himself and, if we don't do something about it, those twins are gonna try and take us.”

“But how do we know it'll work?” said David.

“He said it would.”

“What if he's lying?”

“We didn't tell him we heard the voices from the chimney and the river, so he must have told us the truth about those boys getting killed. And even before you blabber-mouthed about Jeremy, he told us about the boy in the bedroom.”

“No, I mean, about *this*. What if he's wrong, and it doesn't work?”

Donna looked at Jeremy's vacant eyes.

“Then Jeremy stays like this forever.”

David sucked in a deep breath and fell to his hands and knees to crawl under the bush.

Despite a police hunt, neither the twins or Jeremy were seen again. A sighting of the twins' bikes outside the museum that evening led police to question the owner. She was sorry that she couldn't be of more help, since the Museum closed at two in winter. If the children had somehow got through the gates (which she thought she remembered locking) there would have been no one around to see them.

Schoolchildren were traumatised by the loss of their fellow pupils. Although Donna, David and Jeremy had kept their exploration of The Engineer's House a secret, childrens' secrets aren't perfect, and a few of their classmates thought that the house had something to do with Jeremy's behaviour and the disappearances. None of them would have tried to climb the railings – and those who had an inkling about it crossed the street to avoid the house on their way home – but they did talk about the voices. They heard laughter from the river, and a voice from the chimney that seemed to carry itself

down on the wind and place itself right in their ears. The words were always the same.

We did it, Timothy, we did it!

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