

THE MISCONCEPTION

A Spirit Guide, A Ghost Tiger, and One Scary Mother!

1 HOBSON'S CHOICE

Megan was locked in the coal cellar again on the verge of tears. She was only twelve and she couldn't understand why her mother would do such an awful thing to her. It had happened half-a-dozen times before, but like as not, she thought, her father didn't know anything about it. She had never told him and she was sure that her mother would never have said anything either.

There was an unspoken pact between her and her mother not to let each other down, but here she was again, sitting in the cellar, in the dirt and dust with who-knew-what horrible creatures eyeing her up.

She didn't know. It was pitch black and it took all her strength to keep herself from crying and begging her mother to let her out. But she had tried that on other occasions and her mother had put unreasonable demands on her as conditions for her release. Conditions she knew she could not fulfil, try as hard as she might.

Sometimes, it seemed that she was the only one who took the pact seriously.

Despite herself, tears began to roll down her cheeks again, making invisible river beds through the dust on her face, washing coal dust onto her school uniform. It was too much, it really was. How could someone who understood her so well, behave so cruelly towards her only daughter?

Megan jumped involuntarily as her mother wilfully hit the door with the vacuum cleaner as she passed by. There was not even the slightest sliver of light from which to draw comfort, so she did what she had found helped her the most and scrambled up the coal heap to the wall and then to her right until she found the corner.

There, she wrapped her long skirt around her legs to stop anything creeping up under her clothes and tucked it underneath her. She did up all the buttons on her blouse, pulled her socks up, pulled her sweater over her head and retracted her hands inside her sleeves. This, Megan knew was as safe as it got from whatever lived in the coal cellar. She was not worried about ghosts and things like that, although that was the problem really, but she didn't like insects crawling over her and couldn't bear the thought of being bitten and having her blood sucked out. She hated spiders too, but wrapped in the cocoon of her school uniform, she knew that there were at most a few inches of skin above her socks that the creepy-crawlies could get to. A few square inches to the sides to be precise, because her arms hugged her calves tight to her thighs.

She wished she could stop sobbing. Even just for a while, but she knew that she would eventually as she waited to be released. She knew when that would be too – at about five-thirty, giving her half an hour to get cleaned up before her father came home from work.

Megan understood why her mother was doing this. It was because she was afraid and Megan wasn't. Her mother was frightened for her daughter and so wanted to make her frightened like she was. The problem was that Megan was not frightened and could see nothing to be frightened about. She had tried to explain it a hundred times to her mother, but she just shut her up either figuratively or literally like now.

Her parents were both Catholic, but her mother was a very strict Catholic and her father somewhat less so. Her mother was frightened about the Afterlife, so she said, but not for herself, since she considered herself to be a good Catholic and was convinced that her place in Heaven was already assured, so long as she continued to do her duty. The problem, as far as Megan was concerned, was that her mother thought that part of her duty was to lock her daughter in the coal cellar, which was why she was there now.

Her father had also been born a Catholic, but was not as strict as her mother. He believed that if people wanted to risk eternal damnation, then that was up to them. He cared about his own soul and

those of the ones he loved, but he believed in an amount of free choice, even for little girls.

Megan loved both her parents despite what her mother did to her, because, although she was only young, she realised that her mother had her best interests at heart. She even tried to love them both equally, but the problem, in Megan's opinion, was that her mother had either not had good Teachers or had been too frightened to believe her own eyes, ears, or senses.

She wasn't quite sure what they were, she just knew that she had them and so did others, but that her mother did not admit to them and so her mother did not want to believe that others had them either. 'After all', her mother had told her, 'I am thirty-four and you are only twelve. I studied at a Catholic school, whereas you just go to the interdenominational comprehensive school'.

Her mother had apparently not had any issues with the comprehensive schooling system, but she had spat out the word 'interdenominational'. Megan had never understood the problem. She had met both good and bad, clever and not so and aware and not so from most religions.

Her mother fell into the good at heart, clever and quite aware categories.

Her father was good, clever and fairly aware.

Megan judged herself to be good, reasonably clever and very aware.

That was her problem. That was why she was huddled in the corner of a jet-black coal hole with all sorts of things probably crawling all over her right at this very second. She shuddered at the thought, but the snivelling had stopped now as she had known that it eventually would.

She knew that she had two options.

She could tell her father what was happening to her behind his back and cause a row, which might lead to divorce or her being taken into care or she could pretend that she was not aware, as she normally referred to it.

Megan had learned that the best thing to do when she was locked in the cellar, was to think about something else and the subject that she liked to think about the most was her friends. She did not have many friends but they were special to her. Her favourite friends were her grandfather, Wacinhinsha and her pet cat.

She closed her eyes, tried to relax and tried to picture them standing before her or sitting beside her. This always gave her a warm feeling and so she did it whenever she was upset. It was one of her little tricks for coping when life seemed unfair.

Megan thought she felt something brush up against her thigh and heard a low noise that was muffled by her sweater.

She froze for a moment.