

Sam Brookes lowered his drained glass, watching the ice cubes slide back like loaded dice, and considered ordering another. That would be his ninth double vodka, but he wasn't drunk enough. And that was what he wanted more than anything.

Because ghosts couldn't haunt you when you were drunk. They weren't vengeful spirits, lost souls of the dead. They were hallucinations brought on by the conscience, the mind's own way of punishing itself. So, keep that mind inebriated and the ghosts couldn't come. Could they?

He shook his head. The ghost was real. It had to be, for Richey to see it. To hear it, speak to it.

Through the window of the now deserted hotel bar he could see the fiery July sun sinking below the horizon, its dying rays bathing the bar in warm hues of orange and red. In spite of the warmth, Sam shivered. It would be dark soon.

As the barman warily refilled his glass, a crumpled leaflet sitting on a plate of leftover fish and chips on the bar top caught Sam's attention. A money-off voucher for entrance to the Sea Life Centre. Now he knew he was being haunted. Mocked by a ghost with a cruel sense of humour. Underlined by tomato ketchup that looked like clotted blood in the dimmed light were more details.

Not just a money-off voucher, but also an invitation to see the new exhibits, amongst them the ghost crab...

The Sea Life Centre had been packed with visitors that afternoon, and being stuck amongst hordes of over-excited people gaping at a load of fish wouldn't have been his idea of spending the last day of the family holiday on the best occasions. But after the dream, the nightmare that could only have been a warning – or a promise – there was even less incentive to come.

Going in now, ducking his head under the fibreglass rocks of the entrance tunnel, he felt like a condemned man lowering his head for the executioner's axe.

He hadn't wanted to come to Hunstanton at all, but Helen had insisted that they all needed a holiday. Finances were tight, so it wasn't going to be a foreign holiday. She'd remembered childhood holidays in Hunstanton, her memory painting the small West Norfolk seaside resort in a rosy light, and insisted on coming here.

In spite of himself, Sam had found the first few days pleasant and enjoyable. Yes, the town was a little run down – what British coastal resort wasn't? – but they'd been lucky with the weather, constant eighty degree heat and blazing sunshine that made a trip abroad unnecessary.

The change in surroundings was helping them all to relax and actually enjoy being a family once more. The lovemaking with Helen reminded him of the earlier years, when they'd been courting. And father and son bonded again.

An observer watching them play on the beach would see that they were cast from the same stone, Richey's frame promising to fill out and make him the same tall but stocky man his father was, with a potential for that stockiness to run to fat. Sunlight turned his thick shock of hair golden, the

blonde hair and the small nose the only physical characteristics he had inherited from his mother. That, and a tendency to take his time over things, to be a little too serious.

Whereas his father had rushed around like a lunatic at his age, Richey was more calm and thoughtful, analysing everything, searching for different angles and possibilities in every hobby he undertook. Even on holiday.

The hunting for fossils in the chalk and sandstone cliffs was slow and methodical. Sam smiled as he watched Richey checking off each sample against the examples in his notebook with a curt nod of approval, his small face scrunched up with studious intensity.

Sometimes he wished that Richey could be a little less intense, could relax and enjoy life more. Still, it boded well for his future. Not a natural sportsman like his father had been at his age, he wasn't a total spud at school either. Academic, but popular, with a varied group of friends and interests.

Watching him search for crabs and razor clams in the rock pools after the tide had gone out one day, Sam knew Richey was destined to follow in his mother's footsteps rather than his father's. And that was no bad thing. Far better an academic and creative life like Helen's – lecturer in medieval history at the University of East Anglia, with a lucrative sideline in watercolour painting – than his, a salesman for an office supplies company.

On the Tuesday evening, after trying to capture a spectacular sunset over the remains of St Edmund's chapel and the disused lighthouse on the cliffs, she'd laid down her brushes and said to him:

“Richard wants to go to the Sea Life Centre at some stage.” She never liked calling him Richey, thought it childish. “Can we go?”

He mumbled assent, not looking up from his copy of the *Express*. “No probs. We’ll do it Friday, make our last day one to remember.”

Come Friday morning he wished he hadn’t agreed. The dream – the nightmare - he had woken from convinced him that something terrible was going to happen. But a promise was a promise, there was no way he could let Richey down. And how could he explain his reluctance? That would mean telling them what had happened...

And so, on the Friday afternoon, the last day of the holiday, they joined the long admission queue. Sam was trembling on the way in, pale and shivering in spite of the heat that beat down on them.

“Don’t worry, just a chill. Dickey tummy.” He pointed to the seafood stall. “While you guys were getting burgers I thought I’d try something different.”

Helen smiled. “Had an argument with a whelk, did you?”

“Should’ve remembered seafood doesn’t agree with me,” he grimaced. “That’ll teach me...” He took their hands, thankful that the lie had worked.

He’d not touched a thing from the stall. He’d never gone near it. But he remembered the stall from his dream. Everything was identical. The red and white striped awning, the fat, grinning, bearded face of the stall holder. The trays of various seafood nestled on the fake plastic green ‘lawn’. Even the chalked prices on the blackboard...identical, right down to the last penny. And the wafting aroma of crabmeat had been the same - as had the small, lonely figure at the end of the queue. It was the smell and the final customer that made him pale and nauseous.

Once they entered the cool, dark entrance, far from the nightmarish reminders outside, Sam started to relax, felt better. Even more so when he saw the effect the visit was having on his son. Richey was entranced by the rays swimming in the open pool of the first chamber, his face beaming with childish pleasure at the sight of them trying to clamber up over the lip of the tank. The walkthrough tunnel with its tiger sharks had him pointing and laughing with glee and Sam almost felt guilty, realising he had almost deprived his son of this. Helen squeezed his hand and smiled.

“Mum, Dad, look! Crabs!” Richey stopped suddenly, his hand falling from his father’s as he ran to the tank.

Crabs...Sam’s smile froze. He thought back to the seafood stall outside, the small figure with the crab shell...

“Sam? Sam, what’s wrong? Do you need the toilet...” He shook his head, dropped Helen’s hand and walked over to Richey.

He looked at the information card first.

*Ocypode cordimana* - Ghost Crab. A new arrival from Australia, widely distributed from the northwest region to New South Wales as well as the oceans of the Indo-Pacific region...called ghost crab because of its ability to disappear from sight almost instantly...his eyes flicked over the rest of the information, settling on the picture.

A translucent, creamy coloured crustacean, tinged with pink. Ugly little thing, he thought. One of its claws was larger than the other, and its eyestalks didn’t have terminal tips, just huge black eyes that stared at him, accusingly. Sam shuddered.

And then he caught the reflection of his son's terrified face in the glass. At first he thought it was the interior lighting that had turned his son's face so pale, but when he put a comforting hand on Richey's shoulder and asked him what was wrong, what happened next hit him like a punch to the stomach.

“He says he's from Lowestoft. Says he's – he's come back to play with you.”

At the mention of Lowestoft, Sam's heart stood still. White-faced and trembling once more, he turned to face the tank.

Behind the reinforced glass a child floated gently, his Nike clad feet hovering a few inches above the shingle-covered base of the tank. Roughly the same age and height as Richey, he would have been quite thin if it hadn't been for the gases within his decomposing body that had bloated his face and belly to grotesque, surreal proportions. The bright halogen display light, scattered by the constant flowing water, cast strange patterns of luminescence on the boy's yellow skin and the tiny translucent creatures that scurried over his face.

Apart from that, the child looked exactly as Sam remembered from that night's drive back from Lowestoft a year ago.

The child cocked his head to one side, fixing Sam with a glare that burned right through him, the eyes filled with a hatred – and a *knowledge* – that no nine year old should ever have experienced.

“What do you want?” Sam hissed, his words barely audible.

The child smiled grimly, and then vanished. As did the ghost crabs and the water that held them. Nothing remained but a few scattered pebbles coated in green slime and a laminated notice taped to the cracked viewing

glass informing visitors that the crabs had been relocated to a tank further down the hall.

He and Richey were staring at a tank that had been empty for weeks.

*...called ghost crab because of its ability to disappear from sight almost instantly...* Sam pushed the plate and its mocking reminder away from him. It fell off the bar top and smashed on the floor. A long, hard stare from the barman told Sam it was time to go.

He considered going upstairs, to the family room and bed, but he knew he couldn't face his family and their questions. Not just yet.

Helen had ran after him from the Sea Life Centre, demanding to know what was wrong, why he'd run away. Richey had wanted to know more about the boy in the tank. He couldn't tell them, how could he? He had shouted at them to leave him alone. Helen stormed off, taking Richey with her to the amusement arcade while he went back to the hotel and started to pack. After a while he gave up, knew that he needed a drink.

About six o'clock he saw Helen and Richey come back, entering through the bar entrance. As soon as she saw the empty drinks glasses, the redness in his cheeks that wasn't sunburn and the disapproving look from the barman who looked like he was on the verge of throwing Sam out, she'd silently taken Richey's hand and marched upstairs. She didn't speak to him, but her eyes said *you've got some questions to answer*.

If he went upstairs he'd have to answer those questions. If she wasn't awake he'd have to try to go to sleep as well...

No, he wouldn't be able to sleep yet, in spite of the vodka. He wondered if he would ever be able to sleep again.

He left the bar and crossed the road, heading for the seafront. He tripped and stumbled, the vodka at least having a numbing effect on his body if not his tortured mind.

The sun had now vanished completely. Moonless night enshrouded the town, a few scattered clouds trying in vain to cover the multitude of stars that dropped diamonds of light onto the dark waters below. The triangular shaped green that sloped down to the seafront was unusually empty, as devoid of life as the seafront. Sam had never felt so utterly alone.

He didn't see the small dark figure leave the hotel through the main reception. It turned, looked in his direction and began to follow.

Sam stumbled along the empty seafront, walking over the ice-cream wrappers, drinks cans and other debris that litters a seaside town at the end of a busy day. Descending the stone steps that led to the beach he stared at the inky blackness of the sea, trying to lose his thoughts in its restless motions. The sea whispered darkly to itself, as if sharing a secret with a hidden companion.

The sea could hide almost everything. It had never given up the corpse of the Lowestoft boy, but it couldn't hide his spirit. Or Sam's guilt.

He had gone to Lowestoft exactly one year ago to meet a potential customer whose company was interested in the products and services offered by Sam's office supplies company. It hadn't been successful and Sam had left, dispirited and weary.



He knew he should have stayed overnight at the Travelodge; he'd been too tired to drive back to Norwich. The boy had come out of nowhere, tearing across the darkened country lane. An accident. A terrible accident.

But not a blameless one. Four vodka tonics Sam had drunk with his prospective client, and along with the weariness his response time had been slowed. Fatally.

Those four drinks would scream out GUILTY! on any breath test. He would go to prison, a child killer. As well as losing his job, licence and liberty, he would lose his family's love. Not only would he be unable to provide for them, he would have to face their anguished gazes at visiting time, say to his son *yes, Richey, I killed a child your age. Do you still feel safe with me? Still trust me, still love your old man?*

These thoughts were screaming in his head as he climbed shakily out of the Mercedes and stared in horror at what he had done. And it was this fear that had made him pick up the child's shattered body and place it, wrapped in a blanket, in the boot of his car, made him drive to a secluded cliff top to dispose of the corpse and then drive back home without informing anyone.

In that one short moment, fear of losing everything had overtaken his reason, his conscience. He had dumped the body, unable to watch as it repeatedly struck the cold stone on the way down, wet thumping sounds that hammered into his soul. As the tide ebbed and took the blood-soaked blanket and its contents, pathetically small from his vantage point, out to sea and beyond his vision he had hoped that that would be the end of it.

But it wasn't. How could it be? Nightly the child had visited him in his dreams, the same look of terrified surprise permanently fixed on his face. The

shriek of brakes, the sickening thud as he hit the front of the car and bounced off the bonnet. The dead weight in Sam's arms, the black blood trickling through gaps in the blanket. The loud splash as the broken body, weighed down with rocks hastily gathered from the cliff top, hit the water and began its journey out to sea.

The dreams had come relentlessly, night after night, driving him to the verge of breakdown. The lack of sleep affected his concentration, severely impacted his business decisions. His relationship with Helen and Richey suffered as his drinking increased...and then suddenly, after a full three months, the dreams ceased.

Until they came to Hunstanton this week and the dream returned. But this time it was different. The child was no longer a dead body. Neither was he alive. Somewhere...in between.

Thursday night. He dreamt the boy was standing before him in the queue at the seafood stall on the seafront. The boy turned to him, chewing noisily on something he held in his hand. Sam looked closely at the hand, saw that it was the top half of a crab shell.

The boy leaned forwards and whispered: *You should try the crabmeat, mister. It's really good!*

*Not the meat inside them. I mean the meat they feed on...* he then pulled his red T shirt up, over his chest, and plunged the crab shell into the rotting morass that was within his belly. Scooping out his insides, he raised the crab shell, offering the decomposing flesh to Sam.

*The meat you turned me into!*

The dream ended with the boy walking into the Sea Life Centre, beckoning to Sam, a mocking invitation. *Come on! We can play on the beach later. Bring your son...* and then laughter. High-pitched, childish laughter, mocking him.

Nightmares, even as graphic and horrifying as these, he thought he could handle. Because you woke up and *knew* that they were nightmares. But to be visited in the day, when still awake...

He must have been walking for about thirty minutes when he heard something other than the soft sounds of the sea caressing the coastline. A small boy's voice, calling out to him.

He halted in his tracks and looked behind him, but he could see no-one. Hunstanton's seafront was far behind him, its few remaining neon lights making little impact on the black night that enveloped him. To his right the cliffs rose upwards, red white and brown colourings of the chalk and sandstone layers looking more like layers of rotting, decaying meat in the faint starlight. The lapping of salt water on his trainers told him that night was not the only thing that surrounded him. The tide was coming in.

He realised where he was. He had wandered onto the sands of Holme-next-the-sea, a stretch of land where the tide came in on a sudden curve, cutting you off from shore and pulling you out to sea before you knew what was happening.

His mind reeled. Wasn't this the place where a couple of kids had died recently, swept out to the hungry sea so quickly that their parents hadn't realised what was happening until it was too late?

Was this his fate, then? To die by the same black waters that had taken the lives of children? As the cold water rose to his thighs, sucking the warmth from his body, he was suddenly aware that he was no longer on his own.

Someone – a small figure, a child – was standing behind him. Arms clutched at his body as he tried to move away, gripping tightly, fingernails sinking into the flesh of his belly like crab pincers.

Sam shrieked and pushed them away, kicking out at the child. As he did so he lost his footing on the treacherous, shifting sands and went under, the child going with him. As cold saltwater filled his lungs Sam was filled with rage. He found the neck and began to squeeze, trying to extinguish whatever monstrous life-force controlled this creature before he himself died.

He regained consciousness on the beach, the strong hands of the paramedic pushing down on his chest, forcing out the seawater that filled his lungs and stomach. He coughed, vomited violently, the deathly fluid rushing from his mouth and drenching the black sand. He was forced over onto his front, the paramedic pushing him into the recovery position. This enabled him to see the small, black bodybag strapped to a stretcher beside him.

A torch flashed in his face. The paramedic's words were faint, the seawater in Sam's ear canals blocking sound.

“Didn't you know he was there? He tried to save you – to *save your life* – and lost his by trying.”

Sam flicked eyes to the cold, hard gaze of the paramedic. He tried to speak, but could only manage a hoarse croak, spilling more water. He shook his head.

“You sure?” The tone was blunt, accusing. “The guy who put the call through said this boy was calling out to you. You ignored him so he ran into the sea, rushing to stop you.

“Did you think he was attacking you? Is that why you strangled him?”

The paramedic reached over and pulled the zipper of the bodybag down, shone the torch to show Sam what he had done to his own son.

Richey’s open eyes stared lifelessly into his father’s. A small crab, sickly pale and translucent, hauled itself over the thick wet mop of Richey’s blonde hair, its claws clicking softly. Its black eyes glinted in the torchlight and then it vanished, disappearing from sight almost instantly.

It might have been the last remnants of salt water rushing though his ears, but the last thing Sam Brookes heard before he blacked out was the sound of a small boy’s high-pitched, mocking laughter.