



THE MYSTERY OF THE GREEN ROOM

By Clementine Beauvais

I know I said Mrs Feather looked like she wanted to kill Mrs Whistlewell, but I didn't mean it *literally*,' whispered Amy. 'I just thought she was throwing her weird glances, like *this*.'

Amy threw Joseph a weird glance like *this*, and it was frankly terrifying. 'Well, you were right,' I said. 'Mrs Whistlewell is undeniably dead. She's been slaughtered. By Mrs Feather.'

I picked up poor Mrs Whistlewell from the floor of the cage. She was already cold. Mrs Feather chirruped approvingly to see her victim taken away; she was clearly very proud of herself. We buried the murdered canary in the garden, behind the well. Digging a hole was tricky, because the earth was stone-hard, blades of grass locked together by frost.

Little Jazz was devastated. 'Do you think she'll go to Heaven?' she sniffled.

'No,' I replied. 'There's no Heaven. When you die, you just become molecules of nothing.'

This made Jazz cry. 'Does that mean Uncle Lucian is just molecules of nothing now?'

'Absolutely.'

(Jazz cried even more.)

Our great-uncle Lucian Leroux had died three days previously, triggering this impromptu family reunion on his island off the coast of Brittany, in France. There weren't many houses on the island, and *la maison de M. Leroux* - Mr Leroux's house - was the biggest, spread over parrot-green lawns and hidden by high hedges and trees. The rooms of the mansion - the ones, at least, that hadn't been entirely eaten up by black rot and mushrooms - were now occupied for the weekend by the four adults and four children of the family.

None of us were very sad; we hadn't seen Uncle Lucian in ages, and by all accounts he hadn't been a very nice person. I barely remembered him. When I thought of him, I simply saw a boring old person's face. But I also remembered light and darkness; the last time I'd seen him, when I was a young child, he'd set up a magic lantern for me, which threw moving, shuddering shadows on the walls. That was

a good memory – my only good memory associated with Uncle Lucian. He'd made that magic lantern himself: he was an inventor, although, as far as we knew, he'd never invented anything important.

'Mum's calling us,' Amy shouted, waving at her mother – my aunt Pris – who was standing at the door of the house.

Night was falling already, darkening cherry-red the pinkish bricks of the mansion. I wished it were summer – February is a rubbish time to be reunited with your cousins in a place like this. I'd have liked to stay up all night in the garden. And catch up with Joseph. He was so tall now, so big – I didn't feel as close to him as I had when we'd been kids. Three years hadn't been such a difference when I'd been seven and he'd been ten, but now I was eleven and he was fourteen . . .

'You know,' I told him as we walked to the house, 'since you started high school, we've drifted apart.' I liked how adult an expression this sounded. 'We've drifted apart,' I repeated. '*We have drifted apart, Joe.*'

Joseph wasn't listening. 'Who's that in the car?' he asked.

That in the car – a big brown sedan that was pulling up to the mansion, farting loudly – was an old man I was not sure I knew. Aunt Pris, however, clearly recognised him. And it didn't look like she was expecting him.

'Uncle Bill!' she stuttered as the old man got out. 'We

didn't know you'd be joining us, we . . .'

'I've had a phone call from Lucian's lawyer,' said the man. 'Apparently there's something for me from my *dear* brother in the will.'

The way he said 'dear' suggested that Bill thought there was nothing *dear* about Lucian. Aunt Pris looked astonished. 'Something for *you*? But . . .'

'Surprising, I know,' said Bill. 'I suppose sibling resentment weakens as death approaches . . .'

And he pushed past Aunt Pris to get into the house.

'Erm . . . all right,' she whispered, stunned. 'Well, I suppose . . . Joseph, would you mind preparing the green bedroom on the first floor for Uncle Bill? Just make the bed and turn on the heating.'

I was a bit upset she hadn't asked me. Clearly Joseph seemed more responsible. But I was even more upset that he didn't suggest I helped him. *We've drifted apart*, I thought again, watching him walk up the big staircase.

The reading of the will happened that evening. Everyone was invited, even Jazz and Amy. They were pretty polite, I thought. Jazz was picking her nose very discreetly.

'Wake me up if it turns out I'm inheriting the mansion,' I told Joseph.

No luck, unfortunately. But I did wake up when the lawyer

announced, 'Finally, my client bequeaths to each person in this room one object that he made himself. The objects are in labelled boxes, in my car. It is my client's request that the boxes be opened by each family member on their own, as they contain personal notes.'

The parents mumbled, amused. 'This is the kind of thing old Lucian would do,' my dad smiled. 'He wasn't the most likeable person, but he always enjoyed surprises.'

We went down to the lawyer's car, which was packed with square metal boxes, roughly big enough to fit a football. My box was bright yellow, and said 'Marcel' in lovely cursive.

'Danielle Darzac,' said the lawyer. Uncle Lucian's carer, a middle-aged lady who'd been crying for three days, picked up her box and ran off.

'Bill,' said the lawyer next, and Uncle Bill came to collect his box.

'I can't believe *Bill's* getting a box,' my aunt Myriam whispered to my mum. 'Lucian *hated* him!'

After dinner, we were allowed to go up to our bedrooms to open our boxes.

On the wallpaper in my bedroom, the little dark-blue shepherdesses on swings seemed to jitter as I flicked open the golden lock which kept the box closed. A little metal roll popped out of the lid, aligning six wheels of scrambled

letters, and a small engraved message above them: 'Who are you?'

I smiled. Clearly, grumpy old Uncle Lucian had had a dramatic, secretive streak to his personality . . . I carefully twisted the little wheels to spell out my name: M-A-R-C-E-L.

Click! The box opened, and a note swirled down to the floor.

'I know you liked this as a child, Marcel. Maybe you'll still like it now. I wouldn't want anyone else to have it. Uncle Lucian.'

In the box was the old magic lantern. It had a rash of rust and the paper was yellowed, but my skin tingled behind my ears; for the first time - ever - I missed Uncle Lucian.

Suddenly the door creaked open . . .

'What did you get, Marcel?'

Little Jazz, and Joseph, and Amy, in their pyjamas, cradling their boxes.

'I got a toy car,' Amy marvelled.

'A pocket watch.' Joseph said this as if it wasn't a big deal, but you could tell he was proud. He kept putting it into his pocket and drawing it out to read the time.

'A teddy bear,' Jazz whispered. 'With lice!' she added, picking a moth out of its dusty fur. (Clearly the lice were the best part of the heirloom.)

'He wasn't such a boring old person in the end,' I said. 'No one who takes the time to pack all those things for his

great-nieces and great-nephews is an *entirely* bad person.' And I wished he could see us now, piled up on my bed, handling the objects he'd made and handed down to us. I almost felt like, in a way, he *was* there; or at least, that he'd *imagined* how it would go. That he'd *pictured* his family opening the boxes, and . . .

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Dry, hard thuds resonated down the corridor.

Joseph and I exchanged a glance, and popped our heads out of my bedroom door. At the end of the hallway, Danielle the carer was knocking heavily on the door of the green room.

'Mr Leroux?' she asked. Then, louder: 'Mr Leroux!'

We walked down to her. 'What's going on, Danielle?'

'Mr Bill,' she said. 'He's not answering his door. He asked me to bring him his tea, but it looks like he's locked himself in.'

'Maybe he's asleep,' I said.

'He'd have to be pretty comatose not to have heard those knocks and calls,' Joseph scoffed, rolling his eyes at me.

Joseph's dad, alerted by the noise, had joined us at the door. He knocked as loudly as he could. 'Uncle Bill? Uncle Bill!'

No answer came. He looked through the keyhole. 'Looks like the key's in there. You don't have another key, Danielle?' She shook her head.

'Then we need to break down the door,' Joseph concluded. I beamed at him: it was the most exciting thing I'd ever heard.

His dad just replied, 'Indeed.'

The three of us began to give the door sharp, hard blows with our shoulders, like in the movies – once, twice, three times – until . . . BROOF! It blew open, sending bits of wood and metal everywhere.

We peered inside. And for a moment there was silence.

Until Danielle's piercing shriek.

'He's dead!'