

CHAPTER 4: THE SEARCH: MORE BEGINNINGS

It was halfway through the summer holidays. The boy liked the old man – Captain Arthur Benali, no less – as mad or eccentric as he was, but he was dreadfully lonely. He didn't really have any friends in Frinton. Actually, he didn't really have friends at all, not even at the boarding school. He looked on school as if it was a prison, where the only thing he had in common with the other kids was the fact that they were all inmates together.

The rain had set in. The sea and the sky had merged together in one great grey sheet obliterating any chance of a horizon. He took the old man a cup of coffee and knocked on the study door. No answer. He wasn't there. The boy remembered it was his usual Friday visit to the *Specialist*. He never knew why the old man went and it had never occurred to him to ask. And as usual, he thought no more about it. The door wasn't locked so he went in anyway.

It was a large room lined with books like all the other rooms, but in the middle it was dominated by a unique over-large, four-poster bed. Unique because one of the posts was made from the living trunk of the conker tree that, from the outside, seemingly grew out from the roof. The old man had constructed this part of the house himself. This room was built around the old conker tree in the garden because he refused to have it cut down. The trunk came up through the floorboards and out through the ceiling. Of course, when the big winds blew the branches that fanned out over the bedroom roof, the whole room seemed to move, creaking and whining. "It's fantastic. It makes me feel like I'm back on the old *Hippolyte* exploring the Arctic wastes," the old man would say. When the boy asked where he got the idea for the bedroom, he replied simply that he had read it in a book. And it wasn't just a tree. The old man had carved beautiful Islamic and Celtic designs in the bark that had been exquisitely polished. Elsewhere, the names of friends and other special visitors had been intricately autographed and inlaid with copper and brass. Here and there were strange, exotic and complex pictographs that bewildered the boy and kept him returning to marvel at their wonder.

The boy had a go at the telescope that pointed out across the North Sea and the

eastern skies then he got sort of bored and remembered the hand downstairs.

There is a budget horror film called *The Hand* starring Michael Caine. It is about a hand possessed by its dead owner that did a good job of throttling most of the people it encountered in the story. It occurred to the boy that the big green hand might be possessed too; perhaps the old man was possessed? Yeah, possessed by nuts like a fruitcake. He decided to take a peek at the hand in the downstairs toilet. Had he been in a budget horror film right now, there would be some hammy, melodramatic music as he approached the door; some rapid edits and maybe some lightning sound effects as the door edged open. A conventional scream, perhaps. It hadn't moved. What a half-hearted anti-climax. The boy began to suspect one of the old man's elaborate, practical jokes.

The boy became irritated by his own boredom – so much so that he started to clean out the fireplace in the kitchen and it wasn't even his turn. It was that sort of day. But some stories hinge on the smallest of details and this story suddenly began to take shape. Why it should start to take shape at this particular time is a mystery: stories are like that.

As he laid out yesterday's newspapers on the hearthstone to wrap up the cold ashes, a headline from *The East Anglian Tribune* caught his eye:

Walton Pier – The End

He rescued the page none too carefully, like a boy, and read the first column:

After many years of neglect, and persistent, gradual subsidence, the world-famous Walton Pier is on the verge of collapsing into the English Channel. Engineers have pinpointed damage to the sub-structure of the pier throughout its three-quarters of a mile length, caused by continuous movement in the main upright, load-bearing supports at the base of the cliff end.

During the early hours of Tuesday, 23rd July, matters reached crisis point when the south and Frinton side of the pier listed dramatically overnight and now is banked at 75 degrees. Police have restricted access to the pier until further notice.

The Pier is thought to date from the 11th century....

The article went on and there were some diagrams and photographs and more technical detail that the boy didn't understand, but he could hardly believe what he was thinking. The date seemed promising; the pier, the troll, the old man's words echoed in his mind, *they never stop moving, but just like the arms of a clock you can never see them move, yet they move still...*