

Beware of the
Mirror Man

To the eagle-eyed Losh,
whose hard work made my hard
work possible. A thousand berties to you.

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I find television very educating.
Every time somebody turns on the set,
I go into the other room and read a book.

Groucho Marx

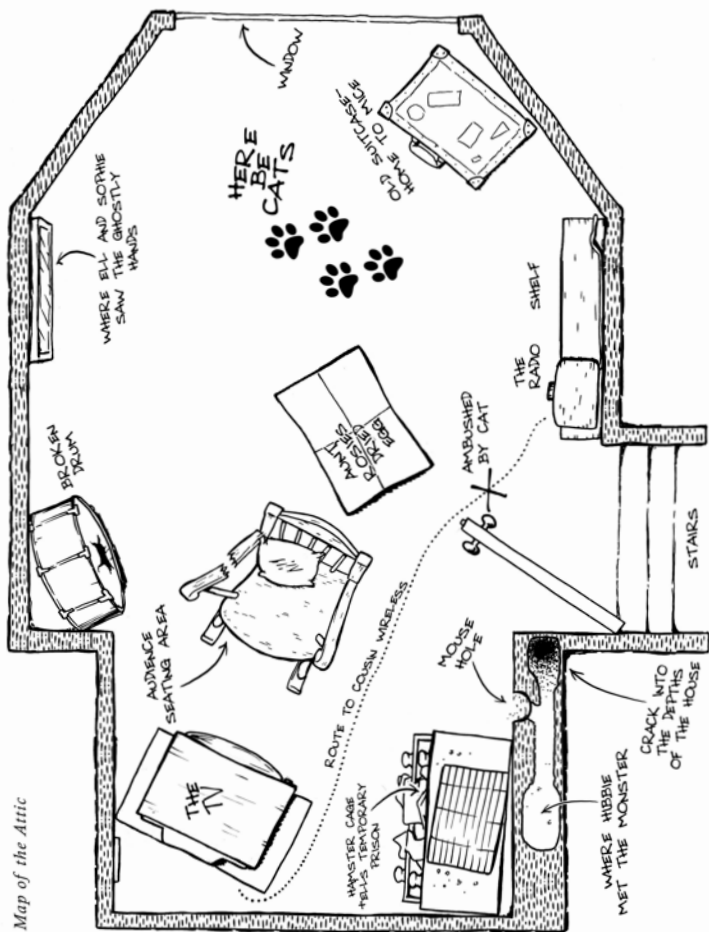
Everyone has a purpose in life.
Perhaps yours is watching television.

David Letterman

Television is for appearing on – not for looking at.

Noel Coward

Map of the Attic



— PROLOGUE —

The attic was deserted. That is to say, deserted as far as humans were concerned. Most would have only noticed a spider busily building yet another web between the arms of an ancient rocking chair. The most observant may have spotted a lonely battered suitcase discarded on the carpetless floor, but they would not have given it a second glance. It had been many, many years since it had seen sun, sea and sand, and was now the home to several small rodents.

The cardboard box with the words *Aunt Rosie's Dried Egg* printed in fading blue letters may have raised an eyebrow, but most people would not have been interested. Even the large drum propped against the peeling wall would have been ignored. In its centre there was a hole where many years ago a clumsy foot had stumbled. It was now yellow with age, and covered in thick layers of dust. Among this rubbish, not even the most observant of people would have seen the rather unusual inhabitants of this particular attic.

The building that the attic sat on top of was a large, elegant Edwardian house – once proud, full of servants and their well-off masters. The house now stood quiet and still.

Outside in the overgrown garden the sun began to set and the 'For Sale' sign planted haphazardly in the flowerbed cast eerie shadows on the ground. With a flutter, a magpie flew upwards out of the undergrowth. Landing on his usual perch, the branch of a nearby tree, his eye caught something glittering through the cracked attic window. The bird watched with interest as an ancient and dusty television set, the kind that your grandmother may have recalled from after the last world war, flickered into life.

Almost as soon as the set came on an old husky voice yelled loudly, 'Oi! Turn the lights out!'

A younger voice replied sulkily, 'Keep yer 'air on! Thought there was an audience outside.'

A click and the light on the old television went out. With the glitter gone the bird soon lost interest and took to the air, returning to his nest for a night's sleep. As the sun went down, the house again appeared deserted. Really, it was only sleeping. Just like the magpie.

— CHAPTER ONE —

Arrival

The inside of the house was dark and gloomy. Sophie reached for a light switch and flicked it on. There was a feeble ‘ping’ as the bulb blew. She pulled a face in irritation, but her eyes quickly adjusted to the darkness. Glancing around, she saw that she was standing in a short corridor with no windows. There were several closed doors and at the end of the corridor was a large, winding staircase. Her face lit up when she saw sprawling cobwebs hanging from the ceiling.

‘Great! Spiders! Wow, do you think there’s a big one?’ she exclaimed.

Barnaby just shrugged his shoulders. Annoyed by her little brother’s lack of excitement, Sophie decided to tease him.

‘This place looks so spooky,’ she said in her most ghoulish voice. ‘Do you think there’s a ghost?’ she added, rolling her eyes to bring the maximum chill up Barnaby’s spine.

‘What with no head?’

‘Oh, yes. No head and no arms.’

‘I’d like to meet a ghost with no feet and no legs,’ said

Barnaby.

Sophie lost interest. Her plan was not working. How can you scare somebody who wants to meet a ghost?

‘Don’t be daft. He wouldn’t be able to move.’

‘That means he can’t get away,’ shouted Barnaby gleefully. ‘But he might float away if it’s draughty. Quick! Let’s get him!’

Barnaby clomped off at speed along the corridor and up the winding staircase. Sophie afforded herself a smug grin. Now she would have a chance to explore by herself. Once more she looked around the place that was to be her new home. The building was a whole world away from the modern house she had lived in until now. This house had stood proud through two world wars, kings and queens had come and gone, and thousands of new inventions had delighted and horrified. Sophie let her mind wander, wishing that she could see just a little of the drama that it must have witnessed.

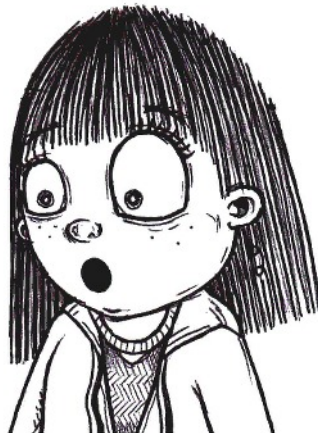
Her thoughts were interrupted by the sounds of the unloading of the removal van drifting in from outside. If she remained where she was any longer, her parents would find some boring task for her to do. Too late; the front door flew open. Sophie’s father, Bob, a short man with thinning black hair and a large belly, flopped into the hallway. Clutched tightly in his hands writhed Ginger, the family’s pet cat. The cat glared at Sophie with his shiny green eyes and struggled in her dad’s grasp, as keen as Sophie to explore. Bob pressed the animal firmly into Sophie’s arms.

‘Careful,’ he said. ‘Don’t let Ginger out of the house yet. He’ll get lost. He has to get used to his new territory.’

Bob retraced his steps back to the removal van. Hugging the wriggling puss in her arms, Sophie sat on the bottom step of the staircase. Looking after Ginger wasn’t too bad a job she supposed. Exploring would have to wait. Being careful not to loosen her grip on the cat, she attempted to unroll the new issue of *Urban Teen* that her mother so disapproved of. She had nearly succeeded when a loud crash made her jump and Ginger lashed out with his claws at her bare arm. Yelping, Sophie rubbed her arm and peered around to find the source of the noise.

‘Sophie, Sophie!’ shouted an excited Barnaby from the top of the stairs. ‘I’ve found where the ghost lives!’

Sophie was both relieved and cross. It was only Barnaby, but his clumsiness had made Ginger hurt her. ‘There isn’t a ghost, silly,’ she said sulkily. ‘I made it up.’



She pretended to read the magazine, but Barnaby came down the stairs and pulled insistently at her arm. Sighing, she stood. There would be no peace unless she did as he asked. Barnaby grabbed Sophie's hand and dragged her stumbling up the stairs. At the top she noticed a large pile of tatty books, spread across the floor. Her brother must have knocked them over, causing the almighty crash that made Ginger lash out. Barnaby pulled her past them and down a thin corridor.

Glancing into a few of the bedrooms as they passed, she spotted masses of old crates and the occasional piece of furniture swathed in big white dustsheets. In one room she saw a large four-poster bed. Sophie hoped that it would be her bedroom. However, Barnaby dragged her onwards, along the landing and up a tiny staircase. In this part of the house it was becoming harder and harder to see. In fact, Sophie realised that in the dark she would have missed this staircase altogether and it surprised her that Barnaby had seen it at all.

At the top there was a small door. It opened with an eerie creak, and the children went in. Looking around, Sophie saw that she was in a small attic room. Set in one slanted wall was a large window. The daylight that filtered in cast peculiar shadows that danced on the faded and torn wallpaper.

'See! Told you!' said Barnaby proudly. 'This is bound to be where the ghost lives. Maybe he'll float back! Or maybe he's hiding!'

As her brother searched for his ghost, Sophie took in her surroundings. The items in the attic were very old, and very dusty. Cobwebs hung from every surface. Certainly it was dirty, but it was not ghostly. It was just a normal room, in a state of advanced neglect. Even the window was cracked. On the wall near it there was a big frame, hung on a crooked slant as if it had been put up in a great hurry. Sophie noticed that it was not only crooked, but it had also been put up back-to-front. All she could see of it was the old rough wooden back. It must be a picture, she thought. Maybe a long lost masterpiece that would be worth thousands. Even millions.

Sophie put down her magazine and let Ginger scamper off into the attic. Free of the cat at last, Sophie gripped the frame and turned the picture around. It was plastered in dust and grease, but Sophie could just about make out an outline of a person. Perhaps it was a portrait of some long dead owner of the house. Picking up an old rag from the floor, she carefully wiped away at the dirt that had built up over decades of neglect. It came off easily, but instead of a picture she was confronted with grimy glass. Sophie's heart fell. It wasn't a lost masterpiece, but a dirty old mirror. The outline she had seen was just her reflection through the grease and dirt.

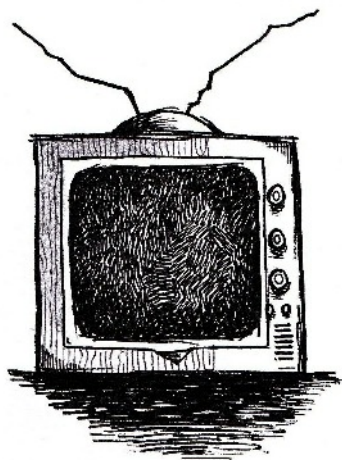
'Nothing supernatural about this stuff, Barney. Junk, that's all,' she said.

Sophie saw the look of disappointment in Barnaby's eyes, but it didn't last long. Suddenly, his round face lit up as he

moved the old box of *Aunt Rosie's Dried Egg* out of the way. He had spied something in the far corner. Excitedly he rushed over to an old upturned chest. Placed in front of it was a creaky old rocking chair. One of its arms was broken, and deadly looking splinters threatened anybody who dared to sit down. But it was not the rocking chair that had attracted Barnaby. Hidden partly behind the chest was a strange-looking television set.

'Wow, look at this telly,' Barnaby said to his sister. 'It must be a thousand years old.'

Sophie studied the bizarre-looking TV. It was a lot larger than the one that her parents had bought for her the previous Christmas, and it was as wide as it was tall. In fact, it was almost box shaped. The screen took up a sizeable portion of the front, and wasn't completely flat like modern televisions. It curved outwards slightly, and had rounded edges. If it still worked, it certainly wouldn't be as good quality as her dad's new TV. Sitting on top was a large aerial made up of two pieces of tarnished and slightly bent wire. The oddest thing about this television was that it appeared to be made of wood. On the front there were several large knobs, and there was not a remote control in sight. Sophie thought that there was a good chance that this particular television was made long before remote controls were invented. There was no doubt that it was old, but she was sure that televisions were not invented a thousand years ago. However ancient it looked, she was positive it couldn't be as old as Barnaby had suggested.



‘Not that old, silly,’ she said as she ran her finger over the television screen. Sophie looked at her finger. It was covered in dust. Nobody had been in the attic for a very long time. ‘It’s been here ages though. I wonder if it works.’

Sophie let her curiosity get the better of her. She turned the biggest knob, which looked likely to be the ‘on’ switch. Nothing happened.

‘Shame. Doesn’t work. As I said, junk.’

‘Yeah! But it’s my junk. I found it!’ said Barnaby.

Sophie shook her head. Why did Barnaby always say such stupid things? He could have all the rubbish in the house as far as she was concerned. She wanted that four-poster bed. How could she convince her parents to let her have it? An unexpected creak caused her to look up sharply. The door hadn’t been shut properly! Ginger! Sophie turned towards the door just in time to witness the cat slipping out

of the attic.

‘Ginger! Come back!’ she cried. ‘Come on Barney, better catch him or Dad will kill us.’

The children rushed out of the attic, slamming the door behind them. As they left, the room was again quiet, but it wasn’t to last for long. A few seconds later the old television broke into a loud hum.

With a flicker, the screen sprang into life to portray a black and white picture of a pretty young woman dressed in a flowing ball gown. Finally the hum cleared, and she began to speak in a posh clipped voice.

‘Good afternoon, and welcome to...’ The woman suddenly stopped mid-sentence. Shouting over her shoulder, her voice abruptly changed. In a rough Cockney accent she exclaimed, ‘Lads! There’s no one ‘ere! Are we still doing the show?’

An old husky voice replied, ‘May as well. We could all do with a rehearsal anyhow.’

Strange Programmes

Outside under the hot sun the removal men were nearing the end of their task. Many of the family's belongings, packed in a variety of boxes and bags, had already been taken into the house. Only a few large items were left. Ted, a young skinny man, clambered into the back of the lorry and selected a huge flat screen TV. Struggling with its weight, Ted stumbled to the lorry's door and awkwardly passed it to his workmate. Harry, a round elderly man with a grey moustache that appeared to be too big for his face, paused for a second to push his round glasses firmly up his nose. Ensuring he had a tight grip on the television he began to lug it up the garden path towards the house.

Sophie's father watched the hard-working removal men from his position on the doorstep. Although he hadn't carried anywhere near as much as them, he felt shattered. He wearily observed Harry lumbering along the snaking path, carrying something large with apparent ease. To his shame, Bob felt a pang of jealousy at the older man's fitness. Just at that moment, Harry stumbled on a loose paving stone and nearly lost his balance. Bob realised that the removal man was carrying the family television set. His television

set! His brand new television set! His most prized possession! With renewed strength, he sprang up and darted forward.

‘I’ll have that,’ he wheezed, ‘I’m sure you need a rest.’

Snatching the TV from Harry, he carried it into the house, puffing with extreme effort as he went. Harry simply shrugged and wandered back to his lorry, muttering under his breath, ‘He’s even worse than my missus.’

Once inside, Bob found his grip on the television slipping. The old man had made it look so easy to lift. As he carried it across the bare floorboards of the house and into the area that was destined to become the living room, he heard a scream. He recognised the voice at once – it was his wife Ruth. Bob looked thoughtfully at the television, placed it with great care on the floor, and then rushed back outside. In the garden Ruth was looking agitated. She pointed with a shaking finger to a cat, who was peering with luminous green eyes out of the shadows beneath the lorry.

‘A black cat ran across my path,’ she said, her voice quivering. ‘That’s bad luck! I knew we shouldn’t have moved! I should have listened to my horoscope!’

Bob relaxed. Ruth was by far the most superstitious person he had ever met. Unfortunately she was also his wife, and sometimes her ways simply baffled him.

Fatally he said, ‘Not that rubbish again!’ Immediately he regretted it.

‘It’s not rubbish. Black cats are very bad luck. One ran past a friend of Martha’s and she...’

‘Isn’t a black cat supposed to be lucky,’ interrupted Harry. The two removal men had crept up behind Bob and Ruth, no doubt to see what all the drama was about.

‘Yeah. It’s those Americans that say it’s unlucky. In England it’s lucky,’ chipped in Ted.

Ruth’s jaw dropped open, speechless. Bob breathed a sigh of relief. Saved by the removal men. The black cat bounded from the cover of the lorry, weaved itself between Bob’s legs and started to vibrate happily. Brushing the fur from his trousers, Bob picked up the purring cat and turned to Ruth.

‘It’s only Ginger. Those kids were supposed to be looking after him.’

Ruth relaxed. ‘Oh, it’s our cat. I thought he was inside. That’s okay then,’ she said.

‘I’ve never understood the difference,’ said Bob, eyebrows raised. ‘He’s still black.’

‘Yes, but he’s *called* Ginger,’ came Ruth’s reply.

Bob cast his mind back to when their cat was a kitten. He would never forget the fuss Ruth had made when he brought the tiny cat home for the first time. But the children fell in love with him on sight, and Ruth had found it impossible to deprive them of their new pet. Even though he was black, calling him Ginger seemed to cancel out the ‘bad luck’ in his wife’s eyes. He opened his mouth to argue, and then thought better of it, closing it with an audible pop. Then he turned around and carried Ginger back into the house.

‘Puss... puss... where are you?’ called Sophie.

Stooping down, she peered beneath a large table that had been dumped haphazardly in the kitchen by the removal men. Underneath there were a large number of boxes containing plates, cups and cutlery, but not even the faintest trace of Ginger. Perhaps he was hiding. To be sure, Sophie crawled into the space. She was so absorbed that she didn’t see her father enter the room until he spoke, and when he did she jumped. There was a crack as bone collided with wood.

‘Sophie, lock Ginger in the attic room will you? If you shut the door firmly he’ll be fine. This time, do it right. You don’t want him to get run over or lost do you?’

With her head throbbing, Sophie withdrew herself from under the table. Bob thrust Ginger into her arms and strode away. Sophie stomped up the stairs, rubbing her sore head. She was surprised to see Barnaby standing outside the attic door. Then she realised why he had not gone in. There were strange sounds coming from inside.

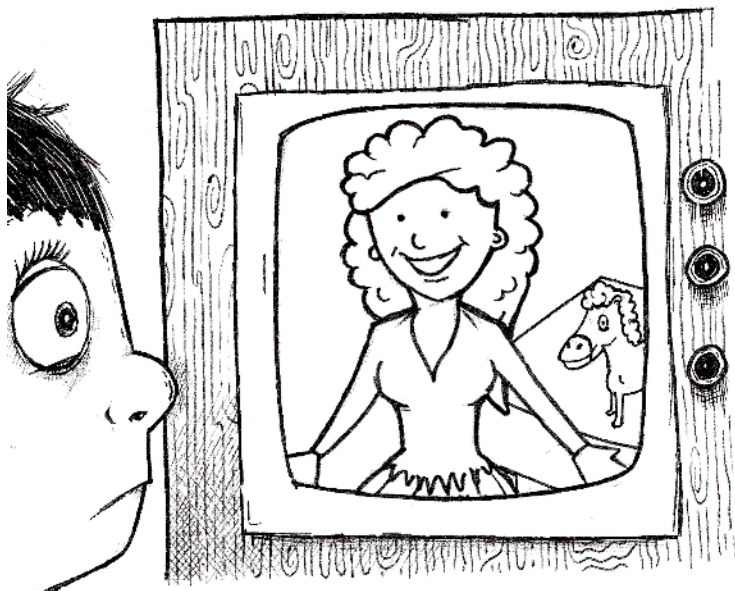
‘A stranger’s in our attic,’ said Barnaby, his face pale with fright. All his bravery at meeting ghosts was now forgotten.

Knowing it was up to her, Sophie held her breath and pushed the attic door. It did not take her long to realise that there was no stranger waiting in the shadows for them. Instead, the ancient television, which she had dismissed so readily as junk, had sprung into life. The picture was a little fuzzy and was in black and white, but the TV was certainly

working. Sophie recalled her parents' tales of their childhood. When they were young, all televisions were black and white. It must have been very odd, she thought, watching television in such a dull way. Sophie felt nudging behind her, as Barnaby tried to see who the 'stranger' was, bold now he had his big sister to hide behind.

'It's okay,' she laughed. 'It's only that old telly. Seems like it works after all.'

'Goodie!' yelled Barnaby. As her brother rushed in like a mini-whirlwind, Sophie checked the door. By the time she was convinced that it would not spring open again and put down the cat, Barnaby had already put the ancient TV on top of the old chest.



Ignoring the splinters, he threw himself onto the broken rocking chair and started watching the television. Being careful not to stab herself on the broken parts, Sophie pushed her little brother to one side and sat down alongside him. Ginger settled on her lap and broke into a loud purr, all thought of escape seemingly gone.

To Sophie's modern eyes, the programme was incredibly old fashioned. A pretty young woman, dressed in a flowing ball gown, was sitting by a piano. The woman's voice was posh, speaking perfect Queen's English. Somehow the voice did not sound quite right. It was as if she was putting on the accent, but Sophie couldn't see why anybody in the world would purposely want to appear as stuck up as this woman sounded.

'Children love, in the real sense of the word, Percival the Pony. And here he is,' said the woman in her upper-class voice. A wooden horse wobbled onto the top of the piano. Puppet strings hung loosely from its roughly made body, and it looked as if it would fall over at any minute.

'Say hello to the children, Percival.' As the horse nodded, the woman dipped into her pocket. 'I've got a little present for you. A hat! It'll make you look dashing.'

The children watched as the woman pressed the hat onto the puppet's head. Then the horse's front leg fell off, followed a few seconds later by the hat. Barnaby began to giggle.

'Isn't his hat grand?' soothed the woman, as she shoved the leg back onto the wooden horse. She had no sooner done

so, when the back leg fell off.

Sophie had seen enough. She never liked repeats, and this programme was certainly both old and bad. Possibly it was one of those 'classics' that her father always mentioned when he talked fondly of his childhood. He was welcome to them, but Sophie had no intention of wasting her time watching such drivel. She leant across to see if she could change the channel.

'Don't turn over!' complained Barnaby, 'It's funny!'

Sophie tutted in annoyance. If she turned over, Barnaby was bound to run off moaning to Mum and Dad, and they would be forced to help unpack. She settled back again into the chair. It would be better to watch an old television show than work, she thought. On the screen the woman was now playing the piano, and flashing such a large smile that her teeth threatened to burst out of her mouth. Then she broke into song. Sophie winced. She couldn't sing. The woman was so badly out of tune that Sophie believed even Barnaby could have done a better job.

'We love Percival the Pony. We love you,' she wailed.

Mercifully, the song was interrupted when the horse's leg fell off again. Once more the woman attempted to shove the leg back on, but this time her arm became twisted in the puppet strings. As she tried to untangle herself from the mess, the back legs of Percival were pulled forward and kicked the woman hard in the side of the head. Sophie's ears were subjected to yet more high-pitched laughter from her little brother.

‘Cor blimey!’ the woman said, losing her posh accent briefly before regaining her composure and continuing, ‘Percival is in a playful mood today, children.’

Much to Sophie’s amazement the horse replied, ‘No I’m not! Stop being so rough, will you!’

‘Shhh, you’re supposed to be mute,’ whispered the woman loudly.

Sophie shook her head. This had to be the worst programme she had ever seen. ‘This is awful. Perhaps it’s a joke,’ she sighed.

‘I like it,’ said Barnaby.

Sophie was about to respond, when the door opened and her father’s head popped around. ‘Tea’s ready. We’ve bought fish and chips,’ he said.

Sophie stood up, relieved to have dodged the unloading. Plonking the cat on the rocking chair, she leant over and switched the set off. Food was certainly a better prospect than the current programme. As Sophie left the attic, she spotted Ginger sneaking after her towards the delicious aroma of fish. She quickly shut the door in his furry face, and descended the stairs. Behind her was a pitiful meow of disgust.

As light faded and night closed in, a tall young man loitered in the street directly outside the house. His tattered black leather coat flapped in the breeze, sounding as if a multitude of bats were trapped within his pockets. His piercing eyes glanced up at the cracked pane in the attic window. He

stared for a full four minutes, only blinking when a lorry thundered past and disturbed his concentration. When the lorry's headlights brightened the street for a swift moment, a shimmer reflected back from the window. The man smiled eerily with lips that were thin and pale, displaying a set of orange teeth. They matched perfectly with the orange glow of a streetlamp close by. He turned his head onto its side and stared even harder. The smile turned into a leering grin. Through the broken pane of the window, a mirror could just about be seen hanging on the wall. The man turned to go, and his hands came into view under the feeble light of the streetlamp. Rather than the hands of a young man, his were old and wizened, as though they didn't belong to him.