**SUCH A SWEET LITTLE GIRL**

**by Lance Salway**

It was at breakfast on a bright Saturday morning that Julie made her announcement. She put down her spoon, swallowed a last mouthful of cornflakes and said, ‘There’s a ghost in my bedroom.’

No one took any notice. Her mother was writing a shopping list, and her father was deep in his newspaper. Neither of them heard what she said. Her brother Edward heard but he ignored her, which is what he usually did. Edward liked to pretend that Julie didn’t exist. It wasn’t easy but he did his best.

Julie tried again. She raised her voice and said, ‘There’s a ghost in my bedroom.’

Mrs Bennett looked up from her list. ‘Is there dear? Oh good. Do you think we need more marmalade? And I suppose I’d better buy a cake or something if your friends are coming to tea.’

Edward said sharply, ‘Friends? What friends?’

‘Sally and Rachel are coming to tea with Julie this afternoon,’ his mother said.

Edward gave a large theatrical groan. ‘Oh, no. Why does she have to fill the house with her rotten friends?’

‘You could fill the house with your friends too,’ Julie said sweetly. ‘If you had any.’

Edward looked at her with loathing. ‘Oh, I’ve got friends all right,’ he said. ‘I just don’t inflict them on other people.’

‘You haven’t got any friends,’ Julie said quietly. ‘You haven’t got any friends because no one likes you.’

‘That’s enough,’ Mr Bennett said, looking up from his paper. There was a silence then, broken only by the gentle rumble-slush, rumble-slush of the washing machine in the corner.

Edward chewed a piece of toast and thought about how much he hated Julie. He hated a lot of people. Most people, in fact. But there were some he hated more than others. Mr Jenkins, who taught maths. And that woman in the paper shop who’d accused him of stealing chewing gum, when everyone knew he never touched the stuff. And Julie. He hated Julie most of all.

He hated her pretty pale face, and her pretty fair curls, and her pretty lisping voice. He hated the grown-ups who constantly fluttered around her, saying how enchanting she was, and so clever for her age, and wasn’t Mrs Bennett lucky to have such a sweet little girl. What they didn’t say, but he knew they were thinking behind their wide, bright smiles, was poor Mrs Bennett with that lumpy sullen boy. So different from his sister. So different from lovely little Julie.

Lovely little Julie flung her spoon on the table. ‘I said there’s a ghost in my bedroom.’

Mrs Bennett put down her shopping list and ballpoint in order to give Julie her full attention. ‘Oh dear,’ she said. ‘I do hope it didn’t frighten you, darling.’

Julie smiled and preened. ‘No,’ she said smugly. ‘I wasn’t frightened.’

Edward tried to shut his ears. He knew this dialogue by heart. The Bennett family spent a great deal of time adjusting their habits to suit Julie’s fantasies. Once, for a whole month, they had all been forced to jump the bottom tread of the staircase because Julie insisted that two invisible rabbits were sleeping there. For a time she had been convinced, or so she said, that a pink dragon lived in the airing cupboard. And there had been a terrible few weeks the year before when all communication with her had to be conducted through an invisible fairy called Priscilla who lived on her left shoulder.

And now there was a ghost in her bedroom.

**What kind of mood are the family in?**

**Can you find five examples of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs?**

Challenge: can you choose the ones which show this mood most clearly?

Try as he might, Edward couldn’t shut out his sister’s voice. On and on it whined: ‘… I was really very brave and didn’t run away even though it was so frightening, and I said…’

Edward looked at his parents with contempt. His father had put down the newspaper and was gazing at Julie with a soppy smile on his face. His mother was wearing the mock-serious expression that adults often adopt in order to humour their young. Edward hated them for it. If he’d told them a story about a ghost when he was seven, they’d have told him to stop being so silly, there’s no such things as ghosts, why don’t you grow up, be a man.

‘What sort of ghost is it?’ he asked suddenly.

Julie looked at him in surprise. Then her eyes narrowed. ‘It’s a frightening ghost,’ she said, ‘with great big eyes and teeth and horrible, nasty claws. Big claws. And it smells.’

‘Ghosts aren’t like that,’ Edward said scornfully. ‘Ghosts have clanking chains and skeletons, and they carry their heads under their arms.’

‘This ghost doesn’t.’ Julie snapped.

‘Funny sort of ghost then.’

‘You don’t know anything about it.’

Julie’s voice was beginning to tremble. Edward sighed. There’d be tears soon and he’s get the blame. As usual.

‘Come now, Edward,’ his father said heartily. ‘It’s only pretend. Isn’t it lovey?’

Lovey shot him a vicious glance. ‘It’s not pretend. It’s a real ghost. And it’s in my bedroom.’

‘Of course, darling.’ Mrs Bennett picked up her shopping list again. ‘How are we off for chutney, I wonder?’

But Edward wasn’t going to let the matter drop. Not time. ‘Anyway,’ he said, ‘ghosts don’t have claws.

‘This one does,’ Julie said.

‘Then you’re lying.’

‘I’m not. There is a ghost. I saw it.’

‘Liar’

‘I’m not!’ She was screaming now. ‘I’ll show you I’m not. I’ll tell it to get you. With its claws. It’ll come and get you with its claws.’

‘Don’t make me laugh.’

‘Edward! That’s enough!’ His mother stood up and started to clear the table. ‘Don’t argue.’

But there isn’t a ghost,’ Edward protested. ‘There can’t be!’

Mrs Bennett glanced uneasily at Julie. ‘Of course there is,’ she said primly. ‘If Julie says so.

‘She’s a liar, a nasty little liar.’

Julie kicked him hard under the table. Edward yelped, and kicked back. Julie let out a screech, and then her face crumpled and she began to wail.

‘Now look what you’ve done,’ Mrs Bennett snapped. ‘Oh really, Edward. You’re twice her age. Why can’t you leave her alone?’

‘Because she’s a liar, that’s why.’ Edward stood up and pushed his chair aside. ‘Because there isn’t a ghost in her bedroom. And even if there is, it won’t have claws.’ And he turned, and stormed out of the kitchen.

He came to a stop in the sitting room, and crossed over to the window to see what sort of day it was going to be. Sunny, by the looks of it. A small tightly cropped lawn lay in front of the house, a lawn that was identical in size and appearance to those in front of the other identical square brick houses which lined the road. Edward laughed out loud. Any ghost worthy of the name would wither away from boredom in such surroundings. No, there weren’t any ghosts in Briarfield Gardens; with or without heads under their arms; with or without claws.

He turned away from the window. The day had started badly, thanks to Julie. And it would continue badly, thanks to Julie and her rotten friends who were coming to tea. And there was nothing he could do about it. Or was there? On the coffee table by the television set there lay a half-finished jigsaw puzzle. Julie had been working on it for ages, her fair curls bent earnestly over the table day after day. According to the picture on the box, the finished puzzle would reveal a thatched cottage surrounded by a flower-filled garden. When it was finished. If…

Edward walked across to the table and smashed the puzzle with one quick, practised movement of the hand. Pieces fell and flew and scattered on the carpet in a storm of coloured cardboard. And then he turned and ran upstairs to his room.

He hadn’t long to wait. After a few minutes he heard the sounds he was expecting. The kitchen door opening. A pause. Then a shrill, furious shriek, followed by loud sobbing. Running footsteps. A quieter comforting voice. Angry footsteps on the stairs. The rattling of the handle on his locked bedroom door. And then Julie’s voice, not like a seven-year-old voice at all any more, but harsh and bitter with hate.

‘The ghost’ll get you, Edward. I’m going to tell it to get you. With its claws. With its horrible, sharp claws.’

And then, quite suddenly, Edward felt afraid.

**What has just happened to make Edward suddenly feel afraid?**

What adjectives are used to describe Julie’s voices?

What adjectives are used to describe the claws?

What do you notice about the sentences in the paragraph before?

Challenge: Can you explain, in your own words, why sentences of this length make a story feel more scary?

The fear didn’t last long. It had certainly gone by lunchtime, when Edward was given a ticking-off by his father for upsetting dear little Julie. And by the time Julie’s friends arrived at four, he was quite his old self again.

‘The ugly sisters are here!’ he announced loudly as he opened the front door, having beaten Julie to it by a short head.

She glared at him, and quickly hustled Sally and Rachel up the stairs to her room.

Edward felt a bit guilty. Sally and Rachel weren’t at all ugly. In fact, he quite liked them both. He ambled into the kitchen, where his mother was busy preparing tea.

She looked up when he came in. ‘I do hope you are going to behave yourself this evening,’ she said. ‘We don’t want a repetition of this morning’s little episode, do we?’

‘Well, she asked for it,’ Edward said sullenly, and sneaked a biscuit from a pile on a plate.

‘Hands off!’ his mother said automatically. ‘Julie did not ask for it. She was only pretending. You know what she’s like. There was no need for you to be so nasty. And there was certainly no excuse for you to break up her jigsaw puzzle like that.’

Edward shuffled uneasily and stared at the floor.

‘She is only seven, after all,’ Mrs Bennett went on, slapping chocolate icing on a sponge cake as she did so. ‘You must make allowances. The rest of us do.’

‘She gets away with murder,’ Edward mumbled. ‘Just because she is such a sweet little girl.’

‘Nonsense!’ his mother said firmly. ‘And keep your mucky paws off those ginger snaps. If anyone gets away with murder in this house, it’s you.’

‘But she can’t really expect us to believe that there’s a ghost in her bedroom,’ Edward said. ‘Do you believe her? Come on, mum, do you?’

‘I…’ his mother began, and then she was interrupted by a familiar lisping voice.

‘You do believe me, mummy, don’t you?’

Julie was standing in the kitchen door. Edward wondered how long she’d been there. And how much she’d heard.

‘Of course I do, darling,’ Mrs Bennett said quickly. ‘Now run along, both of you. Or I’ll never have tea ready in time.’

Julie stared at Edward for a moment with her cold blue eyes, and then she went out of the kitchen as quietly as she’d entered it.

Tea passed off smoothly enough. Julie seemed to be on her best behaviour, but that was probably because her friends were there and she wanted to create a good impression. Edward followed her example. Julie didn’t look at him or speak to him, but there was nothing unusual about that. She and the others chattered brightly about nothing in particular, and Edward said nothing at all.

It was dark by the time they’d finished tea, and it was then that Julie suggested that they all play ghosts. She looked straight at Edward when she said this, and the proposal seemed like a challenge.

‘Can anyone play?’ he asked. ‘Or is it a game for horrible little girls?’

‘Edward!’ warned his mother.

‘Of course you can play, Edward,’ said Julie. ‘You MUST play.’

‘But not in the kitchen or the dining-room,’ said Mrs Bennett. ‘And keep out of our bedroom. I’ll go and draw all the curtains and make sure the lights are switched off.’

‘All right,’ said Julie. ‘One of us is the ghost, and she has to frighten the others. If the ghost catches you and scares you, you have to scream and drop down on the floor. As if you were dead.’

‘Like “Murder in the Dark?” asked Sally.

‘Yes,’ said Julie. ‘Only we don’t have a detective or anything like that.’

‘It sounds like a crummy game to me,’ said Edward. ‘I don’t think I’ll play.’

‘Oh, do!’ chorused Sally and Rachel. ‘Please!’

And Julie came up to him and whispered, ‘You MUST play, Edward. And don’t forget what I said this morning; about my ghost, and how it’s going to get you with its claws!’

‘You must be joking!’ Edward jeered. ‘And anyway, I told you. Ghosts don’t have claws.’ He looked at her straight in the eyes. ‘Of course I’ll play.’

Julie smiled, and then turned to the others and said, ‘I’ll be the ghost to start with. The rest of you run and hide. I’ll count up to fifty and then I’ll come and haunt you.’

Sally and Rachel galloped upstairs, squealing with excitement. Edward wandered into the hall, and stood for a moment wondering where to hide. It wasn’t going to be easy. Their small brick box of a house didn’t offer many possibilities. After a while he decided on the sitting-room. It was the most obvious place, and Julie would never think of looking there. He opened the door quietly, ducked down behind an armchair, and waited.

Silence settled over the house. Apart from the washing-up sounds from the kitchen, all went quiet. Edward made himself comfortable on the carpet, and waited for the distant screams that would tell him that Sally had been discovered, or Rachel. But no sounds came. As he waited, ears straining against the silence, the room grew darker. The day was fading and it would soon be night.

And then, suddenly, Edward heard a slight noise near the door. He heart leaped and, for some reason, his mouth went dry. And then the fear returned, and unaccountable fear he had felt this morning when Julie hissed her threat through his bedroom door.

The air seemed much colder now, but that could only be his imagination, surely. But he knew he wasn’t imagining the wild thumping of his heart, or the sickening lurching of his stomach. He remembered Julie’s words and swallowed hard.

‘The ghost’ll get you, Edward. With its claws. With its sharp, horrible claws.’

He heard sounds again, closer this time.

**What is the mood of the story now?**

What do you notice about the speech before this quote?

In the paragraph that follows this quote, how many different sentence types are used?

Can you list the different sentence types?

Challenge: Can you explain, in your own words, how the different sentence types make a story feel more scary?

A scuffle. Whispering. Or was it whispering? Someone was there. Something. He tried to speak, but gave only a curious croak. ‘Julie?’ he said. ‘I know you’re there. I know it’s you.’

Silence. A dark terrible silence. And then the light snapped on and the room filled with laughter and shouts of, ‘Got you! Caught you! The ghost caught you!’ He saw Julie’s face alive with triumph and delight, and, behind her, Sally and Rachel grinning, and the fear was replaced by an anger far darker and more intense than the terror he’d felt before.

‘Edward’s scared of the ghost!’ Julie jeered. ‘Edward’s a scaredy cat! He’s frightened! He’s frightened of the gho-ost!’

‘I’m not!’ Edward shouted. ‘I’m not scared! There isn’t a ghost!’ He pushed past Julie and ran out of the room and up the stairs. He’d show her. He’d prove she didn’t have a ghost. There were no such things as ghosts. She didn’t have a ghost in her room. She didn’t.

Julie’s bedroom was empty. Apart from the furniture and the pictures and the toys and dolls and knick-knacks. He opened the wardrobe and pulled shoes and games out onto the floor. He burrowed in drawers, scattering books and stuffed animals and clothes around him. At last he stopped, gasping for breath. And turned.

His mother was standing in the doorway, staring at him in amazement. Clustered behind her were the puzzled, anxious faces of Sally and Rachel. And behind them, Julie, looking at him with her ice-blue eyes.

‘What on earth are you doing?’ his mother asked.

‘See?’ he panted. ‘There isn’t a ghost here. She hasn’t got a ghost in her bedroom. There’s nothing here. Nothing.’

‘Isn’t there?’ said Julie. ‘Are you sure you’ve looked properly?’

Sally – or was it Rachel? – gave a nervous giggle.

‘That’s enough,’ said Mrs Bennett. ‘Now I suggest you tidy up the mess you’ve made in here, Edward, and then go to your room. I don’t know why you’re behaving so strangely. But it’s got to stop. It’s got to.’

She turned and went downstairs. Sally and Rachel followed her. Julie lingered by the door and stared mockingly at Edward. He stared back.

‘It’s still here, you know,’ she said at last. ‘The ghost is still here. And it’ll get you.’

‘You’re a dirty little liar!’ he shouted. ‘A nasty, filthy little liar!’

Julie gaped at him for a moment, taken aback by the force of his rage. Then, ‘It’ll get you!’ she screamed. ‘With its claws. Its horrible claws. It’ll get you tonight. When you’re asleep. Because I hate you. I hate you. Yes, it’ll REALLY get you. Tonight.’

It was dark when Edward awoke. At first he didn’t know where he was. And then he remembered. He was in bed. In his bedroom. It was the middle of the night. And he remembered too, Julie’s twisted face and the things she said. The face and the words had kept him awake, and had haunted his dreams when he last slept.

It was ridiculous, really. All this fuss about an imaginary ghost. Why did he get in such a state over Julie? She was only a little kid after all. His baby sister. You were supposed to love your sister – not fear her. But no, he wasn’t really afraid of her. How could he be? Such as sweet little girl with blue eyes and fair bouncing curls who was half his age. A little girl who played games and imagined things. Who imagined ghosts. A ghost in her bedroom.

But he WAS frightened. He knew that now. And as his fear mounted again, the room seemed to get colder. He shut his eyes and snuggled down under his blankets, shutting out the room and the cold. But not the fear.

And then he heard it. A sound. A faint, scraping sound, as though something heavy was being dragged along the landing. A sound that came closer and grew louder. A wet, slithering sound. And with it came a smell, a sickening smell of drains and dead leaves and decay. And the sound grew louder and he could hear breathing, harsh breathing, long choking breaths coming closer.

‘Julie?’ Edward said, and then he repeated it louder, ‘Julie!’

But there was no answer. All he heard was the scraping, dragging sound coming, closer, closer. Near his door now. Closer.

‘I know it’s you!’ Edward shouted, and he heard the fear in his own voice. ‘You’re playing ghosts again, aren’t you? Aren’t you?’

And then there was silence. No sound at all. Edward sat up in bed and listened. The awful slithering noise had stopped. It had gone. The ghost had gone.

He hugged himself with relief. It had been a dream, that’s all. He’d imagined it. Just as Julie imagined things. Imagined ghosts.

Then he heard the breathing again. The shuddering, choking breaths. And he knew that the thing hadn’t gone. That it was still there. Outside his door. Waiting. Waiting.

And Edward screamed, ‘Julie! Stop it! Please stop it! I believe you! I believe in the ghost!’

The door opened. The shuddering breaths seemed to fill the room, and the smell, and the slithering wet sound of a shape. Something was coming towards him, something huge and dark and …

He screamed as the claws, yes, the claws tore at his hands, his chest, his face. And he screamed again as the darkness folded over him.

When Julie woke up and came downstairs the ambulance had gone. Her mother was sitting alone in the kitchen, looking pale and frightened. She smiled weakly when she saw Julie, and then frowned.

‘Darling,’ she said. ‘I did so hope you wouldn’t wake up. I didn’t want you to be frightened…’

‘What’s the matter mummy?’ asked Julie. ‘Why are you crying?’

Her mother smiled again, and drew Julie to her, folding her arms around her so that she was warm and safe. ‘You must be very brave, darling,’ she said. ‘Poor Edward has been hurt. We don’t know what happened but he’s been very badly hurt.’

‘Hurt? What do you mean, mummy?’

Her mother brushed a stray curl from the little girl’s face. ‘We don’t know what happened, exactly. Something attacked him. His face…’ Her voice broke then, and she looked away quickly. ‘He has been very badly scratched. They are not sure if his eyes…’ She stopped and fumbled in her dressing-gown pocket for a tissue.

‘I expect my ghost did it,’ Julie said smugly.

‘What did you say, dear?’

Julie looked up at her mother. ‘My ghost did it. I told it to. I told it to hurt Edward because I hate him. The ghost hurt him. The ghost in my bedroom.’

Mrs Bennett stared at Julie. ‘This is no time for games,’ she said. ‘We’re very upset. Your father’s gone to the hospital with Edward. We don’t know if…’ Her eyes filled with tears. ‘I’m in no mood for your silly stories about ghosts, Julie. Not now. I’m too upset.’

‘But it’s true,’ Julie said. ‘My ghost did do it. Because I told it to.’

Mrs Bennett pushed her away and stood up. ‘All right, Julie, that’s enough. Back to bed now. You can play your games tomorrow.’

‘But it’s not a game,’ Julie persisted. ‘It’s true! My ghost…’

And then she saw the angry expression on her mother’s face, and she stopped. Instead, she snuggled up to her and whispered, ‘I’m sorry, mummy. You’re right. I was pretending. I was only pretending about the ghost. There isn’t a ghost in my room. I was making it all up. And I’m so sorry about poor Edward.

Mrs Bennett relaxed and smiled and drew Julie to her once again. ‘That’s my baby,’ she said softly. ‘That’s my sweet little girl. Of course you were only pretending. Of course there wasn’t a ghost. Would I let a nasty ghost come and frighten my little girl? Would I? Would I/’

‘No mummy,’ said Julie. ‘Of course you wouldn’t’

‘Off you go to be now.’

‘Good night, mummy,’ said Julie.

‘Sleep well, my pet,’ said her mother.

And Julie walked out of the kitchen and into the hall and up the stairs to her bedroom. She went inside, and closed the door behind her.

And the ghost came out to meet her.

‘She doesn’t believe me, either,’ Julie said. ‘We’ll have to show her, won’t we?’ Just as we showed Edward.’

And the ghost smiled, and nodded. And they say down together, Julie and the ghost, and decided what they would do.