

THE ENCHANTED URN



Wendy Milton

ONE

'Go to bed, Timothy! This is the third time I've asked.'

'In a minute.' Tim Barnett tried to shut out his mother's voice. He didn't look up or move from his curled-up position on the settee. He'd just googled 'nightmares', and Wikipedia said they were dreams that caused feelings of horror and anxiety. He was about to google 'how to get rid of nightmares' when his mother's voice interrupted.

'Not in a minute, Timothy. *Now! I won't tell you again!*'

Tim closed his iPad and dragged himself off the settee. What was the point of trying to explain to his mother that if he went to sleep he'd have the same nightmare? He'd tried telling his father, but his father hadn't even asked what the nightmare was about. He'd told Gramps, who said to stop eating before he went to bed. At least Gramps asked what the nightmare was about. When Tim told him, he'd looked excited. 'You must tell Maudie about this,' he'd said. 'Maudie knows about it.'

'I'll be up in ten minutes, Timothy, and I don't want to see you with your eyes glued to that Apple thingy. I'll never understand why Maude bought it for you.' Maude was Tim's aunt. 'I don't see you reading a book any more, and I'm sure that thing is ruining your eyes.'

'I've told you, Mum. It's an iPad and you can read books on it. Anyway, you say I'm ruining my eyes when I read print books!'

'Don't use that tone of voice with me, Timothy.'

Tim was aware that his mother wanted him to be brilliant. Would she be satisfied if he was just plain average? What if he turned out to be below average . . . or weird?

'Are you asleep?' she whispered when she rustled into his room.

'No.'

'Good. I need to talk to you.' Mrs Barnett sat on the edge of the bed and ran her manicured fingers through her son's dark, curly hair. 'You love Gramps, don't you?'

'Yeah. Gramps is great.'

'So you'd be upset if he didn't live here any more?'

'But he *does* live here!'

'You must realise that Gramps can't go on forever, Timothy, and that there will come a time when he can't . . . well, when I can't . . . what I'm saying is, Gramps will eventually have to go into a home.'

'This *is* his home.'

His mother sighed. 'All right. We'll muddle through somehow. Where did the two of you go this afternoon?'

'To the high street. Gramps bought a violin.'

'A violin? What on earth does he want with a violin? Why didn't you stop him, Timothy? He can't play, and he's too . . . it's too late for him to learn.'

'How should I know? Anyway, Gramps can buy what he likes, can't he? How can I stop him?'

'You're old enough to be responsible, and you must have realised by now that Gramps . . . Well, I suppose the violin will just have to gather dust like everything else in that junk heap of his. Go to sleep now. Sweet dreams.' She kissed him on the forehead and left.

'Sweet dreams?' Fat chance! Every night Tim tried to stay awake, but there would come a point where he couldn't. He'd dream he was floating down a cold, dark street. He could glide through the walls of the houses where the inhabitants used candles and lamps and there were no televisions or computers. Once he'd tried to talk to some children, but they'd looked straight through him.

In the dream he'd stop when he got to a two-storey house at the end of the street. He'd enter a room where an old man dozed in front of an open fire. The old man had a ruddy face, whiskers and a thick, white moustache. Beside the old man's armchair was a retriever, but it was different from any other retriever Tim had ever seen. It had a patch of dark fur around one eye.

The old man would snuffle and wake up. He'd look at his dog and say, 'Not the kind of night to go out, Goldie. We'll have a long walk in the morning, eh?' Then he'd ease himself out of his chair, rake over the embers of the fire and draw the screen closer to the hearth. He'd pick up the oil lamp and carry it upstairs, Goldie padding after him.

Tim would be alone in the dim light of the dying embers. He'd want to leave, but he'd be drawn against his will to the mantelpiece, upon which stood a golden urn. It was engraved with words he'd read many times:

*Within this urn my soul and thine
Might one day meet and intertwine.
If you could but locate the key,
'Twould free my soul to fly to thee.
Poor wand'ring one, through mists of time
I'll wait within this golden shrine.
But list, my dearest! Merlin's art
Says if the urn and thee should part,
A cycle's curse would trap thy heart.*

What was a cycle's curse? After reading the engraving, he'd curl up in the old man's armchair. Although the room was cold, he'd begin to feel drowsy. He'd try desperately not to go to sleep, but inevitably sleep would overtake him. He'd wake to the sound of shouting and snarling. There'd be a sudden flash and then a

terrible pain. He'd be unable to move. He'd feel himself hovering above his body with nowhere to go, except . . .

Just before he woke, there'd be a rush of warmth and a sinking sensation. He'd be trapped, unable to speak or scream (and he wanted to scream). He smelled funny. And he was furry! Where were his arms and legs?

. . .

Now, dear reader, I'd like you to zoom back in time to a bitterly cold, July night in 1919, when two thieves loitered in a lane near a two-storey house in Victoria Crescent, Endersley. Inside this house Colonel Tobias Barnett, his oil lamp held aloft, was mounting the stairs to bed.

'Cause I reckon it's worth a few bob,' said Bernard Farrelly in an exasperated whisper to his mate, 'so for gawd's sake, stop whingeing.'

'Don't see why we can't go in now,' grumbled Bluey, who was stamping his feet and rubbing his hands to ward off the cold.

'Have to give 'im time t' get ter sleep,' Farrelly muttered.

It was midnight when Goldie pricked her ears. She heard the thieves long before they climbed through the window. She gave a growl that roused the Colonel from sleep. He fetched his service revolver and descended the stairs. Goldie had already entered the parlour and hurled herself at the two men.

'Crikey!' yelled Bluey. 'Get this damned thing off me!'

But Farrelly, the golden urn in his grasp, bolted for the window and was halfway through it when the Colonel entered the room. The Colonel fired, shattering the glass above Farrelly's head. But Farrelly had dropped into the garden and was running for dear life.

'Don't shoot! Don't shoot!' cried Bluey, his hands in the air.

A neighbour, roused by the shot, saw Farrelly's dark figure running away and went to the Colonel's assistance. He and the Colonel locked Bluey in the outhouse. After receiving assurances that the Colonel was all right, the neighbour returned home. They'd summon the police in the morning.

The Colonel returned to his parlour. Only then did he notice that the urn was missing, and a terrible pain gripped his heart. His first thought was to force the second thief to reveal the name of the man who'd taken it. Instead he sank into his armchair and wept, which was unusual behaviour for a military man. Goldie licked his hand.

Some time after midnight, in the Colonel's parlour, the ghost of his dead wife, Gwynneth, appeared. She was as young and beautiful as she'd been on the day he married her. Over her white dress she wore a blue cloak with a deep hood. She removed this hood and her golden hair fell about her shoulders, gleaming in the

light of the fire. Her eyes were sad. She pointed at the shelf where the urn ought to be.

'I'm sorry, my love,' the Colonel wanted to say, but he couldn't speak.

'It isn't your fault, my darling. But now you must go. Your soul cannot rest and our two souls cannot be together until the urn is recovered.' With that, she placed her hand upon the Colonel's chest and his pain eased. He became lighter. Then he felt a sinking sensation and a rush of warmth. 'Goldie will look after you, my darling, for the time being.' With that, she vanished.