

From the  
bestselling author  
of *The Athenian  
Murders*

# THE VISIT

A SHORT STORY

V. J. RANDLE



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## Foreword

This short story, *The Visit*, takes place in Tornivan, a fictional Scottish village and the same place in which my mystery thriller, *Seven Bodies* (published on January 6th by Bloodhound Books), is set.



## The Visit

**D**o not visit Tornivan on the 1st of December. It's tempting, I know. The festive season creeps into the air easily, and our little corner of the Highlands seems like the perfect way to usher in the merriment.

Main Street, the only street in the village, takes on a permanent dusting of ice which sparkles under the white sun. There's a giant Christmas tree in front of the church. On the 1st December, fairy lights adorn it, although I have no idea to whom this responsibility falls. Whisky tastes less potent in December and more like caramel: that's a fact. Woolly hats suit everyone, as do rouged cheeks, as does the gentle light cast by a log-wood fire at The Cooper's Arms.

But, please, don't visit.

I always warn tourists throughout the year, if the opportunity arises. I block out the date in my own holiday rental, which is just the spare en suite in my cottage. My worry is people might book into the Tornivan Hotel, down the road, where the owners are much less careful. Reckless, really.

I probably come off as strange, I know. And that's because I can't very well announce the reason behind why I want you to steer clear, can I? I make up all sorts of local folklore to

support my very strong recommendation to stay away: *The whole village and the surrounding area suffers terrible power cuts every year, on this precise date, yes, really, it's annoying, let me tell you. The village is closed then, completely, for one night only, so best work your plans around that. No, no! The 1st of December? That's when the badgers descend, like clockwork, and they're vicious, really, they carry tuberculosis... particularly these ones. It's dangerous. You don't want to be here for that...* (yes, I said that once and, yes, they bought it hook, line, and sinker).

As you might expect, everyone knows each other here. I've lived in Tornivan for all thirty-four years of my life, with only a hiatus in Edinburgh a couple of years ago for a short-lived stint in what I thought would become a glittering career in journalism. My parents – who will now, I hope, be nailing their front door closed – told me I'd be back. *Hardly anyone leaves, Mum said. It has a pull, a draw, you feel it, don't you? It's like we have a pact with the place, we need to do our bit. It's a difficult thing to fight.* Of course, she was right. I wasn't even angry about it in the end. It's just an inevitability, something that just is. Secrets are powerful, I suppose. Yes, they're a burden, but when you're in on one like this, they're non-negotiable. They require their keepers to stay close.

So, I make sure to take the responsibility as seriously as possible. The rest of the village's tiny population is largely in agreement with me and helps in warding off any poor, unsuspecting tourists. Of course, sometimes we do all we can, and poor, unsuspecting tourists turn up regardless. This is, unfortunately, what has happened tonight.

The Cooper's Arms is obviously shut up with its giant, specially-cast horseshoe resting against the black lacquered door. There's been an early and freakish snowfall, which means



Daria and Lowen (Americans, from Charleston, although with a strong Scottish heritage, as Lowen has told me three times now) cannot drive their hire car to the aforementioned hotel, where they have a room. They found my cottage online, and, although I'm "fully-booked", are asking for a place to stay because, as anyone can see, they find themselves in tricky circumstances.

Engaging in what must have already been an hour's back and forth, we're standing on my porch, which overlooks the far end of Main Street. It is like whoever laid the road slabs here halted work due to a sudden emergency – the street stops clumsily before the mounds of heather which lead to the woods. The paving stones literally hang, a precipice of about a metre high, in mid-air.

'We tried a taxi service for a truck or something, but I can't get through,' says Lowen, who is shifting his weight quickly from foot to foot.

'It's freezing!' This from Daria, who, with her unusually pale skin and blond-white hair, looks like she might be used to the cold, but evidently not.

I feel for them. The afternoon is turning into night rapidly and, although Lowen is trying his best to apply a certain brand of practicality to the situation, his eyes are wider than they should be.

Daria's voice grows shrill. 'Can we come in? Just to figure out what to do?'

What am I supposed to say? I can't just send them off into the woods, can I? And if the road to the hotel is blocked, then the road back to Inverness will also be impossible.

'Of course.'

I eye the street behind them. Already, the smell of smoke is in the air. People will be dressing warmly, readying to spend

the night outside. My belly tightens, but I force what I hope is a friendly smile. 'I'm sorry, I didn't introduce myself. I'm Letty. I'm...'

It's understandable because by now Daria's lips are a pale blue, but they push past me into my narrow hallway as I'm mid-sentence.

'Like I say, the room's not available.'

They exchange a look which suggests they don't believe me. Lowen peers into my small living room which is very dark. I secured the curtains earlier with little clips to make sure there were no gaps, not even minuscule ones. The spot where Marnie, my cat, usually sits is empty. She's in her carrier in the shed in a sedative-induced sleep (with a hot water bottle). Of course, I hate myself for doing that to her. But it's really for her own good, and that's what I need to remember.

When I neither invite them further in, nor turn the lights on, they begin to inspect the hallway which is lit only by the greying light outside due to the small glass slit above the door. I should really have covered that up.

Daria huffs and wraps her arms around her midriff. She nods to the pile of newspapers on the side table. 'Cute. I don't often see people reading real-life ones anymore.'

My heart breaks a little for her. She is trying, I think, to make conversation in the hope I'll relent and let them stay.

'It's just the local rag, more of a newsletter, really. The Tornivan Tribune. I'm the editor...' I feel myself blush at having used such a grand term to describe what must seem like little more than a pamphlet. Clearing my throat, I glance at my phone. It's almost six o'clock. I really need them to go anywhere but here. This isn't their home, and it's not their problem. True, they would probably be fine. They're adults, and, as far as I'm

aware, it's just them and nobody else. It's just that things can get... well, they can get weird and I don't think it's fair to inflict that upon unsuspecting strangers. They look so shiny with their pearly teeth and smooth hair – it would just be a shame if they got caught up in any of the unpleasantness. Not to mention, how would I explain everything to them?

'I'll call a local farmer. He might be able to get you at least to the next village on a tractor...'

'A tractor?' Daria doesn't so much as ask the question rather than squeal it.

Lowen sighs and puts a hand on her shoulder. 'See here, we're pretty tired and we can't guarantee there's any place to stay in the next village. I don't mean to be presumptuous, but are you certain we can't stay here? We can pay. However much you want.'

I open my mouth to answer that, no, they cannot stay here because, in fact, my house – any house – is the absolute worst place for them to be. However, before I can protest, the whistles blow. The shrill sounds move in a sonorous wave from the far end of Main Street towards us. I cringe, my shoulders rising to my ears, and grab my own whistle which is dangling from my neck. I stick my head out of the door and blow as hard as I can.

My heart is beating a little too fast as I turn back to face them. They look bewildered, and, even through the dim light, slightly scared. Daria is biting her lip and massaging what I think is a wedding ring on her left hand. Unfortunately, there's no time for me to shepherd them elsewhere. The signal's gone up.

'We need to get out,' I say. If I was embarrassed before, I am completely humiliated now. Anyone would think I am absolutely bananas.

Lowen looks like he's about to ask a question (fair enough),

but I move to one side, *purposefully*, I believe is the word, and gesture for them to walk out the door. Presumably because it's such a bizarre action, they comply, and then watch in silence as I barricade the door with ten locks, plus a two foot long plank of wood, which I hammer expertly across the threshold.

'Listen, are you going to tell us what the hell's going on?' Lowen sounds angry now. I shiver, groping for the right thing to say.

'It's best if you just stay in your car,' I say. 'Wrap up warm, turn the engine off, don't put the lights on. Um... maybe pop the seats down so you're out of sight?'

'What-?'

My throat is tightening. All along Main Street doors are slamming, bolts are sliding, parents are hushing their babies desperately. Children, anyone up to the age of eighteen, hold the hand of an adult. The bonfire is beginning to burn bright in the centre of the street, around which everyone will gather until morning. I spot Mum and Dad huddling against each other; my Mum kicks an errant log back into the flames.

Faces are beginning to turn in our direction and I realise it is only me standing between our American tourists and the rest of the villagers. Now, I'm not *worried*, but I am healthily cautious. It's a similar feeling to when I'm eating a yogurt that has gone out of date a couple of weeks previously. Things have the potential to go bad, that's all. Mum has called me an "odd onion" in the past. She hated it when I lived in Edinburgh; she said it was because she missed me, but I suspect that what she really disliked was the fact that I was talking to other people. Allusions, odd references, a clumsy phrase can slip out and suddenly it's all eyes on Tornivan. Nobody here wants that. We've been forced to deal with things in our own way and that's

how it is, I have come to realise.

‘What is this? A festival or something?’

Daria is holding Lowen’s hand and she is squeezing so hard that her knuckles are white. She’s making an effort to seem interested, but there is an edge to her question. A thread of something wispy catches between her words. She is frightened.

‘You could call it that, I suppose,’ says a familiar voice.

Gracie Hales approaches carrying the wooden fruit crate that will soon become her speaking platform. She’s fifteen now, and every year since she was eight she has given the same speech. She lives with her Mum, Morag, in the house behind my cottage, the last man-made structure you’ll walk past before you enter the forest. The bonfire has grown tall and its light licks her face, illuminating her long red hair and green eyes. She observes the pair of Americans for a little longer than is comfortable, a tight smile etched across her face.

‘On holiday, are you?’

Sometimes, I find it difficult to see through my emotions. Do you ever have that? When you’re feeling a certain way and everything during that period is coloured? I’m nervous, I won’t lie about that, and so Gracie’s question strikes me as far too sinister for comfort. I fold my arms.

‘They’re just passing through. I’ve told them to stay here in their car–’

‘Oh no!’ Gracie has a high-pitched voice but it is never anything but commanding. ‘No, they mustn’t leave. It would be rude to make them go, Letty. Anyway, I’m about to start.’

Her eyes glitter and she looks first at Lowen, and then at Daria. I didn’t think it was possible but Daria’s grip tightens even more around Lowen’s hand.

Whispers shimmy through the snowflakes. Everyone is

watching. They're waiting for Gracie, but also to see what this couple is going to do. Gracie inclines her head and looks like she is listening to distant voices. It's these mannerisms that fuel the rumours about her.

People remember how she was when she was younger. She had a very particular laugh, one that was so delightful, like a chiming bell. She used to practise riding her bike up and down Main Street, a look of fierce determination on that angelic face. I remember the expression: the tip of her little tongue stuck out, her chin jutted forwards, brow taut with concentration. People honestly loved her. She was the sort of child that made strangers smile.

That was until the year she turned eight, of course, on the 1st of December. That was when things changed for Tornivan. The days after her disappearance were terrible. There is no other word for it. I will never forget Morag's cries followed by hours' long periods of silence which were almost more deafening. We scoured the woods, the hills, checked every bothy and shed and wood store. She was gone. Disappeared from her bed. Vanished. *As if by magic*, is what my Mum said at the time.

Two days came and went and it felt like two years. Then, she returned.

I was the one who found her. The image has been imprinted into my brain since. She walked in her pyjamas, calm as anyone, into my back garden. The freezing rain must have been beating painfully across her cheeks, but she didn't even flinch. Her hands were clenched into tiny fists and she just stood, right on my vegetable patch, staring at me through the kitchen window.

I remember her toes were blue. That was my main worry as I rushed her inside: I just kept thinking how important it was to get her feet into warm water.

‘Oh,’ Gracie breathes, bringing me out of my thoughts. It’s unnerving because this was precisely the sound she made when I sat her down on the edge of my bath seven years ago and sprayed her feet with the shower head. I lock eyes with her for a couple of seconds and think the precise same thought I had back then: *Something about Gracie has changed. There is a new sharpness to her, her features seem thorny. Her smile has secrets now.*

Of course, at the time, I chastised myself thoroughly because she was a child who had obviously been through a terrible thing and anyone wouldn’t have been themselves under such circumstances. As for the specifics of these circumstances, it turned out the police didn’t see any need for further investigation, which was good news at the time.

Morag was beside herself with relief. Gracie seemed to get back to normal life without much trouble. Nobody wanted to interfere so we confined our speculations to gossip and nothing more.

But then came the story from my friend Dom, the local primary school teacher, who said he’d found Gracie telling scary tales to her friends in the bike shed. That wasn’t particularly unusual, because it’s around that age that children start to obsess about ghosts and what have you. No, the unusual part was that each and every one of her friends – a group of about six – were inconsolable. Dom had never seen anything like it, he said. They were crying their little hearts out but none could bring themselves to say whatever they’d heard. “*Haunted*”, was the word he used, I believe.

She also started planting foxgloves all over. I saw her doing this on occasion. And by “all over”, I mean in people’s gardens without permission, in the churchyard, in my vegetable patch,

actually.

Her beautiful laughter stopped altogether. She no longer played with friends. Instead, she began to stand where the bonfire is right now and recite long passages from library books about faeries and dark legends. She did it before school and after. It was brutal stuff, really.

After a few months, it got a bit too much, the imagery too horrific, and we had to have a word with Morag, who – and this was strange considering how she'd been so lucky to have her daughter returned to her – took the news with a dower acceptance, her newly pale, drawn face pulling into a grimace.

Dom thought that maybe Gracie was suffering some sort of trauma related to her disappearance, but then things died down. The recitals became fewer and farther between. The foxgloves withered.

Until everyone received a handwritten letter through their door.

We were to meet, apparently, in the middle of Main Street, to hear about the “dangers surrounding Tornivan”. You need to understand that we are a tight bunch and us villagers, partly out of nosiness, but mainly out of concern for one of our own, attended without much persuading. You probably don't need to be told that the date was precisely a year after her disappearance: the 1st of December.

This was to be our first ever meeting. Gracie lit a bonfire and waited patiently on her fruit crate while we gathered, bewildered and intrigued.

That's when she made her great announcement. She revealed in rapid, careful bursts what had happened to her a year ago and what would happen to another child that night if we didn't do as she said. She referred to the monsters in her books. I



remember how she pointed at them, tapping on the page in delicate raps.

None of it made much sense (and I know a thing or two about folklore). She retold the horrible changeling stories in which faeries sneak into houses and swap children with stand-in demonic beings. Those tales don't even belong to these parts, but she spoke with such conviction, such detail, that it didn't seem wise to ask questions. The stories possessed her, took hold. She loved telling them, I could tell.

'I escaped,' she said, her eyes watery and large. 'They took me, they took me and they did all sorts of things. I know they wanted to swap me but I ran! I ran and ran through the woods until I found home! And they told me something. They said they only have the right to enter our boundaries once a year. It's tonight. Every year. Tonight all through until dawn!'

Morag, I distinctly remember, looked like she wanted to vomit. I was silent, of course, because it was all obviously nonsense and I, like everyone, felt it was Morag's place to step in (she didn't). Only Gill Taylor, who has a small holding up the road, tried to respond with reason. I don't want to cast any dispersion, because it's important to remember that nothing was ever proven, but Scarlett, Gill's beloved horse, was found dead the next day. Rest assured, Gill turned up to the next year's meeting.

There's more.

I woke to a commotion from three doors down at about three o'clock the next morning. It was Sam and Ruby Tillig screaming incoherently that their two-year old had been abducted. I say incoherently because the child, Anthony, was right there, happy as could be, in their living room playing with a maraca toy. Sam and Ruby insisted it wasn't him. They were wailing, saying all

sorts of bizarre things about his smile, his voice. To me, he looked just like Anthony always had.

The police were called, of course, and they confirmed there had been no abduction. I hear the Tilligs to this day can't properly look their son in the eye. They moved away to Aberdeen shortly afterwards.

I may as well list a few of the other small tragedies that have happened over the last seven years: the fire at the old pub, the accident involving Dean Bowman losing his arm to a strimmer, the sudden blindness of Elsie (the wife of Dom, whom I mentioned before) that no medical professional could explain. I'm not saying it was Gracie, I mean, how could one child be behind all these things? But... there are whispers about her, more than whispers, if I'm honest. People say she *was* swapped, that she *is* the demon alternate. I suppose superstition festers easily in a place like this.

It's the half-finished conversations at the postbox, the side eyes in the Scotmid, the raised eyebrows whenever I report (via my weekly column in the Tribune) another inexplicable occurrence. All these micro-interactions lead us to believe. And "believe" is the most accurate word, I think. Even though sometimes, I question myself. On a sunny summer's day when the gorse is brilliant and yellow, I think that maybe this will be the year we all realise we've turned collectively mad.

Because there can't be things waiting in the woods. And we surely don't need to go through the rigmarole of our annual ritual. But then, the days shorten and the nights lengthen and I go along with it all once again.

'Oh no, no, no!' Gracie is still watching the Americans and insisting they should stay. I blink and try to maintain a facade of calm but really I want to shout for them to run. I've always

had a good sense of intuition and I can tell Gracie is in one of her more serious moods.

‘Letty, it’s time!’ Mum shouts down the street at me. There is an urgency to her voice and I know it’s because she is worried about what Gracie might do. From where they’re standing, I’m the one causing a delay and, by association, Mum and Dad are also to blame. Gracie drums her fingernails against the fruit crate.

I close my eyes for a number of seconds as if somehow that will help me think of a way to save the Americans from this ordeal, but it is no use. My heart sinking, I gesture towards the bonfire. ‘I suppose it won’t hurt to watch.’

‘We can wait somewhere else...’ Lowen nods vaguely towards his car and I can tell he wishes he’d just shut up and hidden inside. It’s too late for that now.

‘Not at all, don’t be silly,’ Gracie sings. ‘Come on, it’s time!’

We follow her on the short journey to join everyone else. Dom sends me a weak smile and Mum wraps an arm around me, making a “brrrr” sound. Gracie sets her crate on the ground as if she’s in a rush for nobody and steps onto it. She flicks her hair professionally and waits for a complete silence to descend.

‘Thank you, Tornivan, for attending our annual meeting.’

Gracie breathes in and then out again and the condensation meets the smoke from the fire. I’ve always wondered what the bonfire is for, really. It serves as a nice heat source for the night as we take refuge outside our homes, but Gracie isn’t the type to care about the comfort of others... not that I’d ever say that aloud. I wonder whether it’s an ambience thing.

‘Another year has passed, which means another year warding off the evil that exists on the edge of our village.’

She always gets very emotional at the beginning. Her voice

wavers at the end of her sentence and she lifts her arms meaningfully before her. She steadies herself before continuing.

'We have done what's been asked of us, what I've asked of us. We've kept everything as it should be. We remain strong when everyone does what is expected of them.'

I glance at Morag who looks particularly thin this year. She stares at her feet and appears to be mumbling something silently to herself. At this point in the speech, Gracie usually picks out a few people for thanks. Alarming, she raises those green eyes towards me.

'Letty, for your weekly contributions in the Tribune. Where would we be without those?'

Mum taps me on the back like she's anxious for me to answer, but I know better. Gracie is onto the next person. 'Teegan, for your steadfast work in our tiny but mighty local library.'

Teegan raises up her hand with initial surprise, and then brings it down quickly and tries to disappear into her scarf.

'Dom, for educating our young ones about where legend meets fact, and the special part that they, as Tornivan residents, play in this village which is the doorway between magic and reality.'

I peer through the flames at him. He is trying to look proud by puffing out his chest, but I can tell there is a reticence there. He takes his teaching seriously. He will be spreading Gracie's word in his classroom at great personal cost.

'Applaud!' Gracie shouts.

We all applaud, at first in a horrible unison, and then at more erratic intervals. The Americans are standing a couple metres away from me. They're not joining in with the clapping. I wish they would. I really, really wish they would. Gracie looks in their general direction as if she is scanning the crowd, but

she will have noticed. In fact, I see the muscles in her throat convulse a tiny bit.

When the applause dies down, Gracie smiles. Her face is truly beautiful against the dark sky. She somehow manages to look both young and beyond her years.

‘Since my abduction, which I was so, so lucky to survive, and since the replacement of little Anthony Tillig,’ she gulps, overcome by grief, ‘I take it as my responsibility to protect this place. This is the one night where Tornivan’s homes are not safe. This is the night of the faeries. They delight in gaining entry into your private space. They feed off your house’s unique smell, the little trinkets and memorabilia and photographs which decorate your home sustain them. They gain power from where you sleep. They do their dark work from the place you hold sacred. I know this, because I was with them! I was taken!’

Her face gleams orange as the fire rises to a gust of freezing wind.

‘Two days I spent with them. Watched them, heard them. Shivered in their presence as they locked me up and told me about all the twisted, supernatural things they planned to do with me. I ran from them for myself, yes, for my mother, yes,’ Morag doesn’t look up, and instead shakes her head, ‘but mainly for you, my people, my family!’

Cheers erupt and a few people begin the chant. *Together we rise. Together we heal. Together we rise. Together we heal.*

Gracie’s eyes sparkle. ‘They cannot get us if we outwit them. They dare not strike out in the open, cowards as they are. They will get you in your home and so we guard the fire outside tonight. We make fools of them! We will never, ever have another of us taken! What do we say?’

‘We will never, ever have another of us taken! Together we

rise! Together we heal!’

Everyone shouts in reply, apart from, of course, the Americans. Gracie whips her head towards them. Her smile doesn’t falter but it becomes jagged. I pull away from Mum and reach out to Lowen. I have no idea how, but I just know I need to make him join in. He shouldn’t draw attention to himself, to Daria. Gracie will not like it. She only asks for obedience. She only asks for us to fulfil our simple roles. They just need to cheer. They just need to look like they’re fitting in.

Before I can do anything, Gracie says, ‘I’m sorry. I’ve been very rude. I haven’t welcomed our guests properly... they are friends of Letty, I think?’

I don’t need to turn around to see my Mum’s face pinch with terror. This is one of those moments when time moves incredibly slowly and every little detail is amplified. A piece of ash drifts past my nose and I smell it, far more potently than I should be able to. The sound of the wet logs at the bottom of the fire is intense; I can hear the bark hissing and peeling away from the trunk. Mostly, it is Gracie’s eyes. She isn’t blinking. They are growing larger, greener, and I can see pupils dilate with something close to excitement.

I clear my throat. What I’m about to say matters. I know that much. I need to ensure every word lands precisely how I mean it to. I do not want to exacerbate anything. The 1st of December is a strange date; normal laws never seem to apply.

‘They’re stranded, that’s all. They came by accident because of the snow. There’s a booking,’ I add, attempting to control my breathing. Smoke fills my nostrils. ‘There’s a booking for them at the Tornivan Hotel, where they should be staying.’

Behind me, Daria is whispering something very quick and panicked, presumably into Lowen’s ear. I hope they realise I’m

trying to help them and that they must follow my lead.

‘Strangers, then,’ Gracie says. The small crowd shuffles forwards in response. I look back to my parents. It is like hunger, a sort of abandonment of ordinary sensibilities on their faces. Morag is shaking her head even more violently now. Dom squints at me through the flames. He isn’t as far gone as the rest, but I don’t think he has it in him to help me... or them. I’m not sure I would, were I in his position.

‘Visitors,’ I say and, yes, my voice is shaking.

‘But how do we know their intentions are good?’ Gracie asks.

Lowen swears beneath his breath and begins to lead Daria towards their car. People don’t move out of their way but they don’t block them either. Nobody knows what to do. They are awaiting Gracie’s take on the situation.

‘Let’s go,’ Daria says, loud enough for Gracie to hear.

‘You won’t stay to finish the ceremony?’ Gracie moves her arms in a strange gesture, bringing her hands in a circular motion before clasping them. It’s not a signal we’ve ever observed before, but it galvanises the group. Everyone, including my parents, pushes closer together so it’s impossible for Lowen and Daria to break away. I am now pinned in between my Mum and the Americans.

‘What the hell is going—’ Lowen begins to shout. His face is red and his lips are pulled into a straight line. He is obviously trying to keep calm for the sake of his wife. Daria is visibly shaking and I hope it’s because of the cold, but I’m sure it’s not.

‘Hush!’ Gracie raises her voice which makes Lowen angry. He wraps an arm over Daria’s shoulders and tries to push his way through the crowd. People stand firm. We’re all holding our faces in that placid emotionless expression, not dissimilar to ancient statues, that we’ve convinced ourselves detaches us

from whatever action we're about to do. I can feel my own cheeks slackening, my eyes glazing over.

'We're leaving, okay? We're going!' Lowen and Daria are now performing a pathetic march on the spot.

Acid is churning in my stomach. It isn't fair, really it isn't. And worse, it is all my fault, because I couldn't think quickly enough and get them to leave. Gracie hasn't taken her eyes off the couple. She is thinking deeply, her forehead marred by little crinkles.

'Strangers on the night of the faeries?' she says, slowly. 'Visitors on the night of dark magic and mayhem?'

Gasps ripple about the fire. She cannot be suggesting what I think she is: that these Americans are faeries? Yes, we've gone along with her delusions and her fantasies, to the point, I sometimes think, of insanity. But she has never gone so far to provide physical evidence. She has never outright accused anyone of being otherworldly. She has relied on speeches, on rhetoric, on our obedient nature thus far.

I lock eyes with Daria and shake my head. I would like to shout at her, 'Run! For god's sake, run! Claw your way out and don't look back!'

But I don't.

Instead, my mouth forms over the word that everyone else had begun to whisper. *Evildoers. Evildoers. Evildoers.*

Daria is weeping. I, too, feel the hot trickle of tears down my cheeks. Lowen is shouting something but his words are interspersed with groans and grunts as my fellow villagers kick him. And shove him. And, now I have a clearer view, punch him.

'They are evildoers! They have infiltrated our village and used our pure Letty as a pawn! Evildoers! Evildoers!'



Perhaps Daria is screaming, but it is difficult to tell because others are too. Mum pushes past me, her mouth open and panting. She grabs Daria by her hair and throws her to the floor. Lowen struggles as arms drag him back from going to her aid. His shouts are muffled and I see someone is tying a scarf around his mouth.

A heat is rising up from my belly. I know I won't be able to contain it even if it endangers me. 'Stop!' I shout, turning on the spot. 'Stop! Stop! Everyone stop! Please stop!'

My hands are raised to my temples in fists. My eyes are closed and the flames dance like red ghosts on the backs of my eyelids. A silence falls.

I open my eyes to see Gracie has stepped down from her crate and is standing in front of me. I don't like how she looks; she views me with a quiet interest. I imagine what might happen if I shake her, one hand on either side of her arms, rattle all this badness out of her. Over the years, nobody has ever done such a thing, which means she has grown in power and gained meticulous control over our little corner of the world. For a hopeful moment, I think she is just playing and that I have overreacted, misunderstood.

'You brought them here.' Her lips curl up at the edges. My heart sinks.

'No. No, they just knocked on my door and I had to let them in...' My sentence trails off as she starts to laugh. Around me, others follow her lead, imitating the cracked joyous sound. I look at my parents but they avert their eyes.

'You brought them here to reveal our secrets, didn't you? What is it, Letty? Are you tired of our bonfires? Tired of the way we organise Tornivan? Would you prefer chaos, instead? Would you prefer havoc?'

She takes a step forwards, and I stumble back into the villagers behind me. Her eyes have grown dark.

‘You know we must all behave to keep this place safe. You know this, Letty? You know that malice must be stamped out otherwise everything falls apart.’

‘Yes,’ I say, as hands grip my arms. I fight the urge to squirm. If I just agree with her then it will all be fine. In my peripheral vision, Lowen has begun to struggle again.

‘I think you’re bad,’ Gracie says. I don’t quite hear it because terror has overtaken my senses.

‘I think you’ve let badness in. Your guests are corrupt. I think we must save ourselves. I think it is our only choice.’

A scream that sounds like Daria reverberates through the crunch of boots. It’s impossible to see what’s happening through what is now a thick mass of villagers.

‘Gracie, this is madness!’ I shout in her face, unable to move my limbs as I’m held in place. ‘You’re going too far! Stop this, now!’

Gracie gives me the oddest look. She sniffs and draws herself up tall as if remembering something, or listening to those voices again.

In a quieter voice, she whispers, ‘You know it’s better this way. Just let it happen.’

It’s possible, I find, to really focus inwardly on yourself. I don’t know if you’ve ever tried it, but what I mean by it is closing your eyes and imagining all the sinews and nodules and pulsations which exist inside your body; taking note of the precise rhythm of your heartbeat; hearing the blood rush behind your ears, how it percolates through your arteries as it heats the chambers of your brain. It’s possible to spiral inside yourself so much that the noise outside ceases to exist.

This is what happens.

Of course, I am aware there is scuffling, shouting, begging. But I refuse to acknowledge it. There is a stench, one that I don't want to think about. There is a silence, one so contrasted with what was happening before that it is shocking. We villagers gather around the bonfire and camping chairs are unfolded. The smoke turns heavy and black and there is a sizzling sound followed by the smell of barbecue. Mum holds my hand and whispers something along the lines of, 'Just do as she says, just do as she says, poppet,' with her lips pressed painfully against my ear.

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At the first fingers of icy dawn reaching through the purple clouds, we return to our homes. With the claw of the hammer, I rip off the plank barricading my front door. I don't take my boots off as I lurch into the living room and pull open the curtains. For a second or two, I blink outside at Main Street which is now completely empty. I load up the wood burner and throw a match in. It will be nice and toasty by the time I'm back from the shed with Marnie. At the thought of her, I'm overcome with a deep longing for the comfort of her little warm furry body in my arms.

It's freezing outside, and very bright. When I unlock the shed door, her astute triangular face blinks at me from her carrier. 'Shhh, it's okay,' I say as I lift her out from the makeshift bed and press her against my chest. She licks my chin, purring like a helicopter.

The shed looks as it should be: no visitors have broken in here. The toolbox is closed and locked. I keep a few of my books here, and my maps, just to save on space. Nothing will be happening in Tornivan today because everyone will be catching up on

sleep, so, placing Marnie under one elbow, I swipe a couple of books and some old maps to read over a mug of steaming coffee.

The fire has warmed the small space of the living room quickly, and Marnie is back in her spot, blinking at me affectionately. I pull a blanket over my legs and rest my feet on the coffee table, leafing through my comfort read. I've read this one so many times that my annotations likely outnumber the actual text. I've encircled so many words, highlighted, underlined... to be honest, I've nearly memorised the whole thing. I rest my head against the soft fabric of the cushion and recite my favourite bit, 'The fear of deprogramming is at the heart of coercive persuasion. The cult leader sets in motion processes of brainwashing designed to isolate...'

I take a long sip of coffee and nod. Gracie has certainly ticked the boxes. Turning the page, I re-read my notes: *drip-feeding of an unlikely, sometimes supernatural lore. Instilling a sense of extreme secrecy and a sense of superiority for participants in on said secret: common. A figure, perhaps an individual who has experienced these "supernatural occurrences" is often useful in terms of the persuasive process. Strong allusions to bad things happening if people try to rock the status quo seems to be a feature, too. Establishing mores and habits aids the collective, misaligned belief system.*

Sighing, I reach for my map. I love looking at maps. I've always been able to while away hours memorising contour lines and valleys and gullies. On this one in particular, an Ordinance Survey from decades ago, I have drawn a cross in Biro at a point in the middle of the heavily wooded area behind Gracie's house. I touch it and the paper feels uneven beneath my fingers.

The reason I wanted to be a journalist was because I loved the

idea of spinning stories. A writer is the medium through which real-life is filtered to the rest of the world. What a privilege! What a powerful position in which to find yourself. The trouble is that once you've relayed enough stories, it becomes difficult to distinguish between the truth and imagination.

I push myself up, making a heaving sound belonging to someone far older than me and walk into the hall where I keep my stash of Tribunes. I remember how only hours earlier Daria had looked upon them.

I take the whole wad of them back to the sofa and curl up again. Here it is, the report I wrote all those years on this very day. The sentences that stand at the junction of fact and folklore:

*Gracie Hales went missing last night and Morag Hales, her mother, is asking for any information from anyone who might have seen her.*

That was true. That was undeniable. Then on the next day:

*Emergency issue: Gracie Hales is still missing, and was thought to be last seen by villagers on the way home from school the night before her disappearance.*

The first instance of a lie, at least of omission. I am a villager, after all. I had seen Gracie. Yes, I had seen her. I had spoken to her. She was crying and begging me to let her go. I told her to read my books about the faeries (I've said already, I know a thing or two about folklore), and so she did.

*Police are searching the woods, where it is believed she might be.*

You remember how I told you I was the first to "find" her at the end of my garden? This is true, to an extent. I found her in my garden because she had escaped from my shed. She behaved curiously and in a way I did not expect. She was babbling about the stories she'd been reading, her eyes crazed. You must

understand that I wanted no harm to come to her. I just wanted to keep her for a while. It is lonely here. So, so lonely. I only have my parents and, occasionally, Dom, but he got married, didn't he?

I didn't want to hurt her, but now she had escaped... she would surely tell people how I had locked her up? I couldn't have that!

So, as I warmed her up in my bath, I played along with her. Clearly, in her state of terror, the child's mind chose to believe that instead of me, kind and unassuming Letty Walker, whom she trusted and looked up to as a friend of her mother's, a supernatural force had stolen her from her bed.

I worked on the tale with her as the water gently ran over her feet. I pretended I too had spotted figures weaving between the trees with a strange sparkle about their bodies. I said I'd heard dark laughter. I said she had been lucky, because these malicious faeries may well have wanted to swap her, as the books tell us.

My hands tremble as I sift through about a year's worth of careful reporting.

*Anthony Tillig and his parents have moved to Aberdeen. Of course, Tornivan will never forget how the family was plagued by the so-called faerie changeling...*

My stories – Gracie's stories – soon became reality. The Tilligs, already paranoid types, believed in them so much that they thought their son had actually been taken. At this point, I relinquished all responsibility. Gracie was leading the village now; Gracie was telling the stories. I just reported them for her.

I take a final tepid swig of coffee and am about to stand when there is a small tap at my window. My head jerks up and I

see Gracie smiling from behind the pane of glass. She doesn't gesture for me to get the door. Instead, she just stares at me and I wonder for how long she has been there.

I meet her eyes and arrange my face into an obedient smile. She nods and I think she is happy that I have calmed down after the incident with the Americans. Then, she turns away and walks down Main Street in the morning snow in preparation for another year.



## About the Author

Victoria read Classics at King's College, University of Cambridge before teaching Latin and Greek for over a decade. She has given many a tour of Hellenic sites over the years, both in the capacity of educator and holiday-maker. If you spot an excitable woman in a maxi skirt waving her arms about on top of The Acropolis, chances are it's her. Do say hello!

She now lives and writes in the North-East of Scotland with her husband, Will, and cat, Athena (who is every bit the goddess of stratagem as her namesake). Sign up to her newsletter at [victoriarandleauthor.com](https://www.victoriarandleauthor.com) to be the first to hear about all her writing news and the occasional bookish treat.

**You can connect with me on:**

🌐 <https://www.victoriarandleauthor.com>



## Also by V. J. Randle



### **Seven Bodies**

(January 6th 2026, Bloodhound Books)

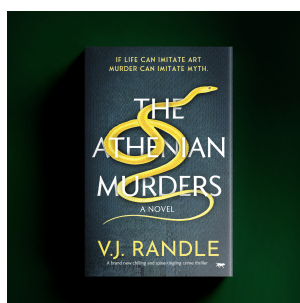
**An exclusive retreat. An isolated hotel. A storm that changes everything.**

The Tornivan Hotel in the remote Scottish Highlands is Jules's last shot at success. When a wealthy investor and his wife arrive for a weekend stay, it feels like the chance she's been waiting for.

But as a blizzard arrives, the hotel's guests and staff find themselves snowed in with no way out, and they all have secrets of their own. When one of them disappears without a trace, panic spreads through the corridors.

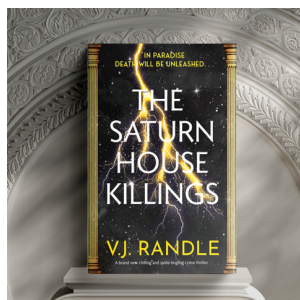
Desperate to protect her reputation and save her dream, Jules makes a decision that could change everything. Because in this hotel, danger isn't out in the storm... it's already inside.

**Perfect for fans of Lucy Foley and Agatha Christie, *Seven Bodies* is a gripping, claustrophobic mystery that will keep you guessing until the very last page.**



## **The Athenian Murders**

Detectives in Greece solve a string of murders inspired by ancient myths.



## **The Saturn House Killings**

Sequel to The Athenian Murders... the mystery of a body found on the beach of an exclusive island resort tests the Hellenic Police team.



## **Cold Secrets**

Bar owner Robert Begg is puzzled when a mysterious visitor claims he is the key to solving a decades' old murder case in the Scottish village of Findrussie.