

EXCERPT FROM GHOST VIRUS

It was beginning to grow dark by the time Mindy came down the alley beside her house in Nimrod Road and into the kitchen through the back door. Her mother was ironing sheets and pillowcases and her father's shirts for the office.

"Mindy!" said her mother. "Where on earth have you been? I've been ringing you and you ringing you! Isn't your phone working? I was going to call the police if you didn't come home soon!"

"Oh, yes, why?" said Mindy, dropping Sprout's lead on to the kitchen table. "Don't you think she's quite capable of looking after herself?"

"*What* did you say? And where did you get that jacket you're wearing? And where's Sprout?"

"What do you care?" Mindy replied, walking towards the door that led to the hallway.

Her mother put down her iron and caught hold of Mindy's arm. She looked so much like Mindy that they could have been sisters, if there weren't twenty-four years between them.

"Where have you been, Mindy? Where's Sprout? What's happened? And why are you wearing that awful jacket? Where's your sweater?"

Mindy stayed perfectly still, but stared straight ahead of her, as if she intended to keep on walking out of the kitchen as soon as her mother let go of her.

"So what is it now?" she asked. "Insult the way she dresses, as well as everything else she does, like her homework, and her piano playing, and her dancing?"

"Mindy – where's Sprout? What have you done with him? Have you lost him? What's going on, darling? Please – tell me!"

Mindy looked up at her at last. "Just like she said to those busybodies in the park – get stuffed and mind your own business!"

Mindy's mother slapped her across the face, and then immediately said, "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to hurt you! But you have to tell me what's happened, Mindy! Why are you talking like this?"

Mindy's left cheek was flushed scarlet, but she gave her mother a dismissive smile, as if she had expected to be slapped, and couldn't care.

"Mindy, for the love of God, darling! I really didn't mean to hurt you! But you've come home hours and hours late, wearing some completely strange jacket, and there's no Sprout with you, and all you can do is answer me back as if I'm some kind of a stranger."

"She's had enough, that's why," said Mindy.

"Why do you keep calling yourself 'she'? Have you had an accident or something? Has somebody attacked you?"

"If you had experienced even a tenth of my suffering, you would feel the same way as I do," said Mindy. Her voice sounded different now, low and measured, and her mother thought her eyes looked different, too – not wide and round and innocent, but curiously feline, and filled with a kind of weary malevolence. They were the eyes of somebody who had been punished by life, and was not going to forgive those who had hurt her, or anybody.

"Mindy, let's go through to the sitting-room. I'm going to call daddy."

"Oh, yes? And what do you think the great and wonderful daddy is going to do? He's as hopeless as you are, you stupid bitch."

Mindy's mother wasn't tempted to slap her face again. She was seriously worried now. She held on to her arm and guided her into the living-room and switched on the light. Over the beige-tiled fireplace there was a row of framed photographs, most of them of Mindy from when she was a baby, and always smiling her coy, shy smile, as if she couldn't believe that she was pretty enough for anybody to want to take a picture of her.

"There, sit down," said Mindy's mother, leading her over to the sofa. "I think you've had a shock and we need to find out what it was. Why don't you take off that horrible jacket? I mean, where did it come from? It doesn't look very clean."

"No," said Mindy, staring around the room. "I hate this wallpaper. Green! Why did you choose *green*, of all the disgusting colours?"

"Well, sit down at least."

"No."

You see? She doesn't have to be obedient. She can defy her mother and there's nothing that her mother can do about it. Her mother won't slap her again. Slapping her like that made her feel worse than Mindy.

Mindy's mother sat in the armchair next to the fireplace and took her mobile phone out of her apron pocket. She rang her father's number and he answered almost immediately.

"Hi there, love! What's up? I'm right in the middle of a meeting, I'm afraid."

"Peter, it's Mindy. Something awful's happened to her but I don't know what it is and she won't tell me."

"What do you mean, 'something awful'? Has she been hurt?"

"I don't think so, not physically. But she took Sprout out for a walk at three o'clock and she's only just come back. There's no sign of Sprout and she's wearing some peculiar second-hand jacket instead of her sweater. And she's saying such meaningless things. She keeps talking about herself in the third person, as if she's somebody else."

"And she won't say what's happened to her?"

"No...she told me it was none of my business. In fact she was ruder than that."

There was a long pause, and then Mindy's father said, "She hasn't been raped, has she?"

"I don't think so, no. But then she won't tell me anything."

Mindy had been standing with her back to her mother, but now she turned around and said, "I know what he's thinking. Typical father. He thinks she was raped, doesn't he? Just because he'd secretly like to have sex with her himself. All fathers do. They look at their little daughters naked in the bath and if their wives weren't around they'd love to touch them."

"Peter," said Mindy's mother. "I think you'd better come home now. And I think we might have to call the police."

"Oh, you want to call the police?" Mindy challenged her. "And what good will that do? You think the police are going to go looking for a Yorkshire terrier and a sweater? You don't think they've got one or two things more urgent to attend to?"

"Mindy –" her mother began.

"No, Janet! You can't go on interfering in her life any more! She's found her strength now! She has me and I have her! We're one and the same! Nothing you do or say is ever going to be able to change that!"

Mindy's voice rose to a scream. She bent forward so that her face was only two or three inches away from her mother's and her mother could feel her spit on her cheeks.

“It’s all going to be different from now on! You’re never going to give her orders again and you’re never going to treat her like a child! She’s a woman because I’m a woman and we’re one and the same! She’s going to come and go as she pleases! Not only that, she -- ”

Mindy hesitated, and held her left hand to her stomach. She retched, and a long string of saliva dripped from her lips.

“Not only that – ” she repeated, but then she stopped again, and retched even louder, with a sickening cackle.

For three or four seconds she stood leaning over her mother with her eyes closed and her cheeks bulging, as if her mouth were filling up with bile. Then she shuddered and vomited directly into her mother’s lap, a stringy torrent of red, half-chewed meat and tangles of wet tan and black fur.

She heaved again and again and all her mother could do was hold on to her shoulders with both hands and try to suppress her convulsions.

At last she sank to her knees on to the carpet and stayed there with her head bowed, sobbing. Her mother looked down at the grisly mess in her apron and she could tell by the fur and the liquorice-black fragment of snout what it was.

“Dear God in Heaven,” she whispered. “Oh, Mindy. What’s got into you, my darling? Who’s got into you?”