

## UNNATURAL GUESTS

By Betsy Hearne

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AFTER my sister Annabelle died, I began to volunteer as a storyteller for kids in the library. It was my mom's idea. Ma Therapist, I call her which she doesn't like, but that's what she is and does, twenty-four hours a day. My aunt is a minister and I call her Aunt Divine, which she doesn't mind a bit. Aunt Divine is a real character, just the opposite of Ma Therapist, who's pretty boring, like me. In addition to tending homeless people in a downtown mission, Aunt Divine also takes care of every homeless animal she comes across. And nobody ever gives her any trouble. There's just something about Aunt Divine that makes you behave.

Anyhow, like I was saying, after Annabelle died, each member of the family was supposed to do something to fill the void in our lives. Ma Therapist figured that volunteering in the library would keep me too busy for the kind of trouble my brother Jimmy Joe specialized in before he turned thirteen, the week of my sister's funeral. Who arranges these things, anyway?

Annabelle was five, the surprise baby trailing me by ten years. She was like Jimmy Joe, always getting into mischief and picking fights and trying to get attention. Wouldn't you know I'd have two bratty younger sibs? Annabelle was maybe even worse than Jimmy Joe. She drove everybody crazy, even Ma Therapist, and sometimes I could hardly stand to be around her. Miss Trouble, I called her, and she hated that. "It's not me," she'd shout, "I'm *good*, I'm *Sweet Annabelle!* It's Mr. Trouble's fault!"

She wouldn't tell us who Mr. Trouble was. Then after she got sick, she was too tired to make trouble and all I wanted was for her to get bratty again, at least tease the dog and cats. The one thing that made her feel better was stories. I guess five is a perfect age for listening to stories. And losing battles with leukemia. Unlike Annabelle's favorite fairy tales, the good guys don't always win. She just got sicker and sicker. She wouldn't eat anything. My mother even gave her chocolate ice cream for breakfast, but Annabelle

didn't eat it. She just let it melt, stuck her finger in it, and drew on the wall. Instead of scolding her, Ma Therapist cried. My father brought Annabelle presents from his business trips, which he took more and more the sicker she got ("He's trying to buy her good health," said Ma Therapist). Aunt Divine lobbied the Lord for Annabelle's recovery. Jimmy Joe set up a dartboard in her room, but then he had to throw the darts for her so for the first time they didn't fight over who won the bull's-eye game. And I told her stories. In the end, the stories were all Annabelle wanted.

The problem was, I didn't know that many. I could remember stuff like the Three Little Pigs, but you can overdose on those easy ones pretty fast. And I couldn't just read to her. She'd glaze over. Sick kids don't have the attention span of healthy ones—regression, Ma Therapist calls it. So I couldn't be looking at a book. I had to watch her face and change the story, pick up the pace when she got bored and slow it down when she got confused and pause when she had pain and make her laugh when she looked sad but let her cry when she needed to. Sometimes cheering up involves a lot of tears. Also a lot of stories. I had to learn a lot of stories. Dewey Decimal number 398.2 on the library shelves. Folktales, fairy tales, myths, and legends. Some she wanted to hear over and over, but toward the end I learned a new one every day. Maybe I hoped it would keep her alive, like Scheherazade satisfying the sultan so he wouldn't chop off her head.

One night this weird thing happened. It was an Arabian kind of night, come to think of it, except I seemed to be rubbing a lamp with no magic in it. This was the last night Annabelle was really conscious. She had asked me to stay with her, so I gave the hospice nurse a break and told her to go nap on the couch for a while. The rest of the family was asleep, or as asleep as any of us got in those days. Annabelle was hooked up to all kinds of tubes. She was drifting in and out, but it was unpredictable. Every time I thought she'd gone to sleep, I'd try to stop and suddenly she'd whimper, hey keep going. It was like a marathon. Did I tell you that I run? I guess the two things I can do in the world are run and tell stories. Ma Therapist says they're both about surviving. Anyway, I hit the wall—about midnight I ran out of energy and stories. You know how hard it is to breathe after too many miles, your body just begs for air. I was begging for stories for my sister when I sensed this presence. Some shapeless thing atomized in the room. It didn't feel like any genie, either; it felt like a black hole. Did I tell you I like astronomy?

Okay, I can do three things—stories, running, and stars. The stars have seen everything. They make all our little disasters seem like air. There are a lot of stories about stars, too. Some are myths and some are science, but they're all pretty fantastical.

This shapeless thing in the room was definitely a grown-up story, way too scary for Annabelle. I said, "What are you, what are you doing here?"

Annabelle said, "What?"

"Nothing," I said to Annabelle, "I'm just talking to myself."

"Well, talk to me," she whined. I had just told her a bunch of long stories in a row, about a highway robber and a changeling and a peddler and a selkie.

"I'm trying," I said to her. "I'd do anything for a story." Then I felt this dark thing slide over, wrap around me like a shawl and disintegrate into my pores, my ears, my mouth, and my eyes. It filled me up. "Come on," said Annabelle, "just make one up."

"Okay," I said, and this story poured out of me. I don't know where it came from, but here it is.

Sweet Annabelle was supposed to clean up her room. First she made the bed and lined up all her stuffed animals in a row. Then she put the books back on the shelf and the toys in a basket. After that, she dropped the dirty clothes in a hamper and straightened her shoes neatly along the wall.

*Sweet Annabelle.*

Last of all, she turned to tidy up the closet, where she sometimes threw things and closed the door so no one could see them. She was poking around in a pile of old junk when she met Mr. Trouble. One minute he wasn't there, and the next minute he was.

"Howdy," said Mr. Trouble.

"How'd you do that?" asked Annabelle.

"Do what?" asked Mr. Trouble.

"Show up out of nowhere."

"Oh, that's just a little trick," said Mr. Trouble. "Nowhere's where I come from, so I always show up out of nowhere. I can do lots of other tricks, too." He had a big laugh for such a tiny little person.

"Will you show me some of your other tricks?" asked Annabelle.

"Sure," said Mr. Trouble.

And he did. Mr. Trouble bounced on Annabelle's bed till the pillows rained feathers. He pulled the dog's plumey tail, threw grapes at Annabelle's nice big sister, broke her mother's favorite teacup, and slipped a few quarters off her father's dresser for a treat. After a while Annabelle tried out a couple of Mr. Trouble's tricks. They worked pretty well. So well that Annabelle's mother got worried.

"Annabelle used to be such a *sweet* child," she said. "I just don't know what's gotten into her."

"Whatever it is, we'd better get it out," said Annabelle's father.

"She won't do a thing I tell her to," said her mother.

"She does a lot of things I tell her not to," said her father.

"Maybe," said her older sister, "she needs to go see Aunt Divine."

Aunt Divine lived two bus rides away at the top of an old apartment building with thirteen cats that she had rescued from different alleys and a dog she'd found in the garbage can.

While Annabelle's parents talked to Aunt Divine, Annabelle played one of Mr. Trouble's tricks on the dog.

"Hmm," said Aunt Divine. "I might have to keep this girl the whole weekend."

"Whatever's best for Annabelle," said her mother and father, "is what we should do." As they walked out the door, they called, "Be sweet, now, Annabelle."

Annabelle set in on the cats.

"We need to take a little ramble," said Aunt Divine after a while. "I like to keep my eye on the neighborhood."

"I bet you do," sassed Annabelle.

Annabelle and Aunt Divine set out. The first person they met was young Jimmy Joe throwing rocks off the stoop. One of the rocks fell right at Annabelle's feet.

"Here comes trouble," muttered Aunt Divine. Annabelle looked up. Sure enough, there was Mr. Trouble, peering around the corner and waving at Jimmy Joe with a sly gleam in his eye. Mr. Trouble seemed to know Jimmy Joe quite well.

Jimmy Joe didn't look at Annabelle and didn't say hello to Aunt Divine. He just kept throwing rocks. Every rock got a little closer as they walked away. Annabelle looked back and saw Mr. Trouble reach out and hand Jimmy Joe another rock.

Annabelle could hear Mr. Trouble's big laugh as the rock landed behind her. Then she felt a sharp crack on the back of her head.

"Ow!" shouted Annabelle, and she charged back at Jimmy Joe with her fists flying. Jimmy Joe waited for her with his own fists raised and a sly smile on his face.

"Hold it!" roared Aunt Divine. She sounded like a lion. Annabelle stopped in her tracks, and Jimmy Joe lowered his fists. Mr. Trouble was nowhere to be seen.

"I've got a little present for you, Jimmy Joe," said Aunt Divine.

Jimmy Joe smirked. Aunt Divine pulled a big piece of chalk from the pocket of her old blue dress. Then she turned into the alley. Annabelle and Jimmy Joe followed her and watched while she drew three circles on the sooty brick wall, each circle inside the other, with a dot in the middle.

"There, now you got a real target," said Aunt Divine.

"I got lots of real targets," said Jimmy Joe. "That's just a dumb old wall."

"I bet you can't hit the bull's-eye," said Aunt Divine.

Jimmy Joe fingered one of his rocks, took aim, and fired. He hit the third circle. Annabelle picked up a rock, took aim, and hit the second circle. Aunt Divine found a rock, took aim, and hit the dot in the middle.

"Bull's-eye!" said Aunt Divine, rubbing her hands on her old blue dress. "We'll see how you do tomorrow." She pulled Annabelle around the corner and left Jimmy Joe staring at the target with a rock in his hand.

"You got some practicing to do," she said to Annabelle.

Annabelle scrunched up her fists and moped along behind Aunt Divine. She could see her get farther and farther ahead. She could see Aunt Divine's pocketbook hanging open just a little bit. She could see one coin and then another and several others fall to the sidewalk. Quiet as a cat, Mr. Trouble slipped up beside her, picked up a coin, and winked at her. Annabelle picked up the rest of the coins and put them in her pocket. She caught a flying dollar bill and stuffed that in her pocket, too. A few more dollar bills fluttered toward her like little green birds. She caught them and caged them in her pocket. Mr. Trouble disappeared while Annabelle was leaning over the trail of coins.

When Aunt Divine got to the end of the block where the old man always sat begging, she reached in her purse to give him money. Her hand came out empty.

She turned and waited for Annabelle to catch up.

“Trouble never comes in ones,” said Aunt Divine. “My money’s gone. I have nothing to give this poor man for his cup of coffee.” She looked at Annabelle.

“I guess we better go on home then,” said Annabelle.

Aunt Divine sighed. “And to think of those rich, velvety chocolate ice-cream cones in the Sweet Shop, on such a hot day.”

Annabelle looked down the shimmery street at the Sweet Shop. She breathed the heat, and it stirred a deep hunger in her stomach.

“Well, I have some money,” said Annabelle.

“Oh, we couldn’t have ice cream while this poor man goes without his coffee,” said Aunt Divine.

Annabelle dropped a quarter in the hat.

“Or the rest of his meal,” added Aunt Divine.

Annabelle pulled out a dollar bill from her pocket.

“Even scrambled eggs and toast cost more than that,” said Aunt Divine.

Annabelle pulled the rest of the dollar bills out of her pocket and dropped them in the hat.

“Now let’s see about that ice cream,” said Aunt Divine. “I expect you still have enough change for two cones.”

Annabelle did, exactly. The ice cream melted on her tongue and down her fingers. Chocolate made Annabelle feel frisky. She danced ahead of Aunt Divine all the way home. Then she pranced up three flights of stairs to Aunt Divine’s door. And there stood Mr. Trouble. He had a chocolate ice-cream cone in one hand, and he was dipping the fingers of his other hand into it and writing sticky brown words all over Aunt Divine’s clean white door.

“You’d better get out of here,” said Annabelle. “Aunt Divine’s going to be mad when she sees that mess.”

Mr. Trouble slurped down the cone and licked his fingers. “She won’t know who did it,” he said. “She’ll think it was you.”

Annabelle looked down at her sticky fingers. She could hear Aunt Divine coming up the stairs. Annabelle turned her back on Mr. Trouble and ran down to meet her. Aunt Divine looked up at Annabelle’s sticky face.

“What’s the trouble, child?”

“Aunt Divine, somebody wrote bad words all over your door.”

“Who could it be?”

“I’ve seen him before. He does a lot of bad stuff.”

“It takes one to know one,” said Aunt Divine. She huffed and puffed up the stairs until they reached the top landing. Annabelle looked around in all the shadows. Mr. Trouble was gone, but the words were still there.

Aunt Divine looked at them. She looked at Annabelle. Annabelle remembered how Aunt Divine hit the bull’s-eye without even trying.

“Don’t get mad, Aunt Divine, it’s not paint—he just wrote those words in chocolate.”

“You better wash them off, then, Annabelle, right now. Before you start target practice. Jimmy Joe’s a good shot, and tomorrow’s coming up real soon.”

Aunt Divine unlocked the door, and Annabelle went inside. She brought out a rag and a pan of water. It only took a minute to wash off the words, but in that minute, there was Mr. Trouble right beside her.

“Howdy,” said Mr. Trouble.

“Don’t you howdy me,” said Annabelle. “You’re nothing but trouble.”

“It takes one to know one,” said Mr. Trouble, and his mouth opened into a big, mean grin. Annabelle squeezed the rag in a tight little ball and threw it right between his teeth.

“Bull’s-eye!” yelled Annabelle.

“Did you call me, dear?” asked Aunt Divine from the inside hallway.

“No, ma’am, I was just talking to myself,” said Annabelle, looking straight at Mr. Trouble.

But Mr. Trouble was gone. One minute he was there and the next minute he wasn’t. Annabelle went inside and closed the door. She had to help Aunt Divine take care of all those animals.

When I finished the story, Annabelle was smiling. “Now I know what to do when I’m in trouble,” she said, and she threw the only thing she could reach—a balled-up piece of Kleenex—right at me. I wished so hard, then, that someday she’d get into ordinary

everyday trouble again, like writing bad words on the wall. The Kleenex fluttered down before it hit me, and her little white hand fell on the sheets and she went to sleep.

All that seems like a long time ago, and I've been telling stories ever since, especially now in the summer when I'm not in school. Stories kind of get under your skin, and then you can't get rid of them. I don't know whether I was dreaming the night Annabelle died, or calling up a genie. Anyway, the kids at the library like my stories, and I never run out of them. In fact, those stories won't go home. I've got a whole bunch of permanent guests. Unnatural guests, you might call them. They eat with me, sleep with me, run with me, stargaze with me, talk to me, everything but listen to me. I know exactly how the princess felt about that frog. Ma Therapist is proud of me. She doesn't know how crowded my room is. But it's okay, because sometimes Annabelle comes back, too, and even Mr. Trouble, peering around the corner behind her. They all seem to be having a real good time.