

***THE HISTORY CLUB***

**By Danielle Pearson**

**Setting**

The church hall and bus stop in the village of Inkpen, Berkshire.

The present day.

**Characters**

FLORENCE, fifties, an amateur spiritualist

DORA, late sixties, a local history enthusiast

BETHAN, thirties, a local widow

NAZ, eighteen, a goth

## 1.

*The church hall, Inkpen.*

*FLORENCE, DORA and BETHAN sit in a circle holding hands, a candle between them.*

*Scattered tarot cards and a rudimentary Ouija board on the floor beside them.*

FLORENCE            He's saying something about... Valentine's Day... a particularly special Valentine's Day?

BETHAN                Yes, yes it was last year, he was home on leave!

FLORENCE            Greg... Greg what is it about that day?

Something about a dress?

BETHAN                The blue one. I wore my blue dress, and it was wet out so I had my trench coat over it. He said I looked proper elegant. Like an old movie star.

FLORENCE            He's saying... something about... Singing in the Rain?

BETHAN                It was my favourite! God it's really him, isn't it?

*She is crying.*

Can you tell him I love him? Can you?

FLORENCE            He can hear you, Bethan.

BETHAN                Greg? Greg it's me. Baby I love you so much. I miss you.

FLORENCE            He misses you too.

BETHAN                Does he... does he remember about the t shirts?

He'd always leave me one, just before he went on a tour. And I'd sleep with it, just so I could smell him...

I still do it. I still take them to bed with me, one at a time, but I'm running out, see, one by one they stop smelling like him, and they just smell like me. And I don't sleep so well these days,

because all I can think is, what am I going to do when I run out of t shirts?

DORA Oh Bethan, love.

FLORENCE He remembers. He wants you to know that he's always with you. Just like when he was away on duty. He'd lie in bed... I'm seeing somewhere hot, dusty... Iraq?

BETHAN Afghanistan –

FLORENCE In Afghanistan, and he'd think of you. And he's still thinking of you.

BETHAN Where is he?

FLORENCE He is... *on*.

BETHAN Where's *on* though? Is it heaven?

FLORENCE In a way.

BETHAN But if he's... if he's like a ghost, doesn't that mean he has unfinished business, or he's unhappy about something?

FLORENCE He is at peace.

BETHAN But then why –

FLORENCE There are things which the mortal consciousness cannot perceive, cannot know.

BETHAN Can you ask him though? If he's here, you could ask him.

*Beat.*

FLORENCE He has... departed.

BETHAN What? What do you mean?

FLORENCE Not forever but, for now.

BETHAN I don't understand...

FLORENCE            You did well. You did very well, Bethan. Best not to push these things.

DORA                 Come here love.

*DORA hugs BETHAN.*

                          Let's have a little break, shall we? Think the vicar's got some custard creams hidden in the cupboard at the back there.

BETHAN             No. Let's carry on.

DORA                 Are you sure?

BETHAN             I'm sure.

DORA                 Alright then. Gosh I've got goosebumps.

*Footsteps from off.*

FLORENCE           Someone's coming.

DORA                 A spirit?

*Enter NAZ.*

                          Oh.

NAZ                  Hi.

DORA                 It's Naz, isn't it? Know your mum a bit from the shop.

NAZ                  Yeah.

DORA                 Well, come in love, you look frozen. We were just – er – we were just talking about the history of spiritualism, weren't we?

NAZ                  Mum said you were doing a séance.

DORA                 Right. Well. Yes there's a – a practical element to today's lecture.

NAZ                  Can I join?

FLORENCE           You're very welcome to.

DORA                   Isn't she a bit young?

FLORENCE            Come and have a seat.

*NAZ joins the circle.*

Let us join hands.

Now, if any other spirits are here with us, make yourselves known.

Make yourselves known to us now...

*The sound of a slamming door and chattering voices from off.*

DORA                   That'll be the weight-watchers. It's nearly nine already.

BETHAN                Can you come again next week?

DORA                   Ms Glover is a very busy woman, Bethan, we can't just –

FLORENCE            I've got a couple of openings in my diary.

*She pulls out a diary stuffed with notes.*

DORA                   There's also just... well there's the issue of payment.

BETHAN                We can use the funds from the bake sale.

DORA                   That was for the British museum trip in the summer –

BETHAN                Yeah, but this is much better –

NAZ                    I'll sign up, if you like. I'll become a member, properly, so you'll have my subs as well.

*Beat.*

DORA                   How would next Tuesday work for you, Ms Glover?

FLORENCE            Tuesday it is. And you must call me Florence.

DORA                   We're ever so grateful.

BETHAN                Thank you. Thank you.

*BETHAN and NAZ get up to leave, tidy away the chairs etc.*

DORA                    We best get a move on before the weight-watchers get in.  
Enforced weigh-ins. Jogging for fun. They're mad as a box of  
frogs, the lot of them. Practically a cult.

*Beat.*

Don't forget your Ouija board, will you?

*Exit DORA and NAZ.*

*BETHAN approaches FLORENCE tentatively.*

BETHAN                Do you do private sessions as well?

FLORENCE            I'm sure something could be arranged.

## 2.

*The village bus stop, a couple of weeks later.*

*DORA and NAZ.*

DORA                    You on the 29 to Hungerford then?

NAZ                      Other way. Heading to Newbury.

DORA                    Ah. Me too. Always have a cup of tea and a doughnut with my  
friend Mags on a Saturday. We've got a pact with the lotto  
scratch cards – if either of us wins we're splitting the millions. My  
John called the lottery a "voluntary tax on stupidity" but there we  
are.

How's school going?

NAZ                      Why?

DORA                    Your mum was a bit worried last time I saw her. Said you'd been  
quiet lately.

*Beat.*

NAZ                      What do you think happens after we die?

DORA I dunno love. Don't think I believe in heaven and hell and all that. Reckon it's probably like a nice long sleep that you don't wake up from.

NAZ Sometimes I imagine I'm already dead. Cold and bluey grey and with worms eating my skin and my eyes. And we're – I mean – I'm. Just quiet. There's just the earth and the water and the sun and the air and we're a part of everything, just energy. It doesn't seem that bad, to be there. With - well. It doesn't feel lonely.

*Beat.*

DORA You know, love, perhaps you ought to join a youth club. Start a reading group. Or a band?

NAZ I can't play anything.

DORA You could go for a brisk walk? You do look a bit peaky.

*Beat.*

NAZ I'm a goth.

DORA A what?

NAZ You know like. Wearing black. Existential despair. Graveyards.

DORA Oh right.

Well you certainly seem to be doing a good job of it, in that case.

NAZ Thanks.

DORA But wouldn't you rather have some other goth friends, instead of hanging out with us old biddies?

NAZ No.

DORA We love having you around, it's just –

NAZ Goths are better when they're on their own. Or with the very elderly.

Makes it easier to contemplate death.



DORA                    We're not *that* elderly dear...

NAZ                      Bus is coming.

DORA                    I'll let you get along then.

NAZ                      See you at the next meeting, though yeah?

DORA                    Yes... alright.

### 3.

*DORA and FLORENCE in the church hall.*

*They are setting up for a tarot reading.*

DORA                    - We lived in the church cottage since we were married. Bedroom looking out over the graveyard, spooky stuff. A lot of them are from the two wars of course. The first was particularly devastating, they lost practically a generation of young men here in the village. Funny how it goes in cycles, losing Bethan's young man to yet another senseless war...

FLORENCE              I doubt he'd call it senseless.

DORA                    - Of course, I used to get spooked all the time, my John thought I was a right div. Funny noises, doors opening and closing. We had some letters of his, from family members on the front. That's how I got interested in local history, it's why I started the club. But I used to joke that it was John's relatives haunting us. He used to say –

FLORENCE              If you'd like to try to contact John, just ask.

DORA                    Oh, well. I'm not sure.

FLORENCE              Isn't that why you booked me in the first place?

DORA                    Well, yes, no, I just thought... bit of history in action, might attract new members. We're certainly on the small side, as local societies go, the weight-watchers outnumber us three to one/

FLORENCE I'll be here for a private session with Bethan next week, so we can have one as well if you like. Calling for spirits in a public environment works, but often it's less effective.

DORA I um. Can I think about it?

FLORENCE Of course.

DORA Bethan certainly seems to be getting a lot out of it. I am worried about Naz though... there was a car accident, you know, last spring. Dreadful business, and I understand a close friend of hers was involved. Her mother said she changed overnight, quit the netball team, went very quiet, stopped seeing all her friends...

Don't... don't let on that I told you that, by the way.

FLORENCE Dora, would you make me a cup of tea?

DORA Oh right, yes of course.

FLORENCE Milk, two sugars.

DORA Right o.

*Exit DORA.*

*A pause as FLORENCE rearranges the tarot.*

*Enter NAZ.*

FLORENCE Hello.

NAZ Alright?

FLORENCE Tarot lessons this week.

NAZ Yeah, Bethan said.

*Pause.*

I was wondering.

FLORENCE Yes?

NAZ                   Next week. Could we do another séance?

FLORENCE           If that's what the group decides. I'm at the pleasure of Dora and the others.

NAZ                   I'll persuade them. Will you do it?

FLORENCE           Of course.

NAZ                   Alright. Cool.

FLORENCE           You know, Naz, if it's a delicate matter. Something that feels too personal. We could always have a private session? I wouldn't want you to feel... bounded, by the psychic energy of the group.

NAZ                   Nah. Nah I couldn't afford that.

FLORENCE           We could work something out between us?

NAZ                   Let's do it as a group. Next Tuesday?

FLORENCE           Of course. I look forward to it.

NAZ                   Cool. Florence?

FLORENCE           Yes?

NAZ                   Her name's Soph.

#### 4.

*The church hall.*

*FLORENCE, BETHAN, and NAZ are settling in a circle around a candle.*

*The sound of rain outside.*

DORA                   It's absolutely pouring out there, never seen a storm like it. Be surprised if the roof doesn't leak.

BETHAN              I think we should get started.

DORA                   Alright. And you're sure about this?

NAZ                    Yes.

DORA                 You're so young.

NAZ                    I'm eighteen.

BETHAN              You just wait. After I spoke to Greg that first time, I went home and slept like a baby. Just knowing he's safe, out there somewhere. That he loves me.

FLORENCE            Let us join hands.

*They do.*

*A beat as FLORENCE settles herself.*

If there are any spirits present with us now, make yourselves known.

We have Naz here, and she would like to speak to a Soph. Do we have a Soph here?

*Beat.*

Soph, if you're with us, we are sending you nothing but good wishes. Naz just wants to hear from you, please, she wants to know that you're alright, wherever you are?

Please Soph. Give us a sign.

*Beat.*

You could make a noise, or a cold breeze, you could move something –

*The lights flicker.*

BETHAN              Oh my god. Do you think that was –

FLORENCE            Soph?

Ok, yes. I have her. She's here. She's here.

*The lights flicker again.*

BETHAN           Shit.

DORA             It might just be playing up in the rain...

FLORENCE       Naz. Is there something you wanted to say?

NAZ              I... God.

*Beat.*

FLORENCE       She's showing me... a road. A long straight roman road, with fields running along either side, and silver birches dotted in the hedges... It's night time. There are young people... four of them... of us... in a... a red car...

*DORA is staring at FLORENCE.*

NAZ              Bloody hell.

FLORENCE       I'm in the passenger seat... the driver has been drinking... he's going too fast. Our head lights are narrow pools in the darkness. There's a sharp bend ahead, it's the end of the roman way, but it's hard to see if you don't know it's coming, if you're not paying attention.

We're not slowing down.

Another car is coming from the opposite direction –

I see it, I try to scream but it's too late –

The driver veers sharply to the left. We skid off the road, the line of silver birches rises to meet us –

There's an explosion. White lights popping behind my eyelids.

Blood. Smoke, smoke in my lungs I can't, I can't breathe –

*She coughs and rasps.*

BETHAN         It's ok. It's ok.

FLORENCE       *In the eerily convincing voice of a younger woman.* Naz. Naz.

BETHAN         Woah...

FLORENCE            You were always so lonely, even in a crowd. I could see that. I could see you Naz. I still can.

*A clattering from outside.*

Do you miss me? Do you?

Did you love me?

NAZ                    Yes. Yes.

FLORENCE            I loved you. So much. I loved you so much.

DORA                 Enough!

*DORA stands up.*

*A silence.*

I'm going to – I think the door must have blown open.

*Exit DORA.*

*FLORENCE seems to wake from a kind of trance.*

BETHAN              Are you ok?

FLORENCE            Some water, please.

*BETHAN passes her a bottle.*

*DORA returns, holding a book behind her back.*

BETHAN              What was that about?

DORA                 What?

BETHAN              You interrupted. Right in the middle of things, you ruined it.

DORA                 I had to get the door. Me next anyway, isn't it?

BETHAN              What are you playing at?

DORA                 Let's do John.

FLORENCE            I'm... a little tired.

DORA                 We've paid you for an hour.

BETHAN                   Dora!

DORA                      Used the entire club fund on you, actually, haven't we?  
                               Do John.  
                               John! Are you here John?

FLORENCE                He isn't here.

DORA                      No? How convenient.  
                               You know what I think my John would say if he *was* here? I think  
                               he'd say, watch out for the charlatan swindler who's about to try  
                               and turn a profit from your grief.

BETHAN                   What the hell is your problem?

DORA                      I told her about the car accident.  
                               *Beat.*  
                               I'm sorry Naz, but that wasn't your friend. I told her about the  
                               accident, that's how she knows about it.

BETHAN                   That doesn't prove anything. The details –

DORA                      She found them in an old copy of the paper, didn't you  
                               Florence?

FLORENCE                What do you –  
                               *DORA pulls out FLORENCE's diary, and from it a newspaper cutting.*

DORA                      Four die in tragic collision. Front page of the Newbury Weekly  
                               News from last April.  
                               You really did your homework on us, didn't you?  
                               *Beat.*

BETHAN                   She had that?

DORA                      Found it in her handbag.

FLORENCE                How dare you –

DORA                    What's wrong? Did you not see this coming in your crystal ball?

*FLORENCE snatches the diary back.*

FLORENCE            You think you're so smart. Knee-deep in your irrelevant little local history club, living in the past.

But when Bethan goes home tonight and snuggles up to her dead husband's t shirt, is she going to feel better for knowing that he's just dead? Just gone, just bones in the dirt?

Can you really say you've helped anyone?

*She snatches up her coat, and exits.*

DORA                    *To Bethan.* When I lost my John... if I'm being honest, I had ... well it was something close to a breakdown. Spoke to a nice lady for a bit. It helped.

Shall I give you her number?

## 5.

*The bus stop.*

*A sunny morning.*

*DORA and NAZ stand waiting, awkward with each other.*

DORA                    The 29 again, then is it?

NAZ                      Yeah. I joined a band, actually. Got practise, in a bit.

DORA                    That's wonderful news.

NAZ                      Yeah. I play keyboard. Turns out you can play keyboard even if you're shit.

DORA                    I'm just getting supplies. We're doing another bake sale. You know after... trying to raise funds for that trip to the British museum.

Listen, about that night –



NAZ                    It's ok, really –

DORA                 No, I've. I feel like such a div.

NAZ                    What happened to her in the end?

DORA                 Vanished. She'd already gotten Bethan to sign up for ten private sessions though. Paid in advance. In cash.

NAZ                    Shit.

DORA                 I'm so sorry. I should never have fallen for it. It's just... You're never too old to be fooled by hope. Remember that Naz.

*Beat.*

NAZ                    She was in the year above. Soph. I didn't really. I mean. She used to ride the same bus as me, every day. She'd been out since year 8, you know, and she was so bloody chill about it that everyone else was just chill too. No one bullied her or anything and. She had this long red hair, it used to catch the morning light and I... and then a few times, a few times she smiled at me, on the bus. I didn't actually know, for sure, about myself, until I saw her. And then it was like a lightbulb flashed on.

DORA                 She was your girlfriend then?

NAZ                    Nah... I was trying to work up the nerve to speak to her. I'd rehearse it all in my head, sat staring at her hair, thinking of all the cool things I'd say. But I didn't.

.                         Then one day they call this special assembly, to tell us that they, that they'd crashed and. She'd been in the front seat when they'd hit the tree and...

                           It's amazing how much you can miss a person you've barely even met.

DORA                 I'm so sorry love.

NAZ Florence said that Soph loved me. That's how I knew she was a fake. We never even had a conversation. So. She didn't love me.

*Beat.*

DORA Actually dear, when you think about it, she could have been secretly falling in loving with you too, all those times on the bus. Trying to work up the nerve to say hello.

NAZ I never thought of it like that.

DORA Well.

NAZ It still helped, you know. Even with it being a lie and all, it helped.

DORA How could it?

NAZ The trouble with a lot of goths, they're really not as sad as they think they are.

But you and Bethan and... I dunno maybe Florence even. You were really properly in-your-guts sad you know? Like me. Helped to say it aloud.

Bus's here.

DORA Take care of yourself then Naz.

NAZ Cool. Will do.

*Beat.*

DORA Naz, would you – would you like to help us, with the bake sale? Only if you've got time, I mean, no pressure, but –

NAZ That'd be nice. Yeah.