

Sample Material

The Black Pear

Alan Porter

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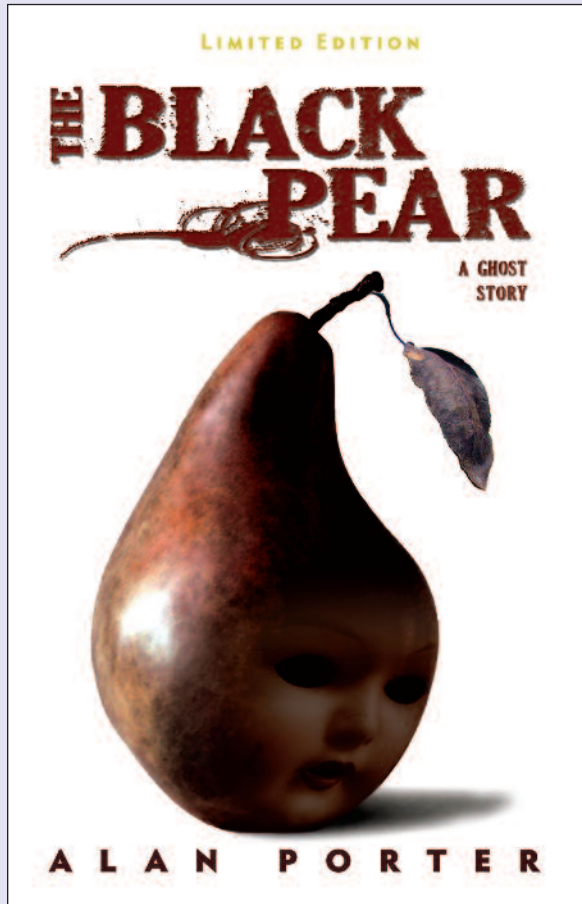
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This was the New Beginning.
Away from the memories,
away from the ghosts.

Dominic was finally behind her...

Emily Cobb is haunted by memories of a horrific past. When her family move to Orchard Grange, all that is supposed to be behind her.

But Orchard Grange has memories of its own.

What is the secret of the Black Pear tree that taps on her window when no one else is around? And why did Alice, a long-forgotten resident of the house, leave a simple silver necklace twined among its branches?

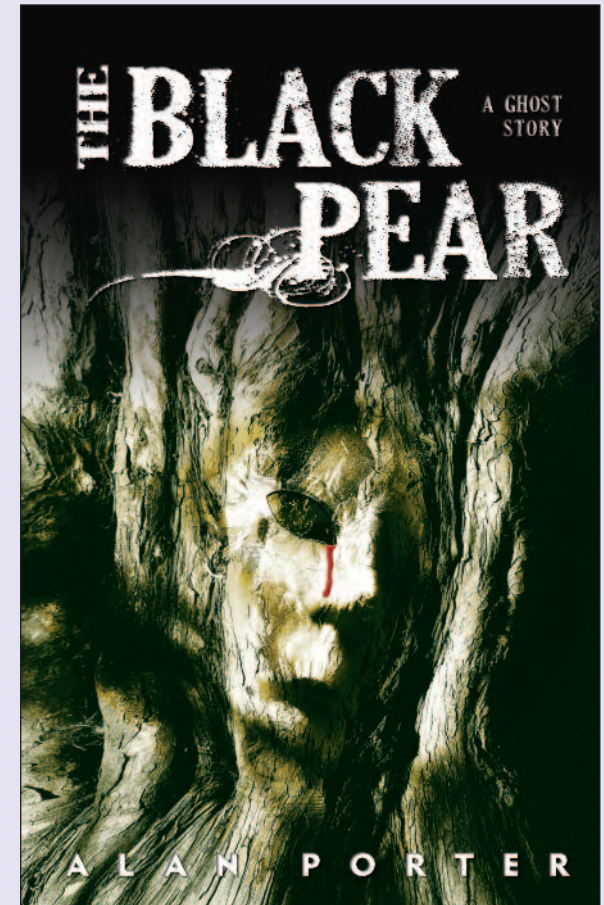
Soon Emily finds herself face to face with a past she thought she had outrun, and a future where nothing is certain any more.

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CHAPTER ONE

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THE BLACK PEAR

Note: sample material is unedited text and may be subject to minor alteration prior to publication.

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This was the start of the start, the first steps of the New Beginning. Fresh spring air, new school, new friends, a house untouched by memories. Maybe now Dominic was finally behind her.

The branches of the old Black Pear tree enveloped her like silence. She tried to believe, to fix this moment when her new life began and she could be free.

But still the doubts remained. What if Dom had somehow stowed away in the removal truck, followed them across the country? What if even now he was watching from beyond the wall, over the roof, through a faded veil of curtain? What if he was waiting... still just waiting?

Emily scanned the courtyard below her. It was bounded on two sides by crumbling outbuildings. Behind her stood the main house, in front a high wall with a brick arch that gave access to the dilapidated orchard beyond. Plenty of places to hide. Plenty of places for him to wait until darkness came.

‘Come on Emily. Choose a bedroom so we can put your stuff somewhere.’ Dr Cobb’s voice struggled out from behind a pile of boxes as he staggered past.

‘That one,’ she said, nodding at the window just a few feet away. ‘I like the view.’

‘Round here? There’s bigger ones at the front, you know.’

‘Leave her, Rex. She can always move later.’ Mrs Cobb hustled her husband through the back door and they were swallowed by the cool gloom within.

Emily sagged a little further into the tree and stared out across the orchard and the rolling fields beyond. The pear’s leaves were still tight buds, but the ancient branches provided a refuge, something solid in her ever-shifting world.

A warm breeze blew in across the fields and ruffled her hair. The tree swayed slightly and creaked, and as she adjusted her weight something sharp poked her leg. Emily hauled herself up and peered into the heart of the tree. A dead branch, barely a twig, stood at its centre. For a moment that was all it was: a sapling branch that hadn’t made it, yet something was out of place. Deep in the decaying hollow a wink of light came up to meet her.

Emily looked around. Her parents were somewhere out of sight in the labyrinth of their new home. They barely even knew she was there.

Intrigued, she reached down towards the strange object.

Slippery, scaly, cold to the touch. Emily recoiled from the snake-like body. She watched for the animal to crawl away, back into its lair within the rotting wood, but it stayed perfectly still.

Mesmerised by the tiny glint of light, she found her hand returning to the object. Her fingers closed around its fluid body. Too thin to be a snake, too long to be a millipede. An inert, dead thing, lost but safe, cocooned in the heart of this reassuring tree. Gently, she pulled it into the present.

It was a long delicate chain, silver maybe. She coaxed it up until whatever was on its end met resistance. With a slight tug, she dislodged it completely from its hiding place. In the spring sunshine a lost symbol of another time was suddenly freed. The dirty medal of St Christopher, little bigger than a child’s trinket, had been reborn.

The tree shuddered slightly in the daffodil air as Emily leaned back into its embrace and wound her new treasure around her fingers.

* * *

‘New beginning, eh?’

‘I guess.’

‘Trust me.’ Dr Cobb stacked the last of Emily’s boxes against the bedroom wall. She remained by the window, looking out over the little courtyard and the ancient tree.

‘I don’t know anyone,’ she said, half to herself.

‘You will soon, and there’s plenty to do around here. Clear the cobwebs...’

‘Rebuild the walls, more like. Prop up the roof, pull the rats out of the water tank, if we’ve even got water...’

‘It’s not *that* bad. We were never going to get a palace for what we paid for this. I like it.’

Orchard Grange was what estate agents called ‘in need of updating’. It was far from derelict, but just as far from the 1950s semi-detached familiarity they had moved from. Nestled amongst a thousand acres of farmland, it stood three quarters of a mile from the village of Merton and a little over four from the town of Danemere. It felt, therefore, a million miles from the suffocating suburban sprawl that had hemmed the family in for all of Emily’s fourteen years.

‘Lick of paint, it’ll be right as rain. There’s nothing major wrong with the old place. And it’ll do your mum good to have a distraction.’

‘Is she all right?’ Emily asked, idly scratching at the box beside her.

‘She will be, now she’s here.’

‘So you don’t think he’s still... you know...? That he could have followed us?’

‘Em, don’t start that again.’

‘I’m not. I just...’

‘He’s not here. We left all that behind, OK? That’s the point. What happened happened: *past tense*. Understand that, for mum’s sake if nothing else.’

Emily nodded and forced a smile as her father squeezed out of the door. The old floor creaked as he walked towards the front of the house. The grown-ups’ end of the house. Where they believed in New Beginnings.

She allowed the silver chain that she had kept clenched in her fist to fall free, transfixed by the patterns of light it threw on the walls of her new room.

How long had it been in that old tree, through snow and

rain, storms, wars, births and deaths...? And why? Why so deep within that slowly beating heart?

‘Emily!’ Mrs Cobb’s voice drifted in from a long way off. ‘Come and help get this bathroom sorted, then we can have dinner.’

Emily placed the necklace on the window sill and snaked between the boxes to the door. If she’d heard the tap on the window at all, she might have assumed it was a sudden gust of wind in the tree. The second tap might have made her turn and look quizzically at the skeletal knuckles of the old branches outside her window.

Then she might have seen that not a breath of wind was stirring. She might have realised that something was not quite right, even this early in her New Beginning.

As Emily wandered down the corridor to the house’s only bathroom, the tree came to rest again.

And on the window sill a little patch of silver glistened in the sunlight.

* * *

That night the storm came, creeping over the western horizon and into Emily’s dreams.

For a long time there was no rain; just the flash of distant lightning and the yearning rumble of dry thunder. Long-dead leaves stirred in the grass, whispering and chasing amongst the shadows as if scuffed by invisible feet.

A finger of wood tapped against the window.

Emily sat bolt upright in bed, lost in unfamiliar territory, unsure what has called her back to consciousness.

Shadowy figures, angular cardboard hulks, loomed in the dark corners of the room. The house held its breath.

Tap, tap, tap. A single leafless branch swayed in the night. Insistent, regular, the ticking of a clock that's forgotten the time.

Thunder boomed, closer now. The tree scraped its accompaniment to the first huge drops of rain that hurled themselves from the heavens.

A sudden flash of lightning illuminated the room, and in its glare Emily saw two streams of water trickling down the window pane. Cracks in the plaster of the walls were momentarily illuminated – meandering lattices like veins against the pale paint. An instant later the thunder crackled overhead as a rage of pain was spewed into the night.

Emily retreated back into the warm nest of bed, peeping out at the curtainless window.

Rain drummed on the roof above. A second wave of thunder shook the house.

But there was something else in that mix of stormy sounds: something unnatural. A chill shot through her, turning her flesh to goosebumps. Rolled up in the sound of nature's tempest she heard an old familiar pitch. A sound she had heard a thousand times before.

Emily retreated further, but even with her head beneath the pillow, the screams still came through.

Tap, tap, tap, the knuckle of wood beat against the window, nailing that sound home.

'It's not him...' she whispered. 'We left him behind.'

Surely?

Emily squeezed her eyes shut and began to count breaths. In and out, relax, move away from the fear.

He's not there. He's-not-there-he's-not-there-he's-not-there.

Her eyes snapped open. She knew it had to be true, so why didn't it *feel* like the truth? She could *hear* him. She knew if she peeped out of the window, down into the courtyard, beyond the tree, she might even *see* him.

What would he look like now? Go on... have a look... dare you... one look... end this here and now...

Sweat stood out on her face and she put a foot out from beneath the duvet. The rough floorboards felt solid, warm even. Real, normal. With her heart pounding in her ears, she curled her toes against the wood and wondered if this was the time. Maybe now she should face it. Face *him*, before it all started again and her New Beginning was lost for ever. It was time to stop running.

She almost did get out of bed, but in the last moment she stopped, the duvet held aloft and cold damp air chilling her skin. She listened. The screaming had gone. Was he *waiting* for her to appear at the window? Was that his plan?

She strained to hear any trace of him, but there was only the thump of her own heart and the hiss of rain on the roof.

Was he already inside the house? Up the stairs and along the dark corridor, his hand poised on the handle of her bedroom door?

She glanced at the door just as another fork of lightning ripped across the sky. Cardboard shadows shuddered in the sudden light, but the door stayed closed. She whipped her foot back into bed and listened.

Would she hear him breathing?

Thunder rumbled again, but it was a dying sound now, moving away into the night.

Emily lay motionless, counting the seconds between each soft flash of lightning and its accompanying rumble of thunder. The rain faded and soon she was listening only to the *drip drip drip* of the leaking gutter above her window. The tree was still.

After fifteen long minutes, there was nothing more to count. The storm had gone. *He* had gone now. If it really *had* been him.

Had she really heard him? Was it possible for him to have found her already? Or was that just ridiculous?

Emily managed a faint smile, which felt good in the now total darkness. It wasn't him; can't have been. Whatever was out there now, it was just a coincidence. She *was* safe now. A New Beginning; that's what everyone had told her. In the morning she would get up, and the sun would be shining and she would know for sure that it wasn't him.

Sleep took her and the night rolled on silently.

And in the first faint glow of dawn, St Christopher smiled up at the tree. A simple token, left in a sapling branch a hundred years or more before had come back to the light.

Emily had seen to that.

She had reached into the past, and the past had been waiting.

A connection had been made.