

The Bridge of Dead Things

by Michael Gallagher

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— CHAPTER 1 —
MRS SMUTTS'S EYE

‘ELIZA MAY BLAYLOCK! Stand up!’

Apart from my teacher, Mrs Smutts, nobody ever called me Eliza. It was always Lizzie. Lizzie Blaylock. It’s a plain enough name and for thirteen years it had served me fine.

An ordinary name for an ordinary girl, you might imagine. I’d certainly only ever thought of myself as ordinary. And up until that day in the spring of 1885, I *was* ordinary. Really I was. I took myself to church on Sundays, said my prayers every night, and attended school regularly. But all that was about to change.

‘Eliza! Did you hear me? I told you to stand up!’

Dorrie Canning, the girl sitting next to me, lowered her head and began to snigger. I scowled at her as I struggled to my feet. When I finally looked up, I began to get an inkling of what was on the damned scrap of paper that she’d just forced into my hand. Something awful had happened to my teacher’s face. A vein had burst in her right eye; it now resembled a spongy, peeled tomato.

‘Eliza Blaylock, were you *passing notes*?’

‘No, miss,’ I said, so sickened by the sight that I nearly dropped the crumpled paper then and there.

‘You know I take a particularly grim view of girls who pass notes in my class?’

‘Yes, miss.’ I bowed my head and stared at the floor. I suppose it probably made me appear even more guilty, but I couldn’t bear having to look at that eye for another second.

‘You were in trouble last week for not handing in your homework, Eliza. And the week before that there was your appalling outburst during morning prayers.’

‘Yes, miss.’ The truth was that Dorrie Canning had stolen my homework and ripped it to shreds in the playground; the week before, she’d put a damned spider down the back of my neck, just as we reached the part of the Lord’s prayer that goes “*Give us this day our daily bread*”.

Mrs Smutts sighed. ‘Well, if you weren’t passing notes, please explain to me what you *were* doing.’

‘I wasn’t doing anything, miss.’

‘In that case, Eliza,’ she said silkily, ‘I’m sure you’ll be able to tell the class the solution to the problem.’

‘What problem, miss?’

‘Why, the *arithmetic* problem I just posed...we *are* studying arithmetic, are we not?’

My friend, Sally Stanley, cupped her hand to her lips and whispered something to me—something about my age, though I couldn’t tell what.

‘Sally Stanley! Take your hand away from your mouth this instant!’

Sally gave a nervous cough and slumped down in her seat.

‘Well, Eliza? Do you have an answer for me?’

‘I’m afraid I can’t have been listening, miss,’ I said with

my head still bowed.

‘Not listening, eh?’ Again, my teacher’s silkiest voice. ‘Then I suppose I shall have to repeat the question. Nines go into a hundred and seventeen how many times?’

I heard Mrs Smutts’s chair being pushed back, then caught the rustle of her dress as she moved down the rows of desks towards me. It was at that point I first smelled something unusual in the room—not the everyday smells of sawdust and polish, but something much sweeter and mustier. *Pears. Rotting pears. Bruised flesh going bad by the minute.*

‘Do you imagine the answer’s written on the floor, Eliza?’

‘No, miss.’

‘Then look at me!’

I raised my head a fraction and found myself staring straight into my teacher’s blood-engorged eyeball. I gasped. Weirdly, instead of air, it was the taste of rotting pears that went shooting down my throat. I began to splutter and cough, not that it got me any sympathy.

‘Your answer, Eliza?’

Those sweet, cloying fumes were making it impossible to breathe, let alone think. Nines into a hundred and seventeen. Nines. Ten nines are ninety...ninety plus twenty-seven...

‘Thirteen! The answer’s thirteen!’ Oh, God, of course. My age.

The crimson eye blinked rapidly. ‘All right, Eliza. Now I want you to show me what you’ve got in your hand.’

‘What?’

‘It’s quite simple. You’ve got something in your hand and you’re going to show me what it is. Hold out your hand.’

The whole class went silent.

‘I said, *hold out your hand.*’

Even though I was feeling terribly giddy from the fumes, I still had the wits to put out the safe one, the empty one.

Mrs Smutts leaned forward.

‘Now the other,’ she said, glaring at me, and suddenly the stench of pears was so thick it was like snorting liquid into my lungs.

I felt my legs begin to buckle as my teacher ripped the note from my fingers and I found myself dropping to the floor, almost as if my bones had been sucked out of my body. I lay there for a moment staring at Dorrie Canning’s boots, shocked to see how they seemed to be turning red right in front of my eyes. Then I glanced up and caught the blasted girl grinning at me. She appeared to be turning red, too, though by now her face was fading fast. Just my luck: those bloated, toad-like features were the last thing I saw as the world that I knew slipped away.

*

When I awake, I discover that I’m lying on the side of a hill—a perfectly round, incredibly big, green hill—staring out into space. And though I should be wondering how on earth it is that I come to be here, the first thing that pops into my head is that I’ve been blessed with a miracle; I

won't have to cope with Mrs Smutts ranting on at me. I'm lying on my back, perhaps fifty feet from the summit, breathing the good, clean air. Then I start to notice how alive everything feels.

More than alive.

The grass that I'm lying on acts as a mattress. I can actually see the blades growing when I move, sending out new shoots to cushion me as I roll from left to right.

Dear God, I am so safe here. I am protected.

I want to say something out loud but, of course, I'm no longer certain that I have a voice to speak with. I open my mouth and out comes a single word—

'Hello...?'

Just a peep of sound, so small that it feels like a memory.

But then it builds: dull at first, then sharp—echoing like crystal—then singing, and singing, and singing until, like a million stars colliding all about me, it explodes in my ears. For one full minute, it's truly deafening.

Green hill. Blue sky. But is there anything else here?

Hardly daring to breathe now in case I set the music off again, I pick myself up and head for the top of the hill—to see what I can see.

*

So where was I *really* during all of this? As you probably guessed: down amongst the chairs and desks, jerking and fitting on the hardwood floor (and all the while doing the most bizarre thing, if Mrs Smutts is to be believed, but we'll come to that later).

By the time I regained consciousness, my teacher had sent most of the class home. Only my friend Sally and this other girl remained. I could see them huddled by the door, staring at me as if I'd grown a second head.

Mrs Smutts leaned over me and peered into my face. I quickly looked away.

'Can you move your fingers?' she asked, watching closely as I wiggled them for her. 'How about your toes? Yes? Then I'm going to sit you up.'

She went to take my hand, then hesitated. She gazed at it for a good few seconds before finally grasping me by the wrist and pulling me into a sitting position. Immediately a vast stream of vomit came hurtling out of my mouth, missing her by inches.

'I'm sorry...' I groaned, staring down at the sodden mess in my lap. Bronwyn, the girl by the door, burst into tears and clung on to Sally for comfort.

'Can't be helped,' clucked my teacher, dabbing her handkerchief over the couple of spots that had landed on her blouse. 'Sawdust will fix that for now. Just be sure you rinse that smock out as soon as you can. And for Heaven's sake, Eliza, use ammonia in the water.'

'Yes, miss.'

Mrs Smutts turned to my friends in the doorway. 'Sally, fetch me the sawdust.'

'What? Me?' Sally shrank back in horror.

'Yes, you, Sally! The bucket in the corner! Quickly, girl!'

I sat there feeling mortified, trying not to move a muscle

as Mrs Smutts scraped the worst of the mess off my smock.

‘Now,’ she said, surveying the results with a nod, ‘Bronwyn and Sally have volunteered to walk you home, and here, Eliza, is a letter for your parents. I need them to come and see me first thing in the morning. Is that clear?’

‘Yes, miss.’

‘Do you think you can stand up?’

‘I think so, miss.’

‘In the morning, then.’

Sally and Bronwyn may have volunteered to walk me home, but really they were no help whatsoever. No sooner had we got out the door than the pair of them took off at a gallop, racing through the streets of Waterloo so fast that I could barely keep up. At The Cut, when they bolted across the road, leaving me to dodge the cab horses on my own, I decided I’d had enough.

‘You two just go home,’ I shouted at them over the noise of the traffic. ‘I can make my own way from here.’

They glanced at each other with looks of relief, then scuttled off into the gloom like a pair of jittery rabbits.

Morpeth Place is a tiny turning off the Waterloo Road, just around the corner from the station. I lived in a house at the end with my father and my little sister, Mary. Three other families lived there too; well, four, if you count the landlady and her husband. We rented the two rooms at the very top—the cheapest ones, since the more stairs you have to climb, the less you pay in rent. We paid five shillings a week, which was a shilling less than the couple who had rooms on the ground floor. That might sound like a fair bit

of money we were saving, but, honestly—trust me—when you're dying of thirst and there's not a drop of water left in the jug, there's always that mountain of stairs to face if you go to the pump to draw more.

The walls of the house were paper-thin and I could hear my sister coughing even before I'd reached the top landing. I pushed open the door and was about to go through to attend to her when I noticed my dad's coat slung over a chair. I frowned. Normally it was at least another hour before he got back from the docks.

'What are you doing home so early?' I asked as I made my way through to the bedroom.

My father looked up with a guilty start then squinted at my dress. 'Gawd almighty!' he cried. 'What the hell happened to you?'

'I threw up at school. Actually, I think I might have had some kind of fit.'

'Oh, girl, you don't want to go having no fits! Lord... you don't need the doctor to you, d'yer?'

I heard the catch in his voice: doctors were expensive. Nobody in our neighbourhood would dream of calling one out unless they were actually dying.

'Don't worry, Dad, I'm feeling much better now,' I lied.

Mary rolled listlessly on to her side. My father sat her up and began tapping away at her back, his cupped fingers producing odd little popping sounds as he struck at the flesh between her tiny shoulder-blades.

'You sure you're all right?' he asked, glancing at me as he worked.

‘Certain.’

I went and got a clean smock from the drawer.

‘Then why the sad face?’

‘No reason...’

‘Girl, you got a face on you like a lemon.’

I stared at the dress in my hands. ‘It’s just...well...when Sally and this other girl walked me home, they wouldn’t say a word to me. They didn’t even ask if I was all right. You know, I got the strangest impression they were scared of me for some reason.’

‘Scared of you?’

‘Terrified, even...’

Dad laughed. ‘You can hardly blame them for that, girl. You know, I sees this chap, once, ’aving a fit. Frightened the bleedin’ life out of me!’

I noticed my father stroking his nose with the side of his thumb—always a bad sign; it usually meant that he was about to tell a lie.

‘I ends up having to stand watch over the poor so-and-so while he’s thrashing about in the street, just in case someone was out to rob ’im.’

‘Oh, really? And did...“*someone*”...manage to rob him —?’

‘Lizzie Blaylock! What you accusing me of? I didn’t take a penny from the stupid cuss! Would I do a thing like that?’

‘*Hmmm...*’ I rolled the soiled smock over my head, folded it, then started pulling on the clean one. My father stopped what he was doing to watch. I suddenly felt very

self-conscious and turned my back to him.

‘Dear Gawd above! Where’d you get them bruises, girl?’

‘Where do you think?’

‘Lord, you didn’t let on that it was as bad as all that!’

I shrugged. ‘Listen, Dad, I’ve got a letter for you from my teacher.’

My father sat bolt upright. ‘What the hell’s she sending *me* letters for?’

‘I expect she wants to see you.’

‘See me? *Why*? I ain’t done nuffin’ wrong!’

‘It’s probably about my fit.’

‘Well...I s’pose that’s different...’ He didn’t sound very convinced. ‘Read it out for us, girl; I don’t have no specs on me.’

‘Dad, we both know you can’t read.’

‘No need to rub it in; yer Dad’s had a busy day.’ He was scratching the side of his nose again.

‘All it says is that you’ve got to come to school with me tomorrow.’

Actually, what it said was:

“Dear Mr and Mrs Blaylock,

Something occurred in my classroom today—something which makes it imperative that I speak to you as soon as possible. Can you please come to see me tomorrow morning at eight-thirty? As this is a matter of considerable importance, I do hope that this time you will both be able to attend.

Yours sincerely,

Mrs Smutts.”

—not that I was prepared to tell my father any of that.

‘I s’pose I *could* take an hour off work...’ He was still scratching his nose.

‘Dad, you’d better not be thinking of bailing on me!’

‘What? Nah...nah! I was just wonderin’ what to wear.’

‘But what you’re wearing’s fine.’

‘Oh, I couldn’t go like this, girl; it wouldn’t feel right. I’d ’ave to wear me suit.’

‘Oh, please, not the suit...’

‘What’s wrong with my suit?’ he whined. ‘It’s quality, that; all wool: you mark my words...’

‘Dad, it’s three sizes too big for you!’

‘No it ain’t...well, not so’s you’d notice.’ He set to work on Mary’s back again. My sister’s cough had eased a little and her fever seemed to be down a bit.

‘Do you want me to take over from you?’ I offered.

‘No, I’ll carry on here. You go wash that dress of yours, then you can get the supper on. What say we have them kippers? They’re startin’ to pong a bit...’

‘Dad, it’s your turn to make the supper!’

‘For Gawdsake, Lizzie, why can’t you do it? That damned landlady always shouts at me for crowdin’ up her kitchen.’

‘But Mrs Ellis *hates* me!’

‘Lizzie, love, Mrs Ellis hates everyone; it’s just her way! Go on, girl...I promise I’ll come with you tomorrow if you do...’

‘Oh, very well! I suppose it’s kippers, then.’

The next morning I was pleased to see that Mrs Smutts had taken to wearing an eye-patch; the thought of seeing that eye of hers again had been giving me the creeps.

‘Considering the seriousness of the situation, Mr Blaylock, I’m surprised that Lizzie’s mother could not also attend,’ she observed sourly as she rose to greet us.

My father looked puzzled. ‘Lizzie’s mother? What the hell would she be doing here?’

I gave my dad a kick. ‘What he means to say is that someone had to stop in to look after Mary, miss.’

Dad gave me an angry look but thankfully took the hint. ‘Yeah, right...right. Mary’s the youngest, see. *Delicate*, like—got the consumption eating away at her. Needs looking after day and night.’

Mrs Smutts pursed her lips. ‘Oh, yes,’ she said, ‘I’d quite forgotten about Mary. Tuberculosis is such an awful disease; I’m sure it must be very difficult for you both.’

‘Ah, well, miss...who are we to question Gawd’s will?’

Mrs Smutts appeared to shake her head doubtfully at this, but then I realized she was actually studying my father’s suit.

‘So, Mr Blaylock, let us get down to business. Did Eliza tell you what happened yesterday?’

‘You mean about her fit, like?’

‘No, Mr Blaylock. I mean about what she *did*.’

‘What she did?’

Nothing could have prepared me for what my teacher said next.

‘Yesterday, in front of the whole class, your daughter had

the gall to imitate a former classmate of hers, a truly unfortunate girl called Thyrza Gault.’

I could hardly believe my ears—I hadn’t been imitating anyone, especially not little Thyrza. What on earth would possess Mrs Smutts to say such things?

My father frowned. ‘You call me in here just to tell me that Lizzie was imitatin’ some damned classmate of hers?’

‘A *former* classmate, Mr Blaylock; it so happens that Thyrza Gault committed suicide last year. The poor girl went home one night and downed half a bottle of hat paint—terribly toxic stuff—and, as you can imagine, she died a horrible, painful death. Tragic...tragic. It was a shock to us all. And yesterday your daughter took it into her head to entertain the class by imitating her.’

My dad’s eyes narrowed. ‘Lizzie? Is this true?’

‘No. I promise you, I never—’

Mrs Smutts struck the top of her desk with a resounding *thwack!*

‘*DON’T YOU LIE TO HIM!*’ she bellowed. ‘*I saw you do it with my own two eyes!* You were there! On the floor! Mimicking the girl in front of everybody! You contorted your face till it looked like her face; you spoke with that pathetic little stammer of hers! You even copied the terrified smile she always resorted to whenever she got picked on. And the things you said about your fellow classmates! Well! I was disgusted!’

‘But I didn’t, Mrs Smutts; truly I didn’t. I was... I was...’ At my green hill. That’s what I wanted to say. At my wonderful green hill, running all the way to the top.

My father gave an apologetic cough. 'If Lizzie says it weren't her, then you best believe it. My daughter don't lie.'

I was so proud of him for saying that, but then I clocked him giving me a big wink. I think Mrs Smutts noticed it too.

'Mr Blaylock, *I saw her do it*. The whole class did. There's no question of it being otherwise.'

'Oh, but, Dad, I didn't! Honest, I didn't!'

My teacher rounded on me with a face like ice. 'Really?' she hissed, pulling something from the top of her desk. 'And I suppose you didn't draw this, then, either?'

It was the note that Dorrie Canning had forced on me. She held it up for my father to see. It was a pencil sketch of a one-eyed monster holding what looked like a chimney-brush in its hand. The caption read: "*If you poke about in chimneys, you're bound to get smuts in your eye*".

Knowing my father, I expected him to snigger, but all I got was a stare. 'Girl, ain't yer goin' to answer your teacher?'

'It was Dorrie Canning,' I mumbled, no longer caring whether I'd be labelled a tattle-tale for the rest of the school year. 'She passed the drawing to me.'

Mrs Smutts snorted loudly. 'Dorothea Canning? You have the nerve to blame Dorothea Canning?'

'Well, why not? It's the truth!'

'Let me tell you this, young lady: Dorothea's parents sent word this morning—the girl was so distraught after the things you said to her, she went home and tried to copy

poor Thyrza. She was just about to swallow that paint herself when her mother walked in and caught her. Luckily the woman managed to grab the bottle away from her daughter before any real harm could be done. Even so, they still had to send for a doctor to calm the girl down.'

'A doctor?'

'Yes, Eliza, *a doctor*. Dorothea Canning had a very narrow escape. And so, I might suggest, have you...' Mrs Smutts studied me long and hard with her one good eye. Her expression wasn't difficult to read. 'Why did you do it?' she asked, and I knew from the tone of her voice that we were no longer talking about the drawing.

How do you answer a question like that when telling the truth clearly isn't going to work?

Mrs Smutts shook her head. 'Of course,' she continued, watching me squirm, 'it's quite impossible for you to return to class. You realize that, don't you? So I imagine you'll be needing a job.'

'*What?* You're saying that I've got to leave school?'

'That's precisely what I'm saying, Eliza.'

'Can't she just h'pologize?' my father asked weakly.

'You really don't seem to appreciate the seriousness of this matter, Mr Blaylock. Look at the number of complaints I've had—' Mrs Smutts tapped a pile of letters on her desk '—all of them threatening to withdraw their daughters if Lizzie remains here at Webber Street Girls. This is my livelihood, I'll have you know; the School Board pays me strictly by results and I am not prepared to see my salary go walking out the door simply to accommodate your badly-

behaved daughter! Now, as it happens, I recently received a letter from a local woman, asking for a girl to train up as a maid.'

'A *maid*?' I shrieked.

Mrs Smutts ignored the outburst and kept her eye trained on my father. 'It's the best offer she'll get, Mr Blaylock, I can assure you. I should think very carefully about it, if I were you.'

Dad scratched his chin. 'She'd get paid for this, right? Proper money and all?'

'Of course.'

'What d'yer reckon, girl? A maid. It ain't so bad bein' a maid...'

I stared at him in disbelief.

'Present this,' said Mrs Smutts, prodding a hastily scrawled letter into my hand. 'Just tell the woman that Webber Street Girls School sent you. There's no need to mention my name; she'll know what this is about. But be aware: I'm going out on a limb for you, Eliza; so for Heaven's sake, *don't let me down!*'

Praise for *The Bridge of Dead Things*:

“[A] fantastically detailed historical fiction novel—rich with period details from 1800 London, colorful characters, AND a very gripping ghostly tale...This is a well written, entertaining story about a young girl who has powers she doesn’t understand...I would recommend this book to anyone who likes historical fiction, or a good thriller. Read this book, you will not be disappointed.”

★★★★★—Paula Fetty-King, Smashwords Reviewer

“This was SO good! The story of Lizzie and how she discovered she is a “bridge” to the dead. Some shivery parts and an historically accurate look at mediums, spiritualism and the way Victorian people, especially the poor lived. Gallagher always does his homework and you can feel how much he loves this era and these characters.”

★★★★★—Chris Keen, LibraryThing Early Reviewer

“I absolutely loved it! I don't give out 5 stars very often, but I did for this book! It grabbed me from the start and didn't let go...Mysteries abound and Gallagher does an amazing job creating an atmosphere of rising fear and creepiness...I hope that there are many more additions to the Lizzie Blaylock series because I now consider myself a firm fan!”

★★★★★—Suzy Schettler, LibraryThing Early Reviewer

“The ins and outs and what-just-happeneds will keep you turning the pages...”

★★★★★—Nightwing, LibraryThing Early Reviewer

“I was amazed by the author’s accurate depiction of the 1800s. He does it in a way that you feel as though you are back in time.”

★★★★★—Melissa P., LibraryThing Early Reviewer

“If you’re a fan of the old penny dreadful (like Sweeney Todd) then you'll enjoy reading about Lizzie Blaylock and what happens to her after she has a ‘fit’ during class...Unlike the penny dreadfuls the

characters are fully drawn and the plot is cohesive.”

★★★★★ —Amber Stults, LibraryThing Early Reviewer

“This is a terrific first book for Mr Gallagher. It’s listed as a YA title, and I think that’s exactly where it belongs. It is an outstanding introduction to several genres that are traditionally set outside the realm of YA, the most significant of which is that of the gothic.”

★★★★★ —Robb Flynn, robbflynn.com, LibraryThing Early Reviewer

“Very nice re-enactment of the Victorian era, and a cast of very interesting and compelling characters.”

★★★★★ —zjordi, LibraryThing Early Reviewer

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