

# PAST IMPERFECT

## CHAPTER TEN

### STRANGE SIGNS AT THE SEASIDE

Joe and Sarah met up in the park the day before Joe's holiday in Norfolk began. Tom was with her and he said that he wished he was going to the seaside too and Joe said he wished he was because he would love to have made sand castles for him. He made a little one in the sand pit but without buckets and spades and without real, slightly damp, seaside sand it wasn't the same. Sarah said that she liked building sand castles too. Now, ordinarily, Joe loved going to the seaside on his holidays but this time he was really half regretting it - he wasn't sure if it was because he wasn't going to be seeing Sarah or if it was because he wasn't going to be seeing her aunt. Or was it both of them? Sarah's family were going off to Scotland in a day or two which Sarah would usually have looked forward to, as well. She was rather regretting that she wouldn't be seeing Joe again although she wasn't going to say so.

They talked over their last adventure while Tom played with some friends of his. They were even more confused after this last trip to the past.

"I still don't understand how we missed America," said Joe. "I checked up on it when I got home. We've got a globe of the world that Dad bought me a few years ago and you really can't miss America if you sail across the Atlantic."

"There's something else," said Sarah. "You remember Old Ben Bun came out with some saying of his nephew from Stratford? After that display in the sky."

"Oh yes, something about Horatio and more things in heaven?" said Joe. "I didn't understand it, really."

"No," nodded Sarah, "nor did I - but I remembered it from somewhere and I checked up on it when I got home. Dad and Mum belong to a local drama club and they perform plays occasionally. They did one last year - by Shakespeare; it was called Hamlet. Have you heard of it?"

"I've heard of Shakespeare," answered Joe, "and Hamlet rings a bell but I don't know anything about it, really. I think it's all a bit heavy going, that sort of stuff."

"So do I," agreed Sarah, "but I have to help with Dad learning his lines because they always give him the big roles. That line old Ben came out with is one of Hamlet's in the play - it was written by Shakespeare. I thought I'd heard it before and when I got back I looked it up."

"You mean old Ben's nephew might have been Shakespeare?" asked Joe. "It's a bit unlikely. Perhaps he'd just heard it somewhere. It might have been a well known saying in those days."

“Yes, but do you remember what Sakowa said?” reminded Sarah. “He said that he had been working in a theatre in London where old Ben’s nephew was writing plays and acting and that it was Ben’s nephew who told him about the voyage that was being planned to prove the world was flat.”

“Oh, yes. I remember now,” nodded Joe. “Do you really think that Ben’s nephew was Shakespeare?”

“I thought it could be, but then I checked on a few dates as well,” said Sarah. “I used the big encyclopaedia we have at home. Do you know when Columbus sailed on his voyage to discover the West Indies?”

This was sounding like a history lesson and Sarah was sounding really knowledgeable - in fact she was enjoying herself. Joe shook his head.

“It was in 1492.” she said emphatically. “Do you know when Shakespeare lived?”

“No, but I bet you do!” said Joe. “You’ve been looking all this up!”

“That’s right,” nodded Sarah, “I’ve been doing my homework. Shakespeare wasn’t born until 1564. If Leif was sailing in the same year as Columbus then he was at sea in 1492, and yet Sakowa spoke to Shakespeare in London. Now how do you explain that?”

“There’s a gap of a few years, isn’t there?” mused Joe.

“You bet there is,” said Sarah, “and no America either. Doesn’t that suggest anything to you?”

Joe shook his head. “What are you getting at?” he said, “I’m just getting more confused.”

Sarah had thought this out and she took a deep breath. “I think that it wasn’t the real past,” she said. “Not our past, anyway. It could all be some sort of dream that we both had or perhaps it was like - oh, what’s the word? Where they put you to sleep and make you do daft things?”

“Hypnosis, I think,” replied Joe. “Is that what you mean?”

Sarah nodded. “That’s it. I saw it on the telly once. I wonder if we were hypnotised - or if there could be another explanation.” She stopped and waited for Joe to ask her what it was. She was rather disappointed because Joe screwed his face up, thought a bit and came out with the answer she had wanted to come out with herself.

“It could be someone else’s past that we were in,” he suggested. “It sounds daft but it’s the only other idea I can come up with. Then there’s that sea monster. I’m pretty certain that things like that don’t exist in our world. Or at least they don’t any more. It sounds a bit like some of the science fiction stuff I read - perhaps we were in the past of some other world altogether - or even in their present.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” agreed Sarah, “but it sounds so unlikely. Anyway, how are we travelling there? Is Thunder Head taking us in some kind of space ship?”

“The idea of Thunder Head being in charge of a space ship is frightening, and as for that daft Roman architect - I can’t see him as a space pilot,” replied Joe; Sarah nodded.

“Aunt Fifi’s house isn’t really equipped to be a landing place for a space ship either - which leaves hypnosis,” she said.

“What about the sky?” pointed out Joe. “How were we hypnotised to see the sky open up when we were in the park?”

They looked up to the sky a bit apprehensively, half expecting it to open up again, but it was dull and full of grey clouds; there was no sign of a break in them to let the sun through, let alone a glimpse into the far reaches of the galaxy.

"I hope it's better than this on holiday!" said Joe.

"Don't forget to send us a postcard," reminded Sarah as she collected Tom from the swings to go home for lunch.

"I won't," promised Joe. "Should I ring when we are back?"

"Yes, and have a good time," replied Sarah as she set off for home. Joe asked if she wanted him to walk home with them but Tom decided it by grabbing Joe's hand and setting off. He was firm friends with Joe now.

"He'll miss you," said Sarah, who wasn't sure if she wasn't going to miss Joe as well but wasn't going to say anything.

"I'll miss Tom, too," said Joe, giving her little brothers hand a friendly squeeze and Tom told Joe all about the game he had with his spaceship the day before, while Joe felt that he was going to miss Tom's sister too, but wasn't going to say so.

They said goodbye and once Joe got back home it was all hustle and bustle as the family packed so he didn't have time to miss anybody.

The next day they drove to Norfolk and Joe went straight down to see the sea as soon as he could, while his parents unpacked. Right on cue the sun came out - it had been dull the whole day until then. Joe walked along the beach and threw pebbles into the sea, paddled in the water and sat on the sand and listened to the sound of the waves. This was what he really liked doing - and idly he watched the waves wash up and down the shore and move the pebbles around - and then he sat up in surprise because he noticed that some of the pebbles were assuming a strange shape on the sand as the sea washed over them. It was like the drawing of an intricately coiled chain, about three metres long. The sea continued to wash over them but they stayed unchanged now, as clear as anything, glistening on the sand and laid out in that odd, twisted spring-like shape. He thought that someone must have fixed them there like that before and now the tide was just washing them clear of the sand and debris but even as he looked the waves washed in and added another three pebbles to the end of the shape, very precisely. He still thought that most of the shape must have been fastened into the sand in some way and he walked over to it and moved some of the pebbles with his foot. They moved easily enough - but as a wave washed in again, it moved those pebbles right back where they had been.

This was very odd indeed; the shape seemed to be complete now - two-dimensional but just like the drawing of a three-dimensional object - a madly coiled and knotted spring. Andy came down to the beach to tell Joe tea was ready - he noticed the shape and asked if Joe had done it. Joe shook his head, walked thoughtfully back up the beach with Andy and climbed up the path to the top of the cliff. From there he looked down to the shape on the beach. It was disappearing now, washing away, the pebbles swept all over the place by the sea as if the shape had never been there.

He was rather quiet that evening after tea and his brother teased him.

"He's missing his girlfriend! He's missing his girlfriend!" he taunted.

Mum quickly hushed them both before an argument developed and his dad suggested they went out for a walk in the evening sunshine.

They walked along the cliff tops and enjoyed the warm air and the clear view of the sea. Joe was missing Sarah and her aunt, it's true, but he was quiet for another reason as well - he was thinking over their adventures and trying to make sense of them - and he was also thinking about that strange shape he had seen in the sand. Suddenly his father pointed out to sea.

“Look!” he said. “It looks like some plane has been stunt flying in the sky!”

They looked and Joe gasped. A long white trailing cloud spiralled across the evening sky, glowing yellow and red in places as the setting sun caught it. It was coiled into the oddest shape, intricately knotted and coiled and while it was long enough to look like the vapour trail of a jet, it didn't seem high enough somehow - and what was more, it was identical to that strange shape Joe had seen in the sand earlier. It wasn't fading or spreading, either, like a vapour trail would do, but stayed where it was and even coiled itself up a little bit more. They watched it for a few minutes, and then a breeze blew up and began to disperse the cloud. They continued their walk, with Joe even more puzzled.

The next day Joe got into the routine that he enjoyed on his holidays - up early, he assembled his wooden toy yacht, went down to the model boating pond and had a great morning sailing the yacht in the light breeze. It wasn't a very big yacht, nor was it particularly special, but it was one of Joe's favourite toys. His dad had found it once in a junk shop and had repaired and repainted it, while his mum had sewn the sails. Now it sailed really well, better than many of the brand new ones that other children had. Andy had a bigger yacht and he joined Joe later and they had races on the pond. This was how Joe liked to spend his mornings and in the afternoons he liked to go down to the beach. It was a fine, hot day and his parents brought a picnic lunch for them all to eat on the cliff top. Afterwards Joe went down to the beach and built a big castle. His brother helped him and for once they didn't quarrel much. Joe was really enjoying himself, all thought of adventure, Sarah, Tom and Aunt Fifi pushed to the back of his mind - and then Andy pointed to something in the sea.

“That's odd,” he said. “What a funny shape that seaweed is making.”

Joe joined him by the waters edge and looked. Some distance away in the waves was a long piece of dark green seaweed, which wasn't really unusual. What was odd was that it was coiling up, knotting, tangling and uncoiling, to form a huge, long convoluted spiral, just like the shape formed by the pebbles and the cloud the day before. This time, though, it was if the shape was alive, like some great sinister snake, writhing after its prey, moving with determination and purpose. Then a great wave washed over it and it disappeared, all traces gone. This was something else for him to think about. What did these odd shapes mean? He wished Sarah was there along with her aunt so he could tell them about it. He bought a postcard that evening but the space on a postcard is very small - you can't really write all the details about strange shapes in the pebbles, the clouds and the sea in a space that big. All he could really say was that he was having a good time on the beach and sailing his yacht. He didn't put “wish you were here” although he felt like doing so.

He posted the card the next day on the way to the model boat bond and was walking along, lost in thought, when he heard someone call his name. He turned round - and there was Sarah, running down the path towards him, waving a bucket and spade! Joe was really glad to see her - and amazed, too, asking her how on earth she had got there. Then he saw a familiar figure walking towards them along the path - Aunt Fifi, grinning broadly and waving to him. She bought them ice creams and they sat on a bench on the cliff top while she and Sarah explained everything.

It appeared that Aunt Fifi felt that she needed a holiday; the money that Mrs Smyth-Brown had given Aunt Fifi after finding her Pekinese was enough to pay for ten days at the seaside and she had asked if Sarah would like to go with her. Sarah had jumped at the chance and her parents had been glad she could go off and enjoy herself - although her parents both had some doubts about Aunt

Fifi. However, Sarah was very fond of her Aunt and had promised to behave, so they had agreed to her going.

“I don’t go on holiday much,” said Aunt Fifi. “It’s not the money - it’s the Chief. Can you imagine going abroad, settling down on an aircraft and then having old Thunder Head manifesting himself and demanding bottles of duty-free booze. It tends to worry the stewardesses when they come across an extra passenger in a feather head-dress.”

Joe showed Sarah how to sail the yacht and when his parents arrived to take him to lunch, Joe introduced Sarah and Aunt Fifi to his parents. His mum had already met Sarah and was pleased to see her again and to know that Joe would have someone of his own age to play with. Aunt Fifi was a bit startling to meet for the first time - all hung with her bangles and necklaces and in her brightest purple dress, she did stand out a bit. However, they were pleased to let her look after Joe for the afternoon and after lunch Joe and Sarah went down to the beach and built castles and paddled. Later they sat on the sand and Joe told Aunt Fifi and Sarah about the strange sights he had seen - the pebbles, the clouds and the seaweed.

“We were thinking that all these adventures and things might have been some kind of hypnosis,” he said, “but Mum and Dad and Andy all saw those odd things in the sky and the sea.”

“I know what you mean,” said Aunt Fifi, “You try to find some rational explanation for it all and then old Thunder Head blunders in reeking of firewater and you have to go back to the drawing board. But you’re not the only one who has been seeing things, either.”

“No,” agreed Sarah. “I took Tom down to the park in the morning and met Auntie there. We were really early and the man who looks after the park was there. He had raked over the sand in the sandpit and it was all smooth, or so he said. We got there just as he was looking at it in a really odd way.”

“That’s right,” nodded Aunt Fifi, and she continued, “we had a look in the sandpit and there was a very odd shape in it, just like it had been drawn in with a bit of stick, looking like a coiled and spiralling snake or something, a bit knotted up in places. The man thought it might have been done by a snail, but as he said, it must have moved like lightning because it had only just appeared.”

“Not many supercharged snails about in the park, or so he said,” giggled Sarah. “Then I was helping Dad with a bonfire yesterday afternoon and we got it going really well, all the garden stuff had dried out and burnt well and then suddenly loads of smoke came out and spiralled up in a really odd way - and instead of going away in the wind like smoke does, it hung there and just writhed about. It sounds very much like those things you saw - all coiled up and knotted all over the place.”

“I’m mystified,” sighed Aunt Fifi. “I’ve never come across anything like this before. Then I nearly missed the train this morning.”

“Auntie wasn’t ready when I got there this morning,” said Sarah. “All her necklaces and things were all tangled up in a terrible muddle.”

“That’s right. I usually hang everything up very carefully when I go to bed,” said Aunt Fifi. “With all this metal work hanging around me it can easily get muddled if I’m not careful, so I arrange it all nicely on some hooks by the side of my dressing table. This morning when I came to put them on you should have seen the mess!”

“All coiled up and twisted!” said Sarah, meaningfully. “Remind you of something?”

“Any sign of the Chief?” asked Joe.

“No thank heavens!” replied Aunt Fifi. “I think he’d stand out a bit if he appeared here. We’re staying in a respectable hotel in the town and I don’t think they would appreciate an extra guest suddenly walking through the walls. Of course he can become invisible but in a way that’s worse.”

“How do you mean, Auntie?” asked Sarah.

“Well for a start, people can still hear him and hearing some disembodied voice speaking that fractured English he comes out with can be a bit unnerving. And then of course, if you talk back to him, it looks as if you are the barmy one, talking to your imaginary friend. People look at you very oddly.”

Joe thought that with Aunt Fifi’s somewhat unusual appearance, she must get used to people looking at her a bit oddly but he didn’t say anything.

“To change the subject, how do you fancy seeing the show on the end of the pier?” asked Aunt Fifi. “It’s quite famous, the show here. It’s just about the last of the old pier shows.”

Neither Joe nor Sarah had ever seen one of the shows that were put on every summer in the theatre that stood at the end of the grand old iron pier that projected into the sea and dominated the promenade of the town. These shows were indeed quite famous but Joe’s parents had never got round to going to one on their holidays. Later that afternoon Aunt Fifi met up with Joe’s parents again and they agreed that Joe could go the next day if Aunt Fifi could get tickets. The next day Joe met up with Sarah and Aunt Fifi by the model boat pond. Aunt Fifi had given Sarah some money and she had put it together with some of her pocket money and bought herself a toy yacht. The two children sailed their boats for while and then took them back to the hotel where Aunt Fifi and Sarah were staying before they went down to the pier so Aunt Fifi could buy the tickets for the show.

Once they arrived on the pier they had quite a surprise. A charity fancy dress day was being held, with stalls manned by local people in all sorts of costumes. There were sailors, soldiers, clowns, Romans, kings, queens, scarecrows and cowboys.

“Old Thunder Head might fit in after all,” chuckled Aunt Fifi, as they bought some fudge from a stall manned by a spaceman.

“Someone call?” came a familiar deep voice from behind them, and they turned to see the Chief, arms folded, looking magnificent in his costume. Unfortunately he had made a slight error in the place where he had chosen to make his appearance. In fact he was only just on the pier. The deck of the structure was surrounded by an ornate iron railing and there was then a very narrow ledge the other side of the railing. The chief was on that narrow ledge and he suddenly realised as much. With a yell, he overbalanced and fell backwards, arms flailing, into the water with a mighty splash.

“Clot!” said Aunt Fifi unsympathetically. “Typical, isn’t it? Has to make an exhibition of himself.”

Fortunately no-one had noticed the sudden appearance of the Chief in all his finery or for that matter his sudden disappearance. Joe was rather worried about him; he wondered if he should throw one of the life belts that were placed around the pier into the sea for the chief to grab hold of. However, he didn’t need to. The Chief reappeared, dripping wet, this time on the right side of the railings.

“Me all wet!” he announced.

“You’re dead right there!” giggled Aunt Fifi. “Your trousers will soon dry in this sun but your head dress is all soggy.”

“Me send it back!” said the Chief and he closed his eyes. The soggy head dress with its droopy feathers disappeared to be replaced by a really splendid one, huge and wide, taller than the last one and with a double row of brightly coloured feathers that ran the length of the Chief’s back.

“This my best one, full ceremonial, for finale!” the Chief said proudly.

“That’s a brilliant costume, mate,” said a cowboy manning a cake stall. “You could raise a few bob for charity by posing for photographs with the tourists!”

The Chief looked mystified until the fancy dress day to raise money for charity was explained to him. Then he raised his eyebrows and nodded.

“Heap good idea!” he said. “Me been out of show business for a while and out of practice but soon get back into swing!” He accosted a couple of holiday makers strolling round the pier. “Hey, palefaces!” he said. “Lady here take your photo with me and you give money to poor! Okay?”

The couple were taken aback by this, Joe and Sarah were in fits of giggles and Aunt Fifi looked very embarrassed, but to their amazement the couple agreed and handed their camera to Aunt Fifi while the chief posed with a huge grin on his face. In his magnificent costume he really did look good and they handed him £5! Aunt Fifi took it and passed it to the stallholder-cowboy who whistled and handed them a collecting tin to see if they could raise any more and to make their efforts look a bit more official. Now the Chief was really in his element as he went round the pier, accosting holidaymakers - and the mayor too, by mistake. As the Chief said later, how was he to know that the man with the gold chain wasn’t a tourist? He was very successful, and loads of people gave him money to pose while Aunt Fifi, trying desperately to keep a straight face, took the photographs. Joe and Sarah were very impressed by him and noticed that he had a real knack of approaching people and then posing and acting just like a professional entertainer, chatting up the tourists and making them laugh. It grew near lunch time and Aunt Fifi handed the money they had collected to one of the men in charge of the charity event. He checked the amount they had raised and he whistled with amazement and delight as he counted it.

“Thank you very much!” he said to them. “There’s over £100 pounds here!”

They went for lunch in the cafe at the end of the pier, next to the theatre. Aunt Fifi bought them sandwiches and cakes and they sat down to eat.

“You look as if you’ve done this sort of thing before,” said Sarah to the Chief.

Thunder Head nodded. “Long time ago!” he said. “Yes, once me in show business. Miss it sometimes - me good showman!”

“Well, you certainly did a good job today,” agreed Aunt Fifi. “However, there is something we want to tell you about and ask your advice on.”

She and the children told the Chief about the strange things they had been seeing. The Chief listened and frowned. “Hmm,” he said pensively, “it all sound very odd. Me not know what to make of it. Wish Chang were here. He heap good at explaining all these things.”

“Whose Chang?” asked Joe.

The Chief looked sad. “Him my spirit guide. Good old man, very old - once he was monk in Tibet. Him try to teach me to be spirit guide. Taught me everything I know - me not know much because me rotten pupil.”

“The firewater doesn’t help,” pointed out Aunt Fifi.

“True,” nodded the Chief. “But it all very difficult to understand anyway. Him departed now for Happy Hunting Grounds.” The chief seemed very sad and thoughtful, staring into his tea.

“I thought you came from the Happy Hunting Grounds,” said Aunt Fifi. “Forgive me for saying so, but I thought you were dead.”

“Me understand why,” said the Chief. “But me not dead - at least me not think so. Feel alive. Stubbed toe this morning on horse. It hurt, so me think me still alive. Not able to explain it though. When me younger, me learn how to track animal for days, even over rocks, how to kill buffalo, skin it, cook it, use almost every bit of it for something, also how to shoot bow, do war dance, do dances for rain, return of spring and good hunting, but non-temporal astral metaphysics not part of my learning then. When me come to learn that, me too old to take it all in.”

“Me too,” agreed Aunt Fifi. “I learned all the usual school subjects, then when I left I learned high kicks, the can-can, the fan dance and the splits, but that’s my lot, I’m afraid. I’ve tried reading about it all since I retired but I can’t say its helping me sort all this out. I’m just getting more confused.”

Sarah said, “I thought it was me that was confused.”

“No,” said Joe, “I’ve joined the club. I thought it was only one of us that might be able to summon that cloud and make us both see things, but now we’re both seeing them when we’re apart.”

“That where old Chang come in,” said the Chief. “He could explain it all. Wish he were here.” He was really looking very sad now.

“Cheer up,” said Aunt Fifi kindly. “Look, we’re going to the End of the Pier Show this afternoon. We’re going to get the tickets now. It starts in an hour. Why don’t you come with us?”

The Chief brightened up. “Stage show?” he asked. “Oh, it been a long time since me see one! Yes, me like to go very much. But problem!” he went on. “Me very tall and head-dress taller. No-one see if they behind me. And if me stay here you pay for me. Me go invisible and watch from side of stage. Hope you enjoy it. Me go now.” He closed his eyes in preparation for vanishing.

“Hold on!” said Aunt Fifi, grabbing his arm. “Don’t you think that suddenly vanishing in the middle of a crowded cafe might just make people panic a bit?”

“Good thinking!” agreed the Chief. “Me disappear in Little Boys Room! See you all later after show.”

He went off to the toilets and Aunt Fifi sighed.

“He can be a trial!” she said. “Just pops up whenever he feels like it.” She looked thoughtful. “Do you know,” she said, “I never realised that he had a spirit guide. I always thought he was, well, you know, passed on to the Other Side as in dead. He thinks he’s not dead at all. I wonder just where he is from.”

“He said that he had been in show business,” said Sarah. “Does that mean he was on stage like you, Auntie?”

“Quite possibly,” replied her Aunt. “I really don’t know much about him at all, now I think about it. I wonder what sort of shows he was in? Come on, we’ll get the tickets for this afternoon.”

