



The Midden

‘Come on, Paul!’ shrieked Julia as she ran down the dune, the sand sliding away under her bare feet. Below her lay the beach, a white expanse bordered by mounds of seaweed. Beyond the seaweed lay the sea, a great mass of slow, tumbling waves, each solemnly dumping another load of the green-brown kelp.

Julia didn’t wait for an answer to her call – a brief backward glance showed Paul atop the dune, staring single-mindedly into the sea. She kept on running, breaking into an erratic skip to avoid the stinging bluebottles cast ashore to die in the morning sun.

Entranced by the view, Paul slowly moved his gaze along the beach, like a swivelling human telescope. He

looked mainly to the north, where grey rocks thrust out into the sea, forming a spit, full of intricate pools and dangerous channels.

Above the spit, a strange hill rose out of the sand, a reddish hill, crowned with thousands of gleaming white fragments and shells. The hill dominated the shore, rising high above the lesser dunes that flanked it.

‘Come on!’ shouted Julia again. Paul looked down and saw that she was already walking towards the spit. He quickly switched from looking to walking mode and took a diagonal path to meet her, half sliding down the face of the great dune.

‘Isn’t it fantastic?’ burbled Julia, as Paul finally arrived at the spit, panting from his exertions. She spoke without looking at him, intent on the tiny fish that swirled about her toes in the rock pool.

‘Yeah, great!’ answered Paul enthusiastically. ‘Do you want to go out on the spit? We might see a dolphin from the end.’

‘Not now. Wouldn’t you rather climb that?’ asked Julia, pointing at the hill.

‘What sort of hill is that?’ asked Paul. ‘I’ve never seen a hill like that on a beach!’

‘It’s a midden. Daddy told me about it last night. You can just see it from the house.’

‘What’s a midden?’

‘An Aboriginal midden,’ explained Julia, ‘is sort of a really old rubbish tip. It took thousands of years to build up, just by people dropping shells in the same place. That’s what those white things are.’

‘But what about the red dirt?’

‘Oh, that,’ whispered Julia, her eyes widening in mock fear. ‘The dirt is the remains of old, old bones.’

‘Maybe I don’t want to go up there after all,’ said Paul, echoing Julia’s tone of mock fear. Deep inside though, he was a little frightened. The Midden looked quite safe in the bright sunlight, but at night, it could easily be a different, more chilling place.

‘Let’s go then,’ shouted Julia, springing to her feet and bounding up towards the Midden. Not quite so eager, Paul slowly got to his feet and walked after her.

It took several minutes to climb to the top, as the shell fragments cut their bare feet, making it like walking across a field of broken glass. Still, it was possible to thread a precarious path through the shell patches by keeping to the sections of plain red earth.

On top of the Midden, the sea breeze was much stronger and the scent of salt was heavy in the air. From their vantage point, they could see clearly for kilometres, both to the north and south. With their newly extended horizon, an ocean-racing yacht had just become visible out to sea.

‘The Sydney to Hobart race goes by here,’ said Paul, watching the yacht’s spinnaker billow out to catch a sudden breeze. ‘We might see them go by if we stay long enough.’

‘Hey, I’ve found a nest!’ cried Julia, who had started exploring the irregular bumps and hollows at the top of the Midden. Paul didn’t come at once, so Julia re-emerged from her hollow and dragged him round to see her find.

The nest, if it was one, measured a good two metres in diameter, and was made of loosely woven sticks and dried mud. It was empty, save for a single ball of feathers about half a metre wide. Paul looked at it curiously, noticing that some of the feathers were longer than his arm and very, very black.

‘Julia, what sort of bird makes a nest like this?’

‘Oh, some sort of sea eagle,’ replied Julia, who was poking at the ball of feathers. She found a scrap of brightly coloured cloth and eagerly began to take the ball apart to find whatever might be inside.

‘Sea eagles don’t have black feathers,’ said Paul. ‘Anyway, this bird must be a lot bigger than a sea eagle.’

‘Must be a wedge-tailed eagle then. They’re the biggest birds in Australia. Everyone knows that!’

‘I think we ought to go,’ said Paul, a chill fear suddenly creeping up the back of his neck. As he spoke, the sun

went behind a large black cloud that had sneaked in from the west. Almost instantly, the Midden was dark, the summer heat suddenly absent.

‘I’ll go when I find out what’s in this,’ replied Julia, ripping feathers from the ball. ‘I think it’s some sort of doll.’

‘Who cares?’ shouted Paul. ‘This place isn’t safe. Let’s go!’

Julia ignored him and continued to pull feathers from the ball. Already she had uncovered a hand made from shiny pink cloth and was pulling free a head.

In the twilight created by the cloud, a darker shadow swept across the nest, accompanied by a cawing shriek, horrifyingly loud. Instinctively, Paul looked up, and screamed. Hovering above them was a giant crow, its wings beating down a ferocious wind.

‘Come on!’ shouted Paul, holding a hand over his eyes to keep out the swirling dust. With the other, he grabbed Julia and tried to pull her away from the nest.

‘No!’ cried Julia, pushing him away. ‘I’ve almost got it!’

Overhead the crow screamed and dropped like a stone, landing directly in front of Paul, who grabbed Julia. Both of them tumbled over backwards. The giant crow lunged forward as they fell, its vicious beak jabbing through the air, missing them by centimetres.

Lying on his back, Paul looked up into the crow's black eyes, glittering above the long, lethal beak. He saw the sudden spark of calculation as the crow decided who it was going to skewer.

The beak flashed through the air straight at Julia, but at the same instant, she pulled the rag doll free of the last remaining feathers. The crow disappeared in mid-lunge, leaving only an impotent shadow. Even that faded as the sunlight splashed on to the Midden, now no longer obscured by the black cloud.

'Look,' said Julia, holding up the doll. 'She's beautiful.'

Paul looked at it, bemused, still half expecting the crow to come back. He saw an old rag doll in fairly good condition. It seemed unexceptional, save for the face, which to him looked malign and thoroughly evil. Its eyes were made of black-pupilled greenstone and seemed to follow him with an uncanny interest.

'It's evil!' exclaimed Paul, unable to believe his sister had become entranced by such a horrific thing. She hadn't even said anything about the giant crow and now only had eyes for a grotesque doll.

'No, she isn't!' snapped Julia, clutching the doll to her and getting to her feet. 'Her name is . . . her name is . . .'

'*The Ragwitch,*' intoned a voice in Paul's mind, like the bass boom of a warning bell.

‘Her name is Sylvie,’ said Julia, kissing it on the forehead. ‘Yes – I shall call her Sylvie.’

As Julia kissed the rag doll, Paul thought he almost saw it curl a lip in satisfaction. He blinked – the doll’s lips were unmoving, sewn into a perpetual smile.

Their walk back to the house felt strange to Paul. Normally, Julia skipped ahead, shouting at him to come and look at things, or just to catch up. Now she lagged behind, clutching the rag doll, hardly looking to left or right.

Crossing over from beach to grass, Paul felt more cheerful. They were almost at their house, and surely his parents would notice Julia’s odd behaviour; and they wouldn’t approve of picking up a strange doll from the beach, particularly if he told them about the giant crow.

But he didn’t. Within the first ten minutes, Paul knew that his mother couldn’t see the rag doll. She’d even straightened Julia’s shirt without paying any attention to the doll cradled in the girl’s arms. If *she* couldn’t see the doll, his businesslike father didn’t have a hope. And Julia’s behaviour was put down to tiredness – normal after the first day’s holiday at the beach.

‘What about me?’ Paul wanted to ask. ‘I’m not tired! Anyway, Julia never gets tired!’

But he knew that they wouldn't understand this simple logic. After all, they had a logic of their own. If Julia was tired, then Paul must be even more tired – so both of them would go to bed early.

Instead of going to bed and trying to forget his troubles, Paul went over to Julia's room. She was lying in bed, whispering to the doll. She didn't notice Paul until he spoke.

'Julia,' Paul said anxiously, 'Mum and Dad can't see your doll.'

'I know,' replied Julia smugly, looking up from the doll. 'She told me that they wouldn't. You shouldn't be able to either, you know.'

'Well, I *can* see it!' cried Paul angrily. 'And I don't like it. It's evil and horrible, and it's making you go all strange!'

Julia was silent for a second, then she looked into the doll's black-pupilled eyes. They seemed to sparkle with their own dark flame, telling her what to do.

'Goodnight, Paul,' Julia said remotely. 'Please turn the light off when you go.'

'No,' said Paul. 'The doll told you to say that. You can see it in its eyes. Throw it away, Julia!'

Julia shivered, and Paul saw a tremor pass across her face. Slowly, she began to turn her head back to the Ragwitch, drawn to the black-glinting eyes. Horrified,

Paul dashed forward to grab it, to throw it away – anywhere away from Julia.

But when he touched the doll, it spat aloud and huddled closer to Julia, twining its three-fingered hands through her hair. And a chill voice burst into Paul's head, hurting the inside of his ears and somehow cutting at his mind.

'I am the Ragwitch!' screamed the voice in his head. 'Your sister is nothing – she is only part of ME!'

With that 'ME!', the Ragwitch screamed again, still inside Paul's head. He felt his arms stiffen, the muscles tensing, and suddenly he felt himself being hurled backwards, without control, to land sprawling against the door. Desperately, he tried to get his hands to obey him, but they crept up the door towards the light-switch, and then, with a frenzied twitch, flicked off the lights.

In the darkness, the Ragwitch spoke again, but this time the voice was real – and it came from Julia. Low and hissing, it crawled about Paul, sending shivers from his stomach out along his spine.

'Leave, boy. What can you do against my power? Your sister is mine and MINE ALONE!'

Paul shuddered under the impact of the voice and felt tears start in his eyes. The voice got into his head, and again his hands were moving, under Her control.

Slowly, his hand turned the doorknob and his legs began shuffling him out, away from Julia, out of the darkness and into the light.

‘No,’ said Julia, in her normal, everyday voice. She sat up in bed and looked straight at Paul. A shaft of light from the open door caught her face, and as their eyes met, Paul felt his muscles relax. Hesitantly, he tried to move and found himself free of Her control.

‘She wants to take me somewhere,’ whispered Julia, her face contorting under some great, unseen pressure. ‘Paul, you must . . . She wants to take me to . . .’

Looking into Julia’s eyes, Paul saw them suddenly glow and change colour – a black wash floating out to cover the white. Slowly, the black coalesced around the pupil, and the white started to green over in exact duplication of the rag doll’s evil eyes.

Paul felt himself becoming drowsy, looking into those gleaming, black-pupilled eyes. They seemed to get bigger, become like lanterns . . . lanterns illuminating a ground far below, as he fell towards them . . .

‘Run!’ screamed Julia – the real Julia. ‘Paul! Run!’

Shocked free from the mesmeric eyes, Paul turned and ran, slamming the door behind him.

Paul spent the rest of the night half-awake, with the light on and his door open. Every time a board creaked, he felt a start of fear – but the house was old and prone

to settling, and nothing stalked him through the night. His parents, normally guardians against fear, slept with an unnatural soundness and could not be woken.

At last, towards dawn, fear became weaker than exhaustion and Paul fell into a troubled sleep. He dreamt of giant black crows screaming in from the sky, only to turn into huge rag dolls, with black-pupilled eyes against green – eyes that grew larger and larger, and more menacing, filling the whole horizon with their glowing evil . . .

With a stifled scream, Paul fell out of bed, dragging the blankets with him. It took a few seconds for him to really wake up and his heart to slow its pounding. Bright, cheery sunlight filtered in around the curtains. Sleepily, Paul looked at the clock next to his bed. It said six o'clock – at least an hour too early to get up. Paul yawned and climbed back into bed, rearranging the blankets with a few kicks and half-hearted dragging motions.

He was just rearranging the pillow when he heard the front door close – the slight, snicking sound of someone easing the door shut as quietly as possible.

Paul knew it had to be Julia. His parents never woke up before eight. He felt an unpleasant butterfly in his stomach, remembering the events of the night before. And Julia's words: 'She wants to take me somewhere.'

‘I’ll have to save her,’ said Paul aloud, hoping the sound of his own voice would make him feel better. But it didn’t – it only made everything seem even scarier than before. He just didn’t know what to do. Julia was the one who knew what to do – Julia was the one who always knew, and now she was the problem.

Paul felt tears welling up in his eyes and a terrible feeling of hopelessness swept over him. What would Julia do, if it was me? he suddenly thought – and there was the answer. Julia wouldn’t abandon him, so he wouldn’t abandon her. He quickly threw on his clothes, laced his sandals and ran out of the house, not bothering to be quiet with the door.

There was no sign of Julia, but her tracks were easy to follow across the sand and down to the sea. Paul ran at first, but he soon slowed down. It was too tiring to run on sand.

But Julia hadn’t stopped at the sea. Turning along the coast, she was heading for the rocky spit – or the Midden. Paul thought he knew which one it would be. Grimly, he began to run again, up towards the Midden, the hill of ancient bones.

As Paul expected, Julia was there, kneeling near the giant crow’s nest, doing something with the sticks that it was made of. Paul could see no sign of the rag doll.

Relieved, he sprinted up the last few metres, calling out, 'Julia!'

Julia turned around – and Paul skidded to a stop in shock. He felt like he'd been winded, struck so hard he couldn't breathe at all. For the person in front of him wasn't Julia at all, but a hideous mixture of girl and doll: half flesh, half cloth, and the eyes and face had nothing of Julia left at all, only the evil features of the doll.

'Callach!' spat the Ragwitch, raising one three-fingered hand – and Paul was rooted to the spot: paralysed, save for his eyes, which darted from side to side, looking for escape. He wanted to close them, to not see whatever was going to happen, but his eyelids refused to move.

The Ragwitch laughed, a chilling cackle that sent a spark of fear right through Paul. Then She turned back to the nest and started to rearrange the sticks.

He had obviously been granted a slight reprieve. Paul watched the Ragwitch with some glimmerings of hope. She was taking the sticks out of the nest and making them into a sort of pyramid, breaking the tangled ring and giving it an ordered shape.

She worked quickly. In minutes the nest was no more and the pyramid was complete: a neat construction of sticks, as tall as Paul. He watched, fascinated, as the

Ragwitch drew designs in the red earth around the pyramid – strange symbols that were all straight lines and nasty-looking pictures, like some ancient form of writing.

She didn't look at Paul until the writing was complete. Then She stood up, looming over him. Even in the short time since he'd first seen Her at the nest, She'd grown rapidly and was now at last two metres tall.

He noticed that She now had teeth as well – rows of thin, shark-like teeth, hideously out of place in that smiling, red-lipped doll's face.

She came closer and Paul shuddered, watching the teeth as She leant over him. But he made his eyes go out of focus – he wouldn't look into Her eyes, not after the night before. Her breath struck his face, cold, and somehow smelling of darkness and fear. Paul stared his eyes into even more of a blur and waited to be killed.

Then the Ragwitch spoke, using Julia's voice – a voice changed and tainted but still recognisably Julia's.

'You will stand here for ever, boy, as a monument to those who would keep Me penned here. Alive, unmoving and wishing you were dead. Much like your sister. Yes, she still lives . . . but only inside Me!'

The Ragwitch laughed again and turned back to the pyramid of sticks. She extended Her three-fingered

hand and began to chant: a rhythmic, dissonant series of words that rose and fell in a grating counterpoint, jarring Paul's ears.

As She continued the chant, sparks started to form about Her hand. The bright red flecks of light danced around, forming a globe of flickering light about Her three fingers. Suddenly, the Ragwitch stopped chanting and the globe of sparks flew forward into the pyramid of sticks, which exploded into flame. As the red flames flickered up, Paul felt a rush of cold bursting out from the fire, as though the fire itself were a giant, living icicle.

The Ragwitch bent over and drew another sign in the red soil. The flames licked still higher and turned green at the tips, and a dull roaring filled the air, like a rushing wave. She stepped into the fire and turned to face Paul with Her arms outstretched. Paul saw that She was laughing again, but he could only hear the roaring and the cold blasting at him from Her magical pyre.

Then the flames blew sideways, almost out to Paul's feet. Each tongue of flame was like the petal of a flower, with the Ragwitch in the middle, cupped like a dragonfly in a water lily. The flames flickered once, twice, and then snapped back in a blinding flash. The pyramid exploded, sending burning sticks flying into the air, some landing on Paul, to scar him with their icy flames.

There was no sign of the Ragwitch – and Paul found that he could move again. Numb from fear and disbelief, Paul's first thoughts were of anger.

'You were wrong,' he shouted at the sky. 'Your magic's no good. I'm going to find You and get Julia back! You won't get away from me!'

The shouting seemed to help a bit and Paul felt strangely confident. Carefully, he began to gather the still-burning sticks, rearranging them into a rough copy of the Ragwitch's pyramid.

Together again, the sticks burnt heartily, washing Paul with cold. He looked at the red flames, had his second thoughts and copied the last sign he'd seen the Ragwitch draw. The flames turned green at the tips and the roaring sound began. Paul took a deep breath, screwed his eyes shut and stepped into the icy heart of the fire.