

FLORENCE

“Mommy,” said the girl, “this is Florence.”

It all started the day when the girl introduced her mother to an imaginary friend. The mother took no notice at first. Nearly all young children have a pretend friend, she told herself. The strange thing was that the girl seemed to think that Florence was real, rather than part of a game of make-believe. She was *someone*, a real friend who only she could see.

The girl had always been an obedient child, but as soon as Florence entered her life she started being naughty: breaking and throwing things, always when no one was around. It could easily have passed for a tantrum if the girl had admitted it was her, but each time she blamed it on Florence. The mother always accepted the excuse, but one night she had enough: she screamed at her daughter, telling her that she needed to accept responsibility because *Florence didn't exist*. The girl showed no emotion, just stepped back and said: “I don't think you should say that, Mommy.”

The next day, the mother received a call from the girl's school. Could she come in? There was a matter the headmaster would like to discuss. She jumped into her car and rushed to the school. She couldn't help feeling uneasy when she stepped inside. The headmaster greeted her in his office and gestured towards a chair. The mother sat down and he told her, in a solemn voice: “Your daughter has no

friends. She is distant, does not listen to what others are saying and seems to talk to someone who doesn't exist." The mother said that she knew about the friend, but what did this have to do with school? The headmaster explained that two weeks before a little boy had told the girl that her imaginary friend didn't exist. Two hours later, he had been walking down the stairs and had fallen, breaking two ribs. As soon as he got back from the hospital the boy told everyone that he hadn't fallen, but that something invisible had pushed him. Everybody had tried reasoning with him because it was impossible: the staircase had been empty at the time of his fall. He had insisted and the rumour had begun. Everyone had gradually turned their eyes towards the girl and her *invisible* friend, Florence. Panic had started growing, in the school at first and then in homes as the children told their parents, who had started calling the school asking it to suspend the girl. For that reason, the headmaster suggested to the mother that the girl take a little break from school until the rumour calmed down. The mother accepted, as she thought some rest would make the girl feel better.

The first few days went well, the girl seemingly not talking to anyone anymore, the mother calmer and more relaxed. The only thing that made the mother angry was how others looked at them. People were now terrified, crossing the street when they saw them; mothers telling their children not to approach the mother and the girl's house – they were thought to be evil. After a week, the girl started acting strangely too, spending all day locked in her room, calling out to someone. At night, the mother would hear sobbing coming from the girl's room. One night, it was so loud the mother got scared and barged in. The girl was sitting on her

bed, and as the mother approached, she screamed: “NO! Don’t come near me! You’re bad, bad, bad...”

She kept repeating the word as her mother got her into bed. When the girl spoke again, she simply said: “Florence is gone. I haven’t seen her in days. I miss her, Mommy.”

The girl started crying again, and the mother knew there was nothing she could do.

The next morning, the mother went out to buy some milk. By the shop, an old lady asked her if she was okay. The mother didn’t know what to say, she simply nodded her head and held back her tears. The old lady put her hand on the mother’s shoulder and said: “This might be hard to hear, but if I don’t tell you no one will. You have to know: your daughter’s imaginary friend is bad. Strange things are happening at your girl’s school, bizarre accidents: people falling down stairs, shelves crashing down on students, children bashing into walls. At least one person gets hurt every day, always when there is no one around. The children tell everyone that a mysterious force is the cause of their ‘accidents’. More and more are staying at home, more and more are being locked away by their parents. Everyone is terrified and in every mouth there is always one name, the source of all this chaos: Florence.”

The mother, suddenly terrified, ran back to the house, calling the girl’s name. She searched every room, until she finally found her. The girl was lying at the bottom of the basement stairs, her neck broken, a crumpled note in her hand: “Florence came back.”