

Things sometimes went bump. Small bumps, but they'd make the saucers shiver, and my grandparents would glance at each other then quickly glance away. Earthquake, they'd tell me. Far underground, hundreds of feet probably. Nothing to worry about.

Sometimes, walking by the canal, I'd see things. Squirmy, pale things. Albert, the ancient pike, soon snapped them up. He'd cruise just below the surface, weighing me up until I got big enough to stare right back. My uncles, anglers all, admired Albert. 'He knows when to disappear' they'd say. For years, I thought they were talking about fishing competitions.

Then there were the stories about the missing children. Out too late, people would mutter. The police would drag the canal, send in divers, but always in the daytime. I wasn't allowed near water after dark. In winter, grandad would meet me at the school gate and walk me home. He carried a whistle, it was usually in his pocket, but when we were on the towpath he'd put it round his neck. He taught me to look out for Albert, hanging still in the orange water, a lurking shadow. 'If Albert's about, walk home fast. If he's not, then run.' We ran, a couple of times. Granddad made a game of it, but boy could he run. He never let go of my hand, not once.

A couple of teenagers went missing near the Pigtail Lodge up Highfield, then a middle aged angler didn't get home one morning. Enough was enough, the miners muttered, and the lodge was drained down to the mud almost overnight. There was a fire that night, on the fields behind the lodge. The men took coal and wood by the barrow full, and the clouds glowed red above them. The men came home stinking, then the next week they turned out to work in the mud. An old shaft, they said, it needed making safe. The lodge stayed drained, and kids played in the reeds amongst the frogs and mud until a new generation ploughed it up and dried it out and made a football field of it. The next generation built houses on it, and sometimes, in the kitchens, the saucers shiver.

Word count - 367