

# A Castle of Bone

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

When Hugh is given a new cupboard, little does he know the secret it holds or how it will affect him and all his friends. Because the cupboard changes things - sometimes dangerously - and if it has the power to change a wallet into a pig, imagine what it can turn Hugh's friend Penn into!

And then there are Hugh's dreams; or are they really dreams?

# **A CASTLE OF BONE**

Penelope Farmer

**RHCP DIGITAL**

For Judy with love,  
and for Sandy Hayhurst  
who made writing this book possible.

*. . . And bones of solidness  
froze*

*Over all his nerves of joy . . .*

– WILLIAM BLAKE

*The achievement of Manwyddan the wise  
After lamentation and fiery wrath  
Was a construction of the bone fortress of  
Oeth and Anoeth.*

– WELSH TRIAD

## CHAPTER ONE

“What’s that noise?” asked Jean. They all stood staring at the cupboard. Penn against the light looked huge – his hair edged by light, blazed, caught sun, almost reflected it.

“What noise?” Penn asked.

“But there’s nothing,” Hugh said, “except my wallet.” Penn’s sister Anna had just put it there, then closed the cupboard door.

“Oh wait, oh *listen*,” timid Anna said.

And there was a noise; very small at first; rustlings, tappings, scrapings – but gradually louder, like a tree Hugh thought, a tree growing inside the cupboard, its branches dragging, rapping against the door, blown by some hidden wind. In a moment the sound, increasing, was of neither tree nor wind, it was a huge sound booming within those narrow wooden walls, some huge form banging and racketing in there. And he heard another sound also, as loud as the first, but tighter, shriller, which sounded, only it could not be, like the squealing of a pig.

Penn as usual took Hugh’s decision for him; leaned forward, pulled open both the cupboard doors; within the instant of the click a large white sow fell out, rolled over, picked itself up and blundered, terrified, across the room – quite unmistakably a real pig, with hanging dugs and crude, prehistoric-looking skin; Hugh, though dazed, could see the little bristles that edged its ears, saw the blue symbol stamped on its flank, like the price mark stamped on supermarket goods; as it missed Anna by inches, knocked over his cluttered chair –

“Hugh, the *door*, watch out,” Penn yelled, too late, because the pig which had not for one moment ceased to squeal, dashed through, turned sideways and fell down the first and narrowest flight of stairs. Hugh diving to Penn’s shout, was unable to check the movement of his hand,

slammed the door shut, and as he opened it again the pig fell down more stairs, crashed with full bulk, dangerously, against quivering bannisters, careered along the landing, down a third flight, thundered its feet on the wooden hall floor then shot out of the door into the front garden, Penn and the others in confused pursuit.

Hugh saw Jean's cat bolt upright on a flowerbed watching them; he saw the pig now lurching but still swift enough, run out through the open garden gate. Jean was wailing like a little girl.

"It'll get run over, it'll get run over."

"We'd better try heading it to the park," shrieked Penn.

The gate crashed shut behind them with a clash of iron. The wooden fence shivered all along its length. The black cat watching had not shifted fractionally.

"Your ma must have heard," Penn was saying breathlessly to Hugh.

"She might not. I think she's out. Jesus, just look at it" - he saw the pig weave erratically across the road - "something's going to hit it *soon*."

"At least they slow down here - but on the main road . . ."

Penn took speed again. Ahead of him the pig took speed too, its tail uncurled by speed streaming out behind, and by good luck turned right (the way they needed if they were to drive it towards the park), first kept to the pavement for twenty yards or so, then swerved diagonally towards the traffic island in the middle of the road, where at last it paused. Perhaps the blink of the orange beacons had bewildered it. A car almost halted at the crossing too; thought better of it, jerked on; the pig as immediately decided to move. Pig squeal met brake squeal - whether pig actually met car was impossible to tell, but its flight continued more furiously than ever, while everywhere along the road people stopped and turned and heads shot from cars. Anna and Jean slowed, panting. Hugh entangled himself with a woman and a yellow dog. Even Penn was not

close enough to head the pig up the first road leading to the park, and would have failed at the second probably, had not the pig itself swerved wildly and taken that road of its own accord.

There was a gate at the far end. It was designed to keep deer from getting out of the park, so might not normally have let in a pig, only a man happened to be holding it open for a woman with a pram. Neither noticed the pig until it careered past them; at which the startled man let the gate swing back, barring the pig's exit to the road, but leaving its entrance clear into the park. It ran itself once, frantically, into the iron bars. The second time freely, easily, it ran out, through the trees towards a patch of summer bracken - white pig they saw, black trees, green bracken. Then the pig vanished. They did not see it any more. Almost at once they ceased to hear it squeal.

## CHAPTER TWO

It had taken Hugh and his father most of the morning to find that cupboard. Hugh's room had sloping corners and a window looking into the ash tree, but till now it had had no cupboard, and in one of her periodic domestic agitations his mother had declared that he needed one and sent them both out to look. Hugh, having better things to do with a Saturday at the beginning of the summer holidays, argued that he had hung his clothes on hooks for years, so what, suddenly, was wrong with hooks now? And if he must have a cupboard, why did he, Hugh, have to help look for it? A cupboard was a cupboard, was a cupboard. He did not mind what it looked like. His father said that hooks were adequate but cupboards better; that Hugh with his artistic pretensions should know better than anyone that function should not be divorced from appearance, and if he did not know this was it not about time he learnt? Furthermore, he said, jamming on the battered green felt hat that he wore regardless, both winter and summer, he was not basically interested in buying a cupboard for Hugh either; a fact Hugh would never have guessed from the amount of unlikely and unsuitable shops he seemed prepared to explore in search of it.

They had found themselves at last, both hot and cross and bored, outside a junk shop in a little street that ran down towards the river. There was a trestle table on the pavement with a heap of old music sheets on it, torn and dog-eared, another heap of scratched 78-speed records, a tray of battered, shineless jewellery, chipped plates, chipped cups, stacked precariously, also a cardboard box which said 6X20 Country Vegetable in two-inch-high blue letters and held an assortment of bleached and dusty books. ANTIQUES the board above the door said. "Junk," shouted Hugh's father, striding under the board and into the shop, turning impatiently to beckon Hugh after him.

Inside Hugh sneezed twice, rapidly. It was at least as radical a change of environment as would have been plunging under the sea. Every sense shocked, retreated, reorganized itself. His skin at chill produced goose pimples, his nose sneezed at dust and mould and damp and another, sweeter, but as aged smell, and his eyes seemed to fade in the dim, furred, almost tangible light. To his ears the sounds that escaped from the outside world seemed distorted, like sounds at the far end of a narrow tunnel.

Never in his life had he seen so many things crammed into so small a space - furniture piled up, pictures fitted together on the walls without an inch between them, every table and chair heaped with smaller objects, spoons and ornaments and candlesticks, fans and necklaces, inkwells and ash trays, books and more records. Even the ceiling was crowded, hung with chairs and tables, like angular creepers, among which Hugh's father had to duck his head. The shop altogether was like a forest, Hugh thought, a close dark jungle. But a forest without life; nothing moved in it. For a moment with a shock Hugh saw a white face watching them, but it was a china face on a china head, with blind white eyes and a pale, straw-like wig.

There was a gramophone as well as records. Hugh would not have recognized the rectangular black box, but his father did. Snatching a record from the pile and setting it on the green baize turntable, he fitted a handle into a slot and wound up the gramophone. As the turntable spun round, scratchy but lively music began to jitter across the shop.

The old man stood between a low cupboard and a tall chair watching them. They did not see him come, nor where he had come from. There were gaps between objects, here and there, but nothing as defined as a doorway, though there must have been some way into the back of the shop, Hugh thought.

"We're looking for a cupboard," he shouted, guiltily, above the music. For his father, jiggling to it, rapturously, still

seemed to have noticed nothing. "That cupboard," he said pointing. His eyes fleeing beyond the old man, he had noticed the cupboard for the first time.

The old man had come nearer then and taken off the needle arm and stopped the gramophone. The music left a shadow of itself, then was altogether gone. Yet it was still, to that, to the sound of something called Dinah's Ragtime Boogie - conjuring from some unexpected corner of his memory irrelevant images of feathered and beaded ladies jiggling rhythmically among potted palms - that Hugh saw it - his cupboard - for the first time.

Immediately he had never in his life wanted anything as much as he wanted that, not even his first box of proper oil paints.

It was extraordinary that he could have wanted the cupboard so much. "It's monstrous, abominable," his father said. And Hugh could not have denied it if he tried. Yet that had not made any difference to him. And his father was so bored with the search by now that he did not bother to argue the point for long; at least it was a cupboard and cheap at that. A cupboard he had, after all, been instructed to find.

## CHAPTER THREE

The houses were joined, a pair, tall, pointed and curious; either unsymmetric without the other. Their windows had stonework like eyebrows over them. Along this road all the houses were in pairs but no pair was like any other one, the gables different in particular, some as curvilinear and plump as in this pair they were angular and sharp. The right-hand house had recently been converted and Penn and Anna's parents had bought the flat made of the top two floors. All the paint on this house was new, builders' sand and ladders still littering the garden at the front of it. But Hugh's and Jean's parents had lived in the whole of the left-hand house as long as Jean at least could remember, and it had not been painted for easily as long as that. The paint was a faded pink, the stonework yellowish. Rhubarb and custard Penn called it when he wanted to annoy Hugh.

The cupboard arrived there that evening, long after Hugh had given up hope of it. The sun - a fire between crimson and scarlet - squatted on the skyline as they carried it in through the garden gate; two men in stained white aprons, oily-headed, who mopped themselves and complained bitterly, in dialogue, when it came to lugging the thing up three flights of Victorian stairs. How in all the supernatural . . . could it be so heavy they wondered, and indeed Hugh wondered too, for as cupboards go it did not look particularly heavy. Its doors, swung open, looked thin as matchboard.

"Shoddy, there you are, Hugh, I told you so," declared his father with gloomy satisfaction. "Ain't known another like it, for weight not," the balder of the two men said as he closed his fingers round Hugh's father's inevitably flamboyant tip.

"It's hideous, monstrous," Hugh's father said with enjoyment, examining the cupboard carefully again.

But when Hugh went to bed that night, his clothes were still strewn about the room. He did not know what had stopped him putting them away in the cupboard. Not laziness certainly, though he was usually lazy about such things. But some odd reluctance that he did not try to explain.

And in bed, when he shut his eyes, the empty cupboard assumed . . . in the darkness . . . What it assumed did not frighten, so much as exhilarate him; his heart thumped extraordinarily. Yet he would not let himself analyse what he felt, he forced his mind away into pictures, images.

He began to try to visualize the cupboard. He had tried before, that morning, after they had bought it. His father had decided to have a drink and Hugh had sat on the wall overlooking the river with a glass of Coca-cola beside him, trying to remember what the cupboard looked like.

But he had not been able to. If momentarily he had caught some detail, immediately he had attempted to fit another to it, it would slide away again. He had had a very strong feeling of it, yet could not translate this visually; which had annoyed him because as a rule he was not only observant, but practised consciously retaining what he observed, in order to use it in his painting. He had come to do this almost automatically. Yet now in bed though he had seen the cupboard once again, when he tried to visualize it, still no picture came into his mind.

Instead he saw other images from that morning beside the river: the Coca-cola - a dark elliptical liquid in the glass with a small white moon in it of reflected light - when he had raised his eyes from that, there had been across the river a group of trees, and now in bed that image crowded out the nearer one. They were a group of willows and alders, the alders darker, dourer-looking than the pollarded willow trees.

The group seemed to be closing in on him, rushing towards him through his head. In a moment he could focus