

MY TIME ON EARTH

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This year Ian Creasey published his second collection of SF stories, *Escape Routes from Earth*. It contains several tales that first appeared in *Asimov's*, along with a few other pieces from elsewhere. Ian still lives in Yorkshire, and hasn't yet run out of Yorkshire settings for stories. He says it helps that Yorkshire is the largest county in England. "My Time on Earth" is set in York, a city that has seen a lot of history ever since it was founded by the Romans.

Earth is a world full of ghosts. That's because it's so full of people, and they've got all that history they keep going on about. I wanted to see a ghost, as there's no point visiting Earth if you don't see anything weird. When I asked my parents if we could do one of the ghost walks, they weren't keen. But they wouldn't let me go on my own, so I just kept nagging them—

Yes, Stacey, I did see a ghost. Eventually. I'm getting to it! Do you want to hear this story, or not? Sit down and listen, all of you, and eat your chocolate.

Like I was saying, we were in this place called York. It's really old. I mean, everything on Earth is ancient, but York is really *really* old. There's an enormous church—I forget what it's called. Munster? Minster? I should remember: my parents sure spent long enough dragging me round it. Enough stained glass to last a lifetime. Who goes to church on holiday? If I ever do that when I'm grown up, then feel free to slap me. Just walk up to me and say, "Amy, there are ten million things you could be doing on holiday, and there's plenty of churches at home." *Slap! Slap!* But not too hard, or I'll get annoyed and slap you back.

Anyway, when we came out of the Minster, we saw signs for the ghost walk. And this was the last evening before we were due back on the spaceship, so I nagged extra hard. My parents asked the guy how long the tour would be, and he said ninety minutes. They told him to cut it down to an hour, because there's a lot to squeeze in when you're visiting Earth.

Basically it was a walk around the town, with this guy describing all the gruesome things that had happened everywhere. The twilight grew darker and darker, and the stories became bloodier and bloodier. He took us to a tower on a grassy hill, where loads of Jews were massacred in the twelfth century. It made my skin crawl. I was so creeped out, I held my mother's hand—

Yasmin, there's no need to sneer at me like that. I didn't actually hold Mum's hand: I'm not a baby. I'm just *saying* that I held her hand, to give you some atmosphere and show you how scary it was. We definitely need atmosphere. Turn that light off, and I'll tell you the rest of this in the dark.

Where was I? Oh yes, the ghost walk. We wandered through a ruined abbey, listening to tales of tragedy and violence. A woman in costume leapt out at us. That wasn't scary at all, because she was obviously fake. But it made me jump. I was glad to get back to the hotel. My parents sent me up to bed, while they went out to catch a late show.

The hotel was centuries old, with narrow corridors and poky odd-shaped rooms. It was supposed to be haunted, but Dad said that was just the usual crap they tell the tourists. Every hotel wants to sound more historic than the next, so they compete on how many specters they have wafting around their attics.

I lay in bed, looking up at the timber beams across the ceiling. The curtains were open a fraction, letting in a soft orange glow from distant streetlights beyond the garden. I couldn't sleep. It was our last night on Earth, and I wanted to stay awake to enjoy as much of the holiday as possible. Also, I was spooked out by the stories of all those murders and plagues. The whole town was soaked in blood. I kept shuddering when I thought about it.

The silence didn't help. Most of the time, Earth is incredibly noisy, because there are so many people and they never shut up. But that night it was dead quiet. I could only hear the big clock in the hallway below, chiming each quarter-hour. Every time the chimes faded, the silence grew more stifling.

Before I saw anything, I heard the voice. At first, I didn't even realize it was a voice. It began with a low rumble that made my stomach turn to jelly. Then there was a sighing noise, like a distant wind. Finally it turned into words. "Amy . . . Amy . . . I need your help."

I sat up. In a corner of the room, next to the wardrobe, I saw a floating figure. It was a bearded man dressed in horrible old rags. His face and clothes were the color of ashes.

Instantly, I pressed the light switch by my bed. Nothing happened. The light wouldn't come on, no matter how hard I smacked the switch.

"Amy, don't worry," the man said. "I won't hurt you. I need your help. And I can help you, too." His voice was low and rasping, like stones grinding together.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"It's a long time since anyone asked my name. I'm Luke Trent, at your service." He ducked his head, bowing to me.

"You already know my name, I see." My heart pounded, and I was still scared, but I felt a little reassured that he didn't seem very threatening.

"Oh, yes. I watch you all come and go, come and go. For so long I've been watching. . . ." He sighed a great sigh of weariness.

"What do you want?" I said. "I'm not supposed to give money to beggars." As soon as I said it, I felt silly, because if he was dead then he probably didn't need money. But he looked so poor and ragged. And everyone on Earth always wanted money from us.

"I want to see new skies," he said. "I'm tied to this tiny corner of York, because I can't move far from my anchor. You can't imagine how dull it is, being stuck here for years upon endless years."

"Your anchor?" I asked.

"My heart's blood," the ghostly figure replied. "I died when I was stabbed. I fell onto a wall beside the street, and my blood soaked into the stone. That's what binds me. But if you take the stone back to your home planet, then I'll see somewhere new

at last. Oh, how I long to see somewhere new!" He spread his arms in a pleading gesture. "I could repay you. . . ."

"How?"

"I can find things out. Would you like to learn people's secrets? Would you like to hear what your friends say about you?"

It sounded tempting. "Yes, I would," I said.

Hey, Flavia, there's no need to give me such a dirty look. Even in the dark, I know when you're pulling a face! We're all interested in secrets. That's what a secret is: it's what someone wants to find out. Don't tell me you wouldn't spy on people, if you could.

"You need to go and get the stone," the ghost said. "It's in the garden, half-buried underneath the holly bush. It'll be dirty. But don't clean it, in case you wash the blood off."

"I'm not going outside now," I said. "It's the middle of the night."

The ghost laughed bitterly. "The stone will still be there tomorrow. It'll be there forever, unless you take it. And I'll be here forever, too. I can't stand it any more! Take it, for the love of Christ. Promise me you'll take it!"

I was worried about what he might do if I refused. So I said, "All right, I'll take it."

He smiled, and I saw that he had hardly any teeth. "I'll be forever in your debt," he said. "Don't tell your parents about this. It'll be our secret, and no one will suspect how you know so much."

Obviously, saying "Don't tell your parents" made me suspicious. "There's things we're not supposed to take back with us," I said.

"Like what?" he demanded.

"Um, rabbits." That was the example I remembered. "And other things. Anything that might reproduce, and disturb the ecosystem."

He grimaced. "Look at me! I'm dead—I'm not going to reproduce. I don't know what an ecosystem is, but I definitely won't disturb it. If only I could!"

"Good point," I admitted. "I guess I can take you. You'll need to know about my friends and everyone in school. I'll tell you who—"

The apparition began to fade into a grey blur. "I grow weary," he said. "It's hard for me to manifest so far from my anchor. I need a long rest before I can appear again." His voice diminished to a rattling whisper. "Take me with you. I beg you, in the name of our Lord!"

The ghostly figure dissolved and disappeared. I sat frozen in place, waiting for my heart to slow down. Then I got out of bed and opened the curtains wide, letting more of the streetlights' glow into the room. Everything was the same as usual, as if nothing had happened.

Suddenly, the bedroom light came on. It made me jump, and I whirled round. But again I saw nothing unusual. I pressed the light switch several times: it was working normally now.

On Earth they have a drink called "tea," which comes in little bags of brown grit. It doesn't taste of very much, but you get used to it. I boiled the kettle. By the time I'd had a cup of tea and a biscuit, I'd calmed down enough to try to go back to bed.

Of course, I couldn't sleep. I heard my parents returning, and I wondered whether I should talk to them. "Mum, I saw something scary in my room!" But like I said before, I'm not a baby. Besides, from the way they giggled and stumbled on the stairs, I could tell they'd been drinking wine. You can't talk to them when they're like that. When I grow up, I won't ever drink. It's just disgusting.

Yes, Stacey, you can slap me if you ever see me drinking wine. Tell you what, let's make a list of all the things we promise not to do when we're grown up—we'll call it the slapping list. We can talk about that tomorrow. Don't keep interrupting, or I'll never finish this story.

Eventually I dozed a little bit, and had horrible nightmares about the massacres from the ghost walk. I dreamed that all the ghosts were stuck fast to the places where they died. They kept pleading with me to take them away. I could only do it by cramming them into my pockets, even though clutching them felt like touching slime. And there were too many ghosts: a whole planet full of them, billions and billions who were all screaming at me. . . .

I woke up early, because the curtains were wide open and the sun was shining right onto my pillow. I wondered whether it had all been a dream, and I'd somehow opened the curtains in my sleep. There was only one way to know for sure. I could go down to the garden and look for the bloodstained stone.

As soon as I thought of that, I shivered. Yet it was morning, with bright sunshine. What could possibly happen in daylight?

It still took me a few minutes to gather my courage. First, I had to find out what a "holly bush" was. I looked it up: it's a tree with very spiky leaves.

Then I went downstairs, and grabbed a knife and fork from the breakfast buffet. Finally I headed into the garden.

The morning was cool and breezy. No one sat at the picnic tables. Beyond the lawn and the flower beds stood a row of trees, with a huge sprawling holly bush at the end.

I saw nothing on the grass near the bush. However, the ghost had said the stone was "underneath." The leaves came down almost to the ground. I pushed branches aside, creating a gap to slip through.

The spiny leaves scratched my skin. Inside the canopy, my eyes took a moment to adjust to the shade. I smelled damp earth. Underfoot, twigs and dead leaves covered the soil: there wasn't enough light for anything to grow.

Near the tree-trunk, I saw the stone.

Goose-pimples rose on my arms. It was cold and gloomy inside the holly bush. I could easily imagine the ghost reappearing here, if he hadn't said he needed to rest a while.

The stone was grey, and roughly squared off like masonry. I brushed the leaf litter aside, then used my cutlery to scrape away the loose, damp soil. Eventually I revealed the whole block. It was too dirty to see any bloodstain.

I heaved the stone out of the ground, and into the bag I'd brought. The block was lighter than it looked; I wondered if Earth stone differed from ours at home. Yet even so, the bag wasn't easy to carry. By the time I'd hauled it back to my room, my hands were red and aching.

I took a shower. Then it was time for breakfast.

My parents looked at me with bleary eyes. "Remember, we're leaving this afternoon," said Mum. "We'll go into town and pick up some souvenirs. If you want to buy any presents for your friends, this is your last chance. But don't go overboard. It's all got to fit in your suitcases."

"I met a ghost last night," I said. "He said he was tired of Earth, and he wanted me to take him home."

Dad laughed. "Take a ghost? Sure, why not? Best souvenir ever!"

Mum joined in the laughter. I cringed inside. There was no point in saying anything. I was too young to be taken seriously.

We went shopping in the Shambles, a tiny cobbled street with ancient buildings leaning out and overhanging the ground. That's where I bought most of the souvenirs for you guys: the chocolate you're eating now, the jewelry and other knick-knacks. We had lunch at a place called Bettys, where everything was silver service and white linen. I couldn't decide between two desserts, so my parents let me have them both. I bet that won't ever happen again. It was our last meal on Earth.

Back at the hotel, it was time to pack our luggage. While shopping, I'd almost forgotten about the stone. But as soon as I entered my room, I saw the bag on the floor. I remembered the ghost, pleading with me to take him away.

Could I? I'd mentioned it to my parents, and they hadn't objected. It seemed like a good deed, a charitable act—at least, that's what I told myself. In truth, I kept thinking about how the ghost could help me by overhearing stuff. And if he turned out to be a problem, I could get rid of him by dumping the anchor somewhere. There was no reason not to take him. Besides, I'd promised.

I didn't want to pack the dirty stone next to my nice things, especially as the soil might contain bacteria that I wasn't supposed to bring back. I decided to wash the dirt off. The stone had surely seen plenty of rain, so a quick rinse shouldn't hurt. I lugged it to the bathroom. Washing it revealed a large brown splotch in the middle of the widest face. That must be the blood. Perhaps the ghost was watching me right now.

"Hello!" I said. "Get ready for a journey. Hyperspace is really weird, apparently. We have to be sedated through it, but I guess you won't be. When we're home, you can tell me what it's like."

I wiped the stone dry, and wrapped it in paper. It went at the bottom of one suitcase. I filled the rest of that case with my lightest things. Then I tried to cram everything else into my other suitcase.

Soon I had a problem: not everything would fit. I only had two small cases, and I didn't dare leave any of my clothes behind. My parents surely wouldn't get me a third suitcase. They'd just tell me I'd bought too many souvenirs, and lecture me about being spoiled.

Don't you smirk at me, Flavia. All right, I know not everyone gets to go on holiday to Earth, but that doesn't make me spoiled. Shush!

In trying to figure out my packing, I realized I had a choice. I could take all the presents I'd bought for my friends, and forget about the stone. Or I could take the stone, and abandon most of the presents.

I had to admit that I wanted to use the ghost to ferret out secrets. But I also wanted to give cool stuff to my friends. So I asked myself: is this a choice I definitely have to make? Or can I do both?

I decided to do both. I didn't really need the stone: I just needed the blood. The ghost had said the blood was the important part, when he told me not to wash it off. Well, why not wash it off, but somehow keep it? If I could find a solvent, then I could dissolve the blood, and just take that.

I dashed downstairs to the janitor's closet. It was crammed full of clutter: cleaning materials, tools, old paint pots. My heart sank when I looked at all the bottles. How would I know which to use? I didn't have time to examine every label.

As I scanned the shelves, I saw a box with the label "SUPER MAXI CUTTER BEAM" in big red letters. The illustration showed a bright ray of light cutting through a steel rod. The back had a huge list of warnings about how powerful the beam was. I grabbed the box and took it up to my room.

Quickly, I skimmed through the instructions. You held two activators, one in each hand, and squeezed both handles to create a beam between them—while taking appropriate precautions. Since I didn't have any safety goggles, I wore my sunglasses instead. I opened the windows in the bedroom and the bathroom, and I found the nearest fire extinguisher. Next I practiced using the beam on some spare packaging. It cut right through!

Now I was ready for the anchor stone. I wanted to slice off the layer containing the bloodstain. As I was worried that the beam's heat might boil off the blood, I decided to allow a good margin around it, and cut quite deeply into the stone.

At first it went well. The beam hissed as it began slowly cutting through the block. The smell of charred stone stung my nostrils. Then I noticed that the beam was cutting faster, with less resistance. And the smell had changed: it was sweeter, more aromatic. A wisp of smoke rose from inside the block.

I had to stop. I didn't want to set off a fire alarm. The smoke soon dispersed on the breeze blowing between the two open windows. When the block had cooled down, I wrenched off the sliver that I'd cut.

The stone wasn't a stone. It was a hollow block, stuffed with a dark brown substance. After a long baffled moment, I realized that it must be some kind of drug.

I had nearly become a drug smuggler.

Sinking onto the bed, I buried my head in a pillow. I felt so stupid! In hindsight, it was obvious. Someone knew I'd gone on the ghost walk. That made me suggestible, the perfect victim. They rigged up a fake ghost, persuading me to transport the package. When we arrived home, presumably someone would recover it by intercepting our luggage.

I didn't want to tell my parents, but I had to. They summoned the authorities. A policeman arrived, who said the ghost might have come from a holographic projector. He looked around the room, and found a tiny gadget on top of the wardrobe.

"This is it," he said. "I've never seen a fake ghost before. But there'll be a real ghost soon enough, when we catch the culprit." He slid his finger across his throat, and gave us a cheery grin. "Death penalty!"

"Death penalty?" said Dad.

"Oh yes. Earth is so crowded, we have to thin out the population any way we can."

It was a long afternoon, because we had to give formal sworn statements. The policeman flew us to the spaceport just in time to catch our ship.

The cruise included an outer-planets excursion before we went home. When we arrived on Mars, we heard that they'd caught the man behind the drugs plot. As we'd already provided our evidence, we didn't need to do anything. We continued our holiday. After visiting all the scenic planets, the ship left the Solar System, ready for the trip through hyperspace.

Now, the way hyperspace works is that you simultaneously pass through every point in the entire Universe. First you're *here*. Then you're *everywhere*. Finally you're *there*.

I was curious about the journey, so I skipped the sedation. And I found out that *everywhere* includes the prison where drug smugglers are executed.

His ghost latched onto me. During that endless moment in hyperspace, he poured his rage into my shrieking mind. He flayed me open. "Why didn't you take the package?" he demanded. "Why?"

"I didn't have room," I sobbed. "I had presents for my friends—"

"Your friends?" he said. "So it's not only your fault: it's their fault too. You must all be punished. You must all suffer, as I have suffered."

And now I'm here! I've clawed my way into the wretched Amy's mind. I have made her scream, enduring the terror of death every night.

Now it's your turn. All of you share the guilt. Stacey and Yasmin and Flavia and Elsie, you must all feel what it's like to die horribly in a prison cell.

Scream, little girls. Scream as you clutch at your final moments. Scream as you endure the agony of execution. . . .

Haha, gotcha! You can calm down now. It's only me. Turn the light on, if you like. Yasmin, here's a tissue.

I brought the holographic projector with me from Earth. It's pretty convincing, isn't it? Especially when you're suggestible after hearing about ghosts.

No, the police didn't take it for evidence. I didn't meet a policeman, and they probably don't have the death penalty for drug smugglers.

Here's what happened. When I discovered the fake stone, I decided not to tell anyone. I was worried that talking to the police would make us miss our flight to Mars, and it would all be my fault. So I simply took the block outside and put it back under the holly bush. Then I found the tiny projector on the wardrobe, and snaffled it as payback for being messed around. I thought it might come in handy.

No, Stacey, I haven't lied to you. I really did see a ghost, a proper one, and I'm going to tell you about it. But it wasn't on Earth: it was on our way home.

At the end of the holiday I was disappointed, because I hadn't actually seen anything weird—just a bogus hologram. I knew the trip through hyperspace was my last chance. So I tricked the stewards, and dodged the sedation. Pressing my face against the porthole, I stared into the void, *determined* to see something.

Like I said, in hyperspace you travel through the entire Universe. And when you cross every single point in spacetime, one of those points is your own death.

I conjured up my own ghost.

She was old—which is reassuring, I guess. Yet she had a sad expression. She said to me, "Live your life, fall in love, cherish your friends. And don't be such a bossy boots."

I don't know why she said the last part; maybe it's for the future. But you're my friends, and even though you drive me crazy, I do—um—cherish you. I suppose my vocabulary must change when I'm grown up.

Listen, I'm really sorry about wanting to spy on you all. I mean it. You'll forgive me, won't you? Of course you will!

As for my ghost, I hope she was only sad because her life was over, and not because she regretted anything she'd done. No regrets, that's my motto. I'm going to put it on my list: you can slap me if you ever see me regretting something.

And I'll do the same for you. We'll look out for each other, and be friends forever—even in the dark hideous realms after death. . . .

Now, who wants cocoa?