The Ghost

Miguel Ángel Moleón / Beatriz Tormo

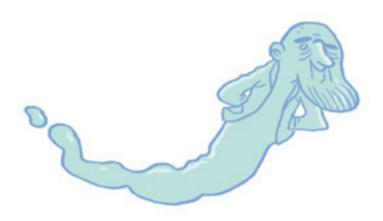


Fundación MAPFRE

The Ghost

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Illustrations by Beatriz Tormo



Fundación MAPFRE

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1.

I couldn't believe it.

But it was true: there we were, standing on the doorstep of our grandparents' house, with our cases on the ground, like Renfield the lawyer on the doorstep of Count Dracula's castle.

And, just like in my favourite horror story by Bram Stoker, it was the most dreadful night: rain, lightning flashes zapping the darkness, thunderbolts... the most terrible storm I had ever seen, with electricity flying all over the place and the wind pushing us towards the precipice, with Granny and Grandpa's great house on the edge of it. It was like a B film, a horror one.

And there we were, yes siree, my brother Josh, my sisters Sophie and Emily, with Luke, Sophie's beloved boyfriend, who never left her side..., and

yours truly, Katie. Mum and Dad had dumped us there just five minutes earlier... before they zoomed off in their Citroën CV; the car's a collector's item, falling to pieces, and a bit hippy, with the whole of the car body splashed over with daisies.

"Bye bye, darling children!" Dad yelled at us, as he took the cases out of the boot and chucked them any old how onto the soaking ground. "Mum and I are really going to miss you!"

Yes, sure, they were going to miss us heaps. They were off on a mad Mediterranean cruise to celebrate some wedding anniversary or other. They'd packed us off to the zany grandparents, and they were going to miss us... my foot!

"Don't worry!" shouted Mum, as she made sheep's eyes at Dad. "Granny and Grandpa'll open the door right away, and you'll be safe and sound! We've got to be off! Or we'll miss the boat!"

The speed they had just gone off at, on the top of that winding hill with woods and bottomless gulleys on either side, it looked less as if they were going to embark on a boat than get on a rocket to go to the moon. They'd sit on the edge of a thin slice of



the moon, with their feet hanging over the heavens, and they'd be cooing at each other like love-birds... At their age? For goodness sake! I can understand Sophie cooing at Luke at her age, at sixteen...

But it was too late now. Hrmph! There we all were, us and Luke, dumped. Four brothers and sisters between the age of eleven and sixteen, and a Romeo aged seventeen going on eight.

"Kaaaaaatie..." scolded Josh, as if he'd read my thoughts as I gave Sophie's boyfriend a black look. He wasn't keen on him either; he was too much of a Goth for his liking.

"I've seen this scene in some horror film or other..." whispered Emily.

We were stuck, and soaked, half way through the Christmas holidays, on the doorstep of our grand-parents' great big house, to spend a few "relaxing days", as Mum had put it, or to "enjoy seeing your grandparents", as Dad had put it, unable to tear his eyes away from their tickets for the cruise all around the Mediterranean, on board the Regina Maris.

My father's mother, in other words, my grandmother, became a widow when we were very small. And my mother's father, just the same, became a widower when Sophie was a baby. The thing was that the two of them, recently bereaved, coincided at some family celebration (or was it the funeral of their respective... spouses?). The two of them, who already knew each other of course, took a shine to each other.

And I'm not exactly surprised, because the two were mad keen on esoteric stuff, mysteries of the hereafter, the occult and goodness knows what other exotic encyclopaedic crackpot wisdom relating to the paranormal. And so they were delighted to put their book collections and their lonelinesses together, and they moved into this great big house, which had the worst reputation for being cursed in the village. That's the reason we were standing there right then, soaked to the skin, freezing cold, and not in the least bit keen on seeing that door open up, to be swallowed up helplessly into the darkness.

And that's exactly what happened, once Emily knocked really hard with the rusty knocker with a skull with hardly any teeth left.



The knocking rang out deep into the inside of the house. And it wasn't long before the door creaked and opened of its own accord, to show only darkness inside.

"Come iiiiin!" the voice of Granny Joyce was to be heard from deep inside, with that 'I collect little bones in bottles of formaldehyde' voice of hers.

"They're here," said Grandpa Raymond. "Come on in. Come on in!"

Shaking with cold (and with fear), we took a step forward, ready to cross the threshold. Luke went first because he was the oldest chap in the group, and he had to show he was brave enough. And as soon as he plunged into the darkness, lugging Sophie's cases as well as his backpack, we heard:

"AAAAAAAAaaaaaagh!"

We stood there petrified at the door. In the pouring rain.

Luke, swallowed up by the cave-like darkness of the hall, seemed to be doing some strange Apache dance, while he moaned:

"Ouuuuuuuuch..."

What was the matter with Luke? Were those jerking movements the result of an unhealthy diet?

"Helloooooo, kiddiwinks," said the sweetest of voices, coming somewhere from the darkness.

"Gosh, how you've grown! Come on in! Don't stay there at the door!"

It was Granny Joyce, all pink and plump, as she emerged from the darkness, holding up a candelabra with various candles. There was enough wax dripping on the floor to go figure skating on. We put on our best smiles. To judge from his expression, Josh seemed to be thinking: "Is this lady our Gran, or have they done a swap? She looks like something out of a horror film."

Granny swept us up in great hugs, and I noted that the shawl she was wearing, a crocheted cat-hair number, smelled strongly of, am I right, calor gas? Yes, there was no doubt about it. Emily and Sophie gasped for breath in her arms. Luke was still complaining and doing his jig. And that was when Raymond, better known as Ray, put in his appearance.

"Give us a hug, my lovelies!" he shouted, and then he looked at Luke: "Is there something wrong with this one?"

Grandpa's housecoat also smelled strongly of calor gas.

At long last, the hall light came on of its own accord, shakily, a mournful yellow light. Granny Joyce blew out the candles on the candelabra and we were all able to see why Luke was still dancing and moaning, with two great big tears rolling down his cheeks. He'd trodden on a mousetrap and he couldn't get it off his foot.

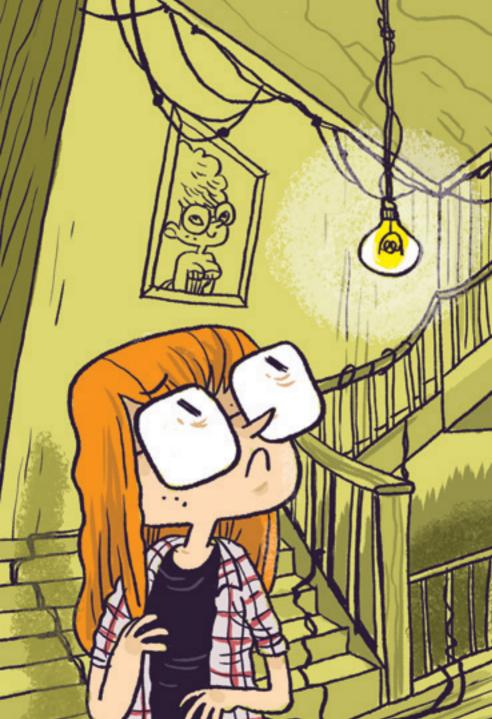
"Ow, ow!" moaned the boy. "They're going to have to give me a tetanus jab, this mousetrap is rusty... Oh my goodness, that's the end of my big toe."

"That's what I call getting off on the right footing..." I said, and Josh got a fit of the giggles. Luke had lost all his Goth glamour.

Our grandparents showered us with attention, while they muttered something about supper already being on the stove.

I fell a bit behind the group, because I couldn't take my eyes off the electrical wiring which ran along the walls, to supply the feeble ceiling light, a collector's item which was sending sparks out over the rugs on the hall floor. The wire was spluttering, splashing melted plastic on the walls and leaving a strong smell of burning flex.

A moment before Granny called me, something worrying happened to me. And I'm in no doubt that it was real. As real as the fact that the bulb came back on again and some small flames immediately set fire to the umbrella stand where some tattered umbrellas were calling for help.



"Katie! Come over to the fireplace to dry yourself in front of the fire!" Grandpa called to me.



"You'D think you'd seen a ghost," said Luke to me, who was well over his fright..., when he saw me come into the living room.

"It's no joking matter," murmured Grandpa Ron. "There are many spirits living in this house."

"There certainly are," added Granny Joyce, with a serious look about her. "There's bound to be a few souls who've got stuck with us when we've been using the ouija board."

"Just think about it: there are some spirits that spend their time blowing the lightbulbs," Grandpa rounded off. "And at showering the carpet with St Elmo's fire."

Yes, yes. St Elmo's Fire. I'd just worked out the rational explanation for such a mystery: electric wir-



ing from before the First World War. And bulbs that were practically fossils.

All the same... what about what I'd just heard in the hall when I got left alone for a few moments?

What was that about? Was that my imagination?

"Are you feeling woozy from the journey?" Emily asked me as she dried her hair near the fire-place.

"That's right, Katie... Your face is still as white as a sheet."

What colour did they think it was going to be, after what had happened in the hall?

We got through the rest of the night without any more surprises. We went up to our bedrooms: one for Josh and me. One for Emily and Sophie. And up in the attic a put-you-up for Luke.

"You've got to be kidding," he said as looked at the junk room, where the ventilation was the porthole window of a ghost ship... "You mean I'm going to have to sleep here all week?"

"If you're afraid of mice, you know, we'll ask our grandparents for a couple of mousetraps," I said to him.

"Oh, don't bother," replied Luke with a brave gesture. "I'm not afraid of mice. And anyway, the house is full of traps. It's a real safety risk!"

The boy was right. There were all kinds of rusty tools with sharp edges littered around the little room. The lighting was even older than the lighting in the hall. So there was a distinct possibility that Luke might wake up converted into a mad fakir, sleeping on a bed of nails.

Granny and Grandpa, as eccentric and as willing to please as ever, helped us to settle ourselves in. They took ancient tins of paint out of the wardrobe so that we could hang our clothes up. And they threw away bottles of turpentine that they had stashed in a first aid box so we could leave our toothbrushes there. And, before dinner, they ran us refreshing baths, although Luke had to have a shortest shower in living memory.

"I'm sorry, sonny," said Granny, fiddling with her glasses. "But lately the water heater hasn't been working very well." "The souls in purgatory just love blocking up our water pipes," Grandpa added.

Poor Luke came out of the shower shivering. And Granny insisted on turning on an old air-heater which I'm sure came from Noah's Ark.

A little while after Luke's figure skating demonstration, when we'd got over the fright, although I was still thinking of that weird thing that'd happened in the hall, I tried to relax a bit soaking in a deep bath full of bubbles. Granny put in an appearance, bent on heating up the room with a little electric fire.

"Here you go, sweetie," she said to me as she brought the fire towards the bath tub. "I don't want you catching your death of cold."

I was even more horrified than when I got left alone in the hall. I was petrified to see Granny coming towards me, offering me the electric fire, which was already plugged in.

"I'm sure that the soul of its old owner lives in this thing," she was saying. "I bought it at a village jumble sale! A real bargain, poppet!"

The truth is that the gizmo was buzzing as if it was possessed. The lead had been chewed by mice and spluttered like a sparkler, and the electric bars were threatening to jump off into the bathwater like the springs of an old mattress.

"You know, there's nothing wrong with being a bit cold," I suggested to my Grandmother, without wishing to snub her.

How could our grandparents be so disastrous? So they were saying the house had ghosts in it? Well I'm sure they would disappear if they decided to have all the electrics redone, or put in fuse boxes with the right fuses. They ought to



change the bulbs that spluttered over curtains and other things which were all ready to burst into flames. Someone needed to tidy up their household odds and ends, especially all those toxic and inflammable products. And they needed someone to explain to them that it isn't a very good idea to bring electrical devices up to the bath, and particularly if it's full of water and you're splashing around inside.

Golly, things didn't look good for us for seven interminable days: to survive our grandparents, their imaginary ghosts, and Luke's screams every time he sat in some armchair and got Granny's crochet needles stuck in his behind.



"What happened to you in the hall, Katie?" asked Josh, who had spotted something was wrong. "You're still looking pale."

"A voice, Josh," I told him, and just admitting it made me scared. "I heard a voice as clearly as I've just heard yours, a man's voice, really close to my ear, was whispering something to me."

"What did it say?"

"It told me to run... DANGER!"

Josh closed his eyes and collapsed in a heap. He gave himself an almighty wallop.



4.

THE next day, Monday, while we were having breakfast, Luke was making fun of Josh because he'd got a bandage over his forehead to cover up the lump that had come up after the incident the night before. Of course Emily and I made even more fun of Luke with his bandage over his forehead to cover up the gash from his crashing into the door, the bandage on his right foot, where he'd come into conflict with the mousetrap; and of how Sophie's Romeo was so bad at covering up how badly he'd slept in the fakirs' room.

Luke complained: "At midnight, I was woken up by the noise of a window that wasn't shut properly."

"That's hardly surprising," Granny commented immediately, as she made some giant pieces of toast.

"The sooner you know the better," added Grandpa. "We're living in the midst of the activity of a terrible poltergeist."

"Terrible!" added Granny as she unplugged the toaster without realising.

When she tried to plug it in again, she was looking at the microwave, where she was heating up the milk so we could have drinking chocolate, and she put the plug of the toaster into the sink, which was full of half washed pots and pans. Of course, since the toaster wasn't up for working on the basis of foam power, Grandpa got up and stuck the plug straight in the socket.

"Kapowwww!" we all heard from the fuse box.

"Oh!" shouted Emily. "A real poltergeist. No doubt about it."

"Time to get out of here," added Josh, who was looking at the clouds through the great window.

"With a bit of luck, it'll even snow," said Luke, although he wasn't completely convinced.

"You see what he's like!" shouted Granny, referring to the fuse explosion. "The spirit won't even let us mention him!"



We finished off our breakfast in the darkness. Then we went along with Grandpa to check the fuse box. What a mess! There were wires all over the place. And there was no way of knowing which one came from where, or which one should be connected to what.

"It's like one of Luke's pieces of craft work..." I suggested with a crooked grin.

"Joyce! Can you pass me the sellotape please!" yelled Grandpa Ron. "I'll have this sorted out in a jiffy!"

He must have sorted it out on various previous occasions, because the inside of that fuse box was a nightmare. There were wires connected with sticking plasters!

Then, at that very same moment, it happened to me again. Now I was in company. Once more I quite clearly heard a man's voice whispering something in my ear! I went pale and Josh realised something was up right away. Sophie wasn't so on the ball, because she was being so lovey-dovey with Luke, and Luke was all interested in pretending he was helping Grandpa Ron. Sara was right out of it, because she was absolutely fascinated by the spiders which were diligently spinning inside the fuse box.

"Again?" Josh said to me, even paler than me.

"Yes..." I managed to spit out.

"And what did the voice say to you?" he asked me.

"That he's really sad, because he can't fill up on one of Granny's stews any longer."

"What?" grunted Josh.

"I promise you, that's what he said to me. And that it's not going to be very long now until we all meet up in the hereafter."

"We're going to ring Dad right now so they can come and get us!" shouted Josh.

He ran out, heading for the telephone. And that was when we discovered, gobsmacked, that the mice had done a good job on the telephone flex.

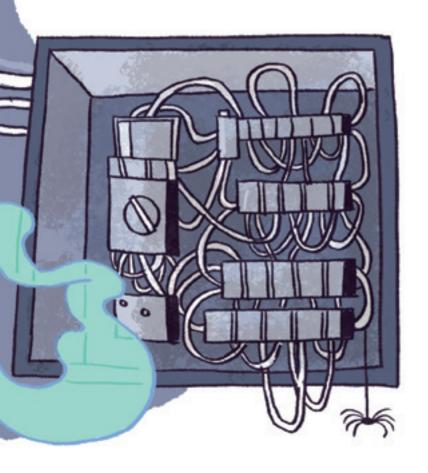
We hardly slept at all after that second time that the spectre spoke to me to tell me about how sad he was, and what he fancied eating. The ghost of the stewpot didn't put in another appearance until Tuesday. And I wish he hadn't. I wasn't expecting him. And it looked as if he only talked to me, not to anyone else. Which was odd, because I was the only one who didn't believe in ghosts. This time, he really did a good job.



"Oh, what I wouldn't do for a good beef stew. With some buttery mashed potatoes," the spectre said to me. "Before the week's out, you're all going to end up like cocktail sausages..."

"On a cocktail stick?" I asked, doubtfully.

"No... Muggins... Fried!"



ALARMED by the warnings of this phantom which possibly only existed in my imagination, I checked where the strong smell of calor gas that always followed my grandparents around was coming from.

Since they both felt the cold, they kept the fire burning in the grate all the time in the living room, which is where we spent hours and hours, immersed in a Ludo tournament. And Granny and Grandpa also had a little round table in the kitchen with a long thick tablecloth hanging down to the floor. Well, it turned out that under the cloth, there was a calor gas heater, to keep your feet warm, and when I checked it, I found out it worked worse than a wonky pedal car.

"How long is it since you last had the calor gas cylinder hoses checked, Granny?" I asked her.

"Oh, goodness me, poppet! Is that something you have to have checked?," she answered.

Have to have it checked? Oh good grief.

"Look under the hob..." I heard the bodiless being whisper to me.

And I looked. That was where the regulator was, which is the thing which controls the supply of gas to the cylinder, and you could see that Grandpa Ron had been at work with the sellotape again.

On Wednesday afternoon, Granny Joyce, with Grandpa and a bunch of other friends well past their sell-by date, who came up from the town for the occasion, had a grand old time doing a ouija session in the living room. Us girls, true pros by now, hit the Ludo board, and we listened to the old biddies calling up the spirits. Sophie wasn't there, she'd sneaked off on her bike with Luke. They didn't take long to reappear of course: the storm again. Luke was exhausted when he arrived because they'd had a puncture.



"That's odd," said Grandpa Ron. "I fixed that wheel myself just a couple of days ago. It'll be another attack from the ghosts."

On Wednesday night, when Granny and Grandpa's friends were saying goodbye in the hall, the most outspoken of the ladies came up to me and said, right in my face:

"Be careful, my little ones. This house is haunted by evil forces. They say that the previous owners..."

"They spontaneously combusted!" the strange woman's husband finished off for her, just to reassure us!

Josh, clutching my forearm, refused to sleep with the bedroom door closed.

"I don't care about how cold it is!" said the poor shivering thing. "It's the cold from the hereafter."

"Oh, don't be such a cretin," I tried to cheer him up, but there wasn't anyone to cheer me up.

"What's spontaneous combustion?" he asked from his bed.

"Something that doesn't exist."

"Even so, what is it?"

"Oh, nothing, it's just they say that there are people who, for no apparent reason, burst into flames. And the flames burn them right up, and there's nothing left behind."

"Well thanks, sis. Now I feel a lot better."



6.

THE worst was to begin on Thursday night. We'd gone to bed early, having beaten Luke roundly at Ludo. Outside, the storm, which had taken up permanent residence over the old house, was up to its usual tricks.

It was just as horrible a night as the night we arrived. Or worse.

It would have been about three o'clock in the morning when a strong smell of burning woke me up.

It wasn't easy to open my eyes, because they were stinging. There was smoke everywhere. Through the half-opened bedroom door I could see flames licking round everything. I tried to pull myself together. I threw myself on top of Josh, to wake him up. At eleven years old he didn't have enough experience

in fires and evacuating burning buildings (neither did I, and I was a few years older).

That was when panic took hold of us. It was getting harder and harder to see. And there was less oxygen. We were surrounded by flames. We started to cough and we couldn't breathe properly. We were coughing more and more.

And then I heard the mysterious being's voice again:

"Keep calm, but you've got to warn your sisters and your grandparents."

"And not Luke?" I asked, my nerves getting to me.

"Luke too, you twit!"

"Twit?" I replied in confusion, dizzy from the lack of oxygen.

"Just think how nice a little bowl of stew would be!" the voice exclaimed. "Don't get distracted, girl!" it added, bossily. "Follow my instructions or you'll end up toast."

Josh saw me talking to someone invisible and he clutched his head in his hands. He was getting hysterical, convinced that his sister Katie was losing it.



We got out of the bedroom and I closed the door immediately.

"I'm closing the door because the ghost told me to," I said, feeling absurd. Just as if I'd been told to do so by a can of beans, you see.

And, doing what I was told, I began to wake the rest of the family up.

Luke came awake with a great jump. Emily was crying, Sophie was looking for the mobile phone she had in her hand.

As we were looking for the door which led to the back stairs, the flames had set Emily's pyjamas alight.

"Wrap her up in a blanket!" Luke ordered me, decisively. "I saw it on the telly."

And that's what I did. With the blanket from our grandparents' room, which was the closest to hand. I threw myself over her and in two seconds, the fire was gone, as were her pyjamas. My sister was wandering around in her birthday suit! But luckily she wasn't injured.

Granny Joyce hadn't got her thick glasses on, so she couldn't find her way. Grandpa, with a heroic gesture, tried to unhook a fire extinguisher from the wall to put out the fire. But it wasn't working.

Right after that, the ghost started to suggest things to me and I relayed what it said directly to the whole group:

"Don't even think about throwing water on the fire."

The ghost suspected, and it turned out later to be right, it knew why that fire had started. A short circuit combined with the gas leaks from the cylinders in the kitchen. So no water.

"You're running out of oxygen!" the ghost shouted, although only I could hear it. "Down on the ground, all of you!"

"Make for the stairs at the back of the house, but keep down, smoke rises," said Luke, who didn't seem so stupid to me now.

But as we were trying to get there, half of the ceiling came down on us. We managed to make it under a table there was in the corridor to protect ourselves. And suddenly, in a cruel twist of fate, I saw a huge collection of fireworks tumbled out on the floor! Brilliant.

POW! KPOW! KPOW! RAKATAPOW!... WHEEE!



We finally made it to the stairs at the back of the house, the ones leading to the garden and the pond where the carp were swimming around. And it must have been a real sight to see us all slide down the steps that nobody had cleaned for years. Ouch! You should have seen the way we slid down on the moss. Bumping down on our tailbones, step after step.

Luke, our hero, jumped from the floor above straight into the pond, saving himself the trouble of getting his behind massaged down the steps. When he came up out of the water, he had a carp stuck on his ear.

"A cutprice Indiana Jones," was the last thing that the mysterious ghost whispered to me; the ghost that had directed our frantic evacuation so successfully.

Yes, the last thing that he whispered. And he disappeared for ever. Never again. He's never spoken to me again, nor any other spectre.

What I haven't told many people, very few at all, is how, before disappearing, the being revealed himself to me. The first thing I could make out between the smoke from the fire and carp leaping about was

his smile. Then his merry eyes, and I was surprised because all those features seemed familiar to me.

One of the few things our grandparents managed to save from the fire was a photo album.

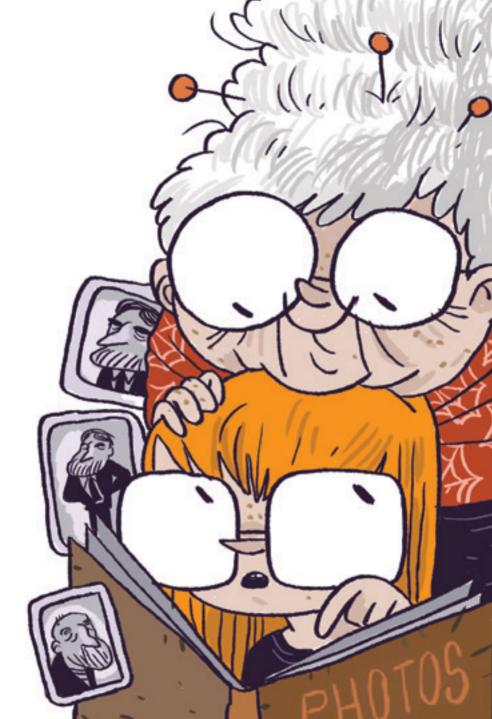
The reunion with our parents was very emotional; I think our hair was still smoking when it happened. And they decided to take us to hospital of course, mostly to see if Emily had got any burns.

I still don't know how we all managed to fit in the Citröen 2CV.

A few weeks later, I was having a look at the photos in Grandpa Ron and Granny Joyce's family photo album, and I nearly passed out when I recognised the mischievous eyes I'd seen on the spectre when it appeared for an instant next to the carp pond.

"That was your grandfather," Granny Joyce surprised me, looking at the photo over my shoulder. "He was a fire fighter," she said with a smile.

"Granny," I said, getting my breath back. "Can you show me how to make a good beef stew?"





In the story you've just read, the characters don't always do the right thing in the face of a catastrophe. In fact, many of the dangerous situations come about because their day to day behaviour is unsafe and irresponsible.

Katie's family should bear the following points in mind:

To prevent FIRES

- Don't hang pieces of clothing to dry near electric heaters or radiators.
- Avoid putting heaters and burners near pieces of furniture or curtains; don't put them near water either.
- Don't play with lighters, matches, candles...
- If you smell gas, don't switch on the light: this could make a spark and start a fire.
- If your parents smoke, warn them not to smoke in bed.
- You should check that cigarettes are completely stubbed out before emptying an ashtray into the bin.
- Connections inside a plug itself can cause overloads in the wiring, and short circuits.

DON'T FORGET

- If your clothes catch fire during a fire, stop, throw yourself on the floor, and roll.
- If this happens to someone else, look for a blanket or something like that, and cover the person with it. That way we can put the flames out.

Important in the event of EVACUATING A BUILDING

- Don't run, and don't panic; keep going and don't stop. Don't push.
- Don't use the lifts. Don't retrace your steps.
- If you're in the bathroom or other rooms attached to the same floor, join the nearest group moving towards the exit. If you're on another floor, join the nearest group moving towards the exit, and tell the teacher about your situation, stating your name and your school year clearly.

To avoid ACCIDENTS

- In the classroom
 - Don't put things in your mouth: they could get stuck in your throat, cut you, choke you...
 - Try not to overload your backpack, or use one with wheels.
 - It's vital that you always follow your teachers' instructions all

the time. In particular on excursions (you're outside the school setting then), during unusual activities (experiments, using materials which represent varying degrees of danger, etc.), during fire practices, etc.



- Use school material properly. Pencils, scissors, glue and etc. are not toys.
- Don't run in the corridor or in the classroom at school. You could fall over or hit yourself against an item of furniture.
 Don't throw things on the floor.
- Pay attention to the school's rules and signs.



In your DAILY LIFE

- Be careful with doors: you could trap your fingers.
- Although you're older now, don't forget to wash your hands before eating.
- Don't eat too quickly. Chew properly to avoid choking.
- When you're doing sport, be careful and be considerate towards your fellow students. Avoid injuries.
- Follow the rules in the swimming pool. Don't push your friends: this could be very dangerous.
- Don't take any medicines that haven't been given to you by an adult.
- If you see a container with liquid inside and you don't know what it is, don't drink it.
- Don't climb up onto items of furniture to get objects that are up there. Ask an adult for help.
- Don't walk around with headphones on. If there's something dangerous, you won't notice it.

Katie's parents are off on a cruise so she and her siblings are going to stay with their grandparents in a very peculiar house. Don't miss this ghost story full of domestic accidents and daily life dangers.

This book is part of the Fundación MAPFRE Educational Project in Prevention and Road Safety. The main objective of this project is to help prevent accidents in childhood within the household and educational contexts. It is based on promoting safe and responsible behaviour and encourages teachers and family members to become implicated.

The aim of this material is to help readers become aware of why and where accidents happen. It stresses the importance of adopting certain habits to reduce their potential impact.

If you want to know more about the Fundación MAPFRE Educational Project, please contact us through the following websites:

www.fundacionmapfre.org www.educatumundo.com



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