



The Book of Ghosts (extract)

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Dreaming

The dreams continue, more vivid, more urgent. Last night I had the one where I am waiting in a room and I look around. I recognise the matching polished pine G-Plan dining table at which I sit, and the deep-orange shaggy rug is cosily familiar beneath my feet. This is the furniture from 24 Churchill Gardens, the house where I grew up. But I am also seated in a woodland clearing. A couple of feet behind the chairs the orange rug gives away gradually to stony moss and miniature ferns and the roots of trees which rear up around the table, a green guard for the brown-and-orange dining arrangement. In the background I can hear birds' wings catch branches, causing dappled light streaming through the leaf canopy to dance on the G-plan table's mirror-like surface. A verdant discothèque, the light falls now on tea cups of finest china and gold-leaf, then on glittering plates which shine like huge gold coins piled with French fancies and Battenberg cake.

I am waiting at this table. But I am waiting in a particular mode: a kind of long-term expectation, a state where all tensions are balanced so perfectly that I appear to be calm, in fact have appeared to be unruffled for years, perhaps centuries. It is like the epic waiting of Miss Havesham at her wedding breakfast. I appear to have mastered acceptance but instead have achieved a state of constant, considered anticipation. In exact opposition to the way that one usually 'just knows' in dreams, I don't know why I am waiting. I am clueless. I am not waiting for guests: they are already here. In fact, they

surround me and all the chairs that usually remain empty are, in this imaginary time, filled.

My brother Paul is sat at the table, grinning so wide his face is split like a Custard Cream. I am angry with Paul, even in the dream, but I am so happy to see him I grin too, through the tension. I wonder if he is convinced by my smile. My Daddy is there too. Or rather Dad? Or Father? No, I never had the chance to grow out of calling him Daddy, so I stick with it. It is the right decision, because he is smiling back at me and calling me his Khaki Princess, like he used to in his letters. I am looking hard but can't make out his features. But I know it is him because I can see the outline of the hat he always wore, like someone just stepped off the boat.

Mam is at the tea-party as well - for a tea-party it is - and everyone is tucking in to the fine china tea and colourful cake except me. I'm the only one who is looking on, both partaking and observing, the only one who is confused. They are all chatting and chuckling and beneath the noise of raised voices and chinking cups I alone am muttering that this can't be real. Not real, not even dream-real, even though it is happening in front of my eyes. Mam glances at me with a look that belongs to the time when I was little. It says 'are you ok' and also 'you'll feel the back of my hand if you don't behave'. But the look lasts only an instant – too quick for me to ask what she and the others are doing here. And anyway, how did she become so young? Her hair is dyed-it-herself red and piled up on top of her head, her figure rounded but firm and her face open and almost unlined by time. She has turned her attention to my brother Robert, who looks

to be about 18 and is wearing the long brown leather duster coat he was so proud of. He is laughing too and my memory is snagged by the crease of his cheeks.

I know it is all wrong. Mam's tight-fitting dress, one she hasn't worn since 1977, Daddy's half-turned away, out-of-focus features, Paul's brilliant laughter and Robert's garrulous eyes. It is not that some of these people are dead, nor even that in life they were never all together, never mind enjoyed tea parties. It is not that I am the only one who has aged. I should be about eight years old, but I am more than thirty years older. I appear to be the only one around this table who is not fixed in time, stuck at this party among the trees and the birds, where the tea and cake will never run out and conversation comes as easy as breath.

No, what is wrong is that I am the only one waiting: suspended between what has been and what could be, suspended in the realm of the possible for as long as I manage not to breathe out. I am sitting in the bosom of my fractured, half-dead family holding my breath for dear life, and I am waiting to go home.