

GHOST MONTH

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SIMON WROE

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Easy Access System Europe, Mustamäe tee 50, 10621 Tallinn, Estonia
gpsr.requests@easproject.com

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PART ONE

INTRUSIONS

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‘SHHH---

Listen!

Do you hear that?

The wind is starting to whisper . . .

Do you know what’s special about today?

It’s the first day of Ghost Month.

This is when things change.

Perhaps you’ve already noticed little things, strange details.

A shadow not attached to anything.

A face in a window which might be a trick of the light.

A feeling someone’s behind you when no one is there.

The dead are coming back.

They come at dusk today.

Sometimes it’s a good haunting –

ghosts visiting their families and loved ones.

Sometimes it’s a bad haunting –

ghosts visiting those who did them wrong.

These ghosts can look all sorts of ways.

They might look more or less like they did in life.

Or as they did the moment they died.

Or – this is not so nice – like they’ve been dead some time.

It’s OK if you are afraid . . .

Who here is afraid?’

All the children raised their hands. September sun filtered through the blinds, picking out little frowns, Year 5 faces scrunched with worry.

Jane thought her class seemed younger today. Their pictures on the walls – monsters, coffins, families with rigid smiles (last week she’d asked them to draw their feelings) – looked more naive, the figures more stick-like, the colours less fixed within the lines.

‘Don’t be afraid.’ She tried to sound fearless and confident. ‘None of you has done these ghosts wrong, have you? None of you has anything to hide. So you have nothing to fear.’ Whether she believed this didn’t matter; it was one of those things you said to others.

The children lowered their hands and looked unsure. Eddie Adeyemi stared out of the window in a daze. One to watch, that boy. His records mentioned a recent death in the family.

‘Any questions?’

A little hand went up. ‘Is this still English class, Miss?’

‘It is, Tommy. I just wanted to warn you.’

Tommy’s hand rose again. ‘I heard fire scares them off, Miss. Is that true?’

‘I don’t think anything scares them off.’

All the watching eyes widened.

‘Now, they get called many names,’ Jane continued. ‘I’ll say some so you know. People talk about phantoms, spirits, ghouls, poltergeists, phantasms, spooks, spectres, shades . . .

Those all mean “ghosts”, OK? And they have newer names too: lost souls, old friends, visitors – if someone talks about friends or visitors this month they might mean the dead.’ Whatever people talked about this month, she thought, they were probably talking about the dead. ‘Or they might use other names like other-siders, lost ones, or intruders . . .’ She tried to think of a lighter name to end on. None came to her.

Late summer in London. A last rush of heat and light. The city in a perpetual haze: shimmering skyscrapers, trembling high-rises. People staggered about like sleepwalkers. Beneath the surface though, everyone was alert for what was coming.

Jane rode the Central Line at half past four, heading east from Shepherd’s Bush. Had rush hour once lasted a single hour? She could not recall such a time. The tube was packed. Passengers crammed in so tight you could poke out your tongue and lick the sweat from your neighbour’s cheek. Many looked exhausted, halfway to ghosts themselves. You just knew they’d come back wearing that miserable expression, that awful tie. Others looked smug, as if already congratulating themselves on how well-adjusted they were, how smoothly they’d navigate the next four weeks.

She thought of her class. ‘Who is afraid?’ and all their hands rising. What an awful thing to put children through. She wasn’t sure they understood what was happening, if understanding was better or worse. She worried so much for them. But as the train carried her further from school

her thoughts of the children faded, replaced with worries of her own.

With each stop the train grew more crowded. Jane, mouth pursed, body tensed, tried to avoid all physical contact. At Marble Arch, she was pushed against a businessman reeking of booze and sweat who made no attempt to keep his body away from hers. When a pocket of space opened up beside him at Bond Street he stayed pressed close. Was he one of those perverts she'd heard about? She looked into his face but could glean nothing. (Lately she'd realised you could never really *know* anyone else.) If the man did something and she made it known, would her fellow passengers help? You shoved people of all ages and dispositions and levels of income and anger into a metal can in a hole in the ground and expected some faint social contract to hold everything in place. How tenuous, how horrifying, everything seemed.

All the adverts in the carriage were for the season now upon them. *Haunted? Take a break with Bliss* – a brand of sedatives. *At Greenways*, a fast-food franchise announced, *we know the value of family. That's why there's always seats for your deceased at our restaurants*. Department stores offered reminders you could ruin this moment without their help. Investment firms were here for you. Hotel chains wanted it known they understood the complexities of grief, love and death.

She squeezed out in a flood of people at Oxford Circus. Escalators carried her to street level, lifting her into the light. *During this season, please take care when travelling*, the tannoy intoned. *The service can get very busy at peak times. Please*

respect others' personal space. Ask yourself, does this person have substance? Might they be alive? Shock and misunderstandings are the primary causes of accidents on our network.

Outside the mood was hectic. Wherever you looked, wild motion. People pushed past with last-minute supplies. Shaven-headed Hari Krishnas drummed and chanted. Someone shoved a flyer into her hand for a grief group on Thursdays in Chinatown. Shopkeepers shouted their wares, every type of remedy, avoidance, cure. *Practise safe hex! Hexes for exes! Don't let a dead ex steal your lover's heart!* Tin-foil helmets so the ghosts can't read your thoughts. Menthol sticks which rubbed under the eye simulate tears. Twenty pounds for a ghost-repelling gizmo suspiciously similar to a regular desk fan. Crosses. Amulets. Snake oil galore. The spiritual and the capital in rampant, excessive bloom. Masks of all types too – hide from the dead, hide from the living when followed by dead you wished you weren't. This season, the face covering of choice was the Japanese Noh mask: blank and expressionless, a condition to aspire to. Ancient and 'other' practices were deemed more effective than their Western equivalents.

Jane pushed through, sickened by all this piggybacking on death. Everything was a deal, a business. Yet she was here for precisely such a purpose.

She had a brisk, clipped way of moving. Which, combined with her short height and sharp features and clothes in various shades of brown, often made people think of a bird. A sparrow perhaps, or a finch. 'You're like a little bird,' they'd say. And Jane would say, 'Oh?,' as if she'd never heard such

a thing in her life and weren't they extraordinary for thinking of it. She was anxious to be liked. Anxious, these days, about a lot of things. Since Sandra left she'd started having heart palpitations. She was known to her GP. Each time, she thought of the coronary that killed her father.

Huge crowds surrounded the street preachers, once all but ignored. 'Five years since they started coming back!' one told his listeners. 'Five years since the shadow fell. Why now? What does it mean? It means damnation is upon us! The higher values are losing their value. Death does not mean death, life does not mean life.' Nearby, another shouted, 'You know who else died and returned? Exactly!' A third spoke of the rewards the month could bring. When we understood the pain of others we learned so much about ourselves. Some in the crowd looked disappointed; they'd had other rewards in mind.

An old man stood in the middle of the flow, inviting hugs from passers-by. 'I love you. Happy haunting. I love you all . . .' A rise in public acts of kindness – strangers smiling at each other, giving up seats to those in need – was also noticeable this time of year. Many subscribed to the primitive belief that acts of goodwill would protect them. Jane dodged the man's embrace.

Family Services was on a narrow side street of grim frontages. Roughly cut beige strips lined the hallway, an unsuccessful attempt to hide a grey carpet heavily stained. In the office, two women argued with a sole employee perched in a sort of cashier's booth. Their voices were raised,

approaching anger, though an anger that still allowed the possibility of resolution.

‘I come here every year,’ the first woman said.

‘I want a tall one this time,’ the other said.

‘Every year.’

‘You gave me a short one last time.’

The pouting employee looked at Jane with that summer resentment common to all workers chained to a desk. ‘Name?’ she asked.

‘Jane Turner.’

The name was fed into the computer.

‘What did you want? Male, female, other?’

Jane dipped her head, ashamed to speak her wants, even ones so basic, in the company of strangers. ‘Male.’

‘I can’t find you on here. When did you book?’

‘I didn’t.’

‘You have to book for Ghost Month.’

‘She didn’t book,’ said the first woman.

The second woman whistled.

‘You have to book.’ It was the employee’s favourite saying.

‘OK, but couldn’t you—’

‘Not if you didn’t book.’

‘Please, you have to give me something. My mother’s coming back.’

‘Everyone’s mother is coming back.’

‘Why do you think we’re here?’ said the first woman.

‘Yeah,’ said the second. ‘You don’t see us crying boo-hoo.’

Jane scowled. Eleven months of the year these women

probably lived their lives as they chose, only to go crazy every September renting mediocre husbands so their dead mothers would think better of them. Her scowl was sympathetic: they were the part of herself she hated.

The women's complaints resumed.

'Is it too much to ask for a sense of humour with this one?'

'I don't care about a sense of humour. I want one I can trust with the silverware.'

'Ladies, you will get the husbands you are given.'

Jane grabbed the employee's hands and spoke in low, urgent voice. 'Listen to me. I need a husband. Today. I don't care what state he's in. I do not care. I just need a shell of a human being in the shape of a man.'

'Jesus,' said the second woman.

'Your desperation is showing, dear,' said the first.

The Family Services employee remained unmoved. It couldn't be done. Supply issues: many of their substitutes were from the EU, so you see it was simply—

'I don't care,' Jane interrupted. 'Anything will do.'

Seeing Jane would not take no for an answer, the employee relented. She could probably find something, but he wouldn't be top drawer.

'So don't come running back here complaining,' said the first customer, who had done nothing but complain.

'He will not be top drawer,' the employee repeated. 'I cannot stress that enough. You're sure you want this?'

Was she sure? Was she going to try to please a dead woman who could not be pleased? One scheme justifying another,

one lie leading to the next. (Her gravestone would read: *Happy now, Mother?*) She'd never felt the need for this level of pretence before, when Sandra was in the picture. But that was then and this was now.

Home was an ex-local authority flat between Ladbroke Grove and Shepherd's Bush. Half the block remained council housing while half had been sold to private landlords. The estate lived with a foot in both worlds. Media professionals and web developers carried their bikes past grandmothers chatting on the stairs. A few of the old ladies were getting their washing in when Jane passed. Empty clothes were said to attract the dead. It was part of the advice for avoiding them. Never touch a dead person's comb. Don't take the last bus or train. Beware the cry of an owl, the rustle of leaves.

Jane cleaned her little flat madly. Retrieved from the bedside drawer the framed photos of her mother and father. Dispatched several drowsy bluebottles with a rolled-up magazine. Threw out all junk food in case Mother's spirit snooped about. Checked every condiment for mould. The butter she replaced with low-fat spread. This year she was thinking. Thinking was better than not thinking – though not, she thought bitterly, as good as not having to think. She covered up the quote on the fridge about how sometimes success is getting to the end of the day and saying I will try again tomorrow. She sent a text to Berenice, who would remain nameless as far as her mother was concerned, saying she was sick, the doctor had ordered tests, it might be a good idea

not to meet for a while. Everything that might embarrass, she hid. The fungal infection cream, the black lace lingerie, the library book on how to achieve big goals. The vibrator she wrapped in tin foil, which it was said ghosts could not see through. She did not believe it, but had no better alternatives. One always hoped for sophistication, but up against it superstition won out every time. She spent a solid hour scrubbing the bathroom, catching frequent glimpses of herself in the cabinet mirror. Why had she cut her hair so short? Her mother would never forgive her.

Halfway through hoovering, her sister rang. A picture of Angie appeared on the screen, both present and absent, a sort of ghost too.

‘I can’t talk long. I’m cleaning.’

‘Why do you bother?’ Angie’s flat was a permanent state. Whorls of dust and such. She maintained she wasn’t the hoovering type.

‘Aside from obvious reasons of hygiene?’

‘It’s not like she can nag you.’

‘She can look naggingly at me. I can’t stand that look.’

‘You’re taking this too seriously.’

‘Why doesn’t she haunt you? Why do I have to do this every year?’ Jane asked, though suspected she knew the answer.

‘How d’you think I feel that she *doesn’t* visit me?’ Angie said.

‘I think you’re delighted.’

‘It’s true,’ Angie admitted. ‘But you’re her favourite, that’s something.’

‘Her favourite to criticise maybe.’

A memory of her mother brushing a cushion like she’d keep on until she brushed through the fabric itself, at which point it would have proved useless and flimsy.

‘Count yourself lucky,’ Angie said. ‘I have a month of my ex following me around and Peter looking like he wants to throw himself out the window.’

‘Two men fighting over you. Poor Busy.’ Angie’s pet name had come from her early pronunciation of ‘spaghetti’ as ‘buzzghetti’, which became ‘Buzzy’, then ‘Buzzy Boo’, then ‘Busy Bee’, and finally ‘Busy’. Whereas Jane had got ‘Janey’, like that would do.

‘It doesn’t count as a love triangle if one of them is dead.’

‘Who says?’

‘Oh please.’

Outside under the sun’s glare the trees and street furniture looked heavy and ominous. In a neighbouring flat a television played to what looked like an empty room.

Jane said, ‘I hate this month. Everyone stuck between past and present. Can’t forget. Can’t move on.’

‘Totally.’

‘Nothing heals anymore. Everything just piles up. One feeling on top of another.’

Angie said, ‘Last night I dreamt Harry came back and he was furious. He said, “You got over me pretty easily, didn’t you?” And I said, “What did you expect me to do? Throw myself in your grave?”’

For once Jane agreed with her sister. ‘It’s so

self-interested. Coming back. Moping about.'

There was a pause as each considered the other's self-interest, weighed up whether to mention it, and decided against it.

'The dead should stay dead,' Jane said.

'You can't say that. That's very behind the times.'

'Good. I don't want to be with the times. I hate the times.'

'Perhaps it won't be so bad. First night's always the worst. Those awful blank faces. Though I think they're warming up more each time they come back . . . Last year I was definitely getting smiles from Harry.'

Jane suspected this 'warming-up' was mostly people seeing what they wanted to see. 'Maybe she'll leave early this year,' she said. 'Remember how Mum was out of her seat the minute a play or a concert ended? Didn't even clap.'

A pause. Here it came: Angie was going to ask. Jane pictured the curl of her lips at the other end of the phone.

'So, did you do it?'

'What?'

'You know. Rent-a-bloke. London Gigolo.'

'They're not escorts. There's no sex.'

'Oh my god, you didn't! So what, is he *staying overnight*?'

'I don't have to explain this to you.' But telling Angie it was none of her business only ever made things worse.

'I'm sorry, it's just so funny.'

'Lots of people do it.'

'Lots of people get back tattoos. Lots of people are idiots.'

'Fine, I'm an idiot.'

'Aren't they expensive?' Angie had to know everything.

'I got a discount.'

'Why? Does he only have one leg or something?'

'I don't think so.'

'You don't *think* so?'

Instantly Jane knew she'd made a mistake.

'You bought him sight unseen? Oh my god! You have to bring your one-legged gigolo round, do you promise?'

'I'm not promising anything.'

'Why? *You*'ll be too wrapped in the throes of passion? Isn't he a bit *he* for your tastes?'

'I'm going now, Busy. Bye.'

Jane dusted the clock on the mantelpiece. Watched the seconds turn, tick by tick; the progress of time across a face. Even in the tiny movements of the clock hands, life felt beyond control. All she could do was wait for the shadow to fall.