

7 Ghosts

by Dan Rebellato

First Draft (September 2022)

'In the process of imitation, revision, and repetition,
the black slave's narrative came to be a communal utterance'

Henry Louis Gates, Jr

'I began to blaspheme and wished often to be
any thing but a human being'

Olaudah Equiano

Characters

David Abiola novelist, 30s, present day

Sarah Crane scientist, 30s, present day

Robert Manning businessman, 50s, 1850s

Sir William Hobhouse adventurer, 70s, 1790s

Lord Nicholas Havers, 60s, 2000s

Florence Scott spiritualist, 30s, 1850s

Isabelle Dawson servant, 17, 1860s

Charlotte Manning spinster, 30s, 1860s

Elliott Bailey musician, 20s, 1960s

Lady Caroline Tobin 70s, present day

Ejikeme Nwaokocha (aka. **Noah Adams**) slave, 30s, 1790s

of these, seven are ghosts

Location

The play is set in 18 Montague Gardens, London, WC1, a four-storey house, part of the Bedford Estate. It is haunted.

It's late at night. We hear the shipping forecast playing on a portable radio. Very close to us, a man is finishing brushing his teeth. He spits and rinses with mouthwash. He dries his face and takes the radio into the adjoining bedroom. He draws the curtains and pulls back the covers on the bed. He gets into bed. He turns off the radio. He sets an alarm. He turns off the bedside lamp. We hear his head hit the pillow and he settles down to sleep.

Silence.

And then downstairs we hear a noise. The man stirs.

Downstairs a door creaks open. We hear the man's breath catch.

Then slowly we hear dreadful footsteps on the stairs coming up to the room. We hear the man's fear in his breath and he tenses in readiness.

The door to the room opens very slowly. The man takes in one whispered, terrified gasp.

SARAH David.

We are with DAVID. Her voice, by contrast, sounds distant, hollow.

DAVID It's not possible...

SARAH Don't be scared my love.

DAVID The accident. This is not possible. Wh - what are you?

SARAH It's me. Your Sarah.

DAVID How are you here?

SARAH I know, my darling.

DAVID There was a funeral...

SARAH I know. I was there.

DAVID Yes. Of course.

Beat.

Why have you returned?

SARAH To see you.

DAVID Have you come to harm me?

SARAH No. I love you.

DAVID How did you get in? Oh. Stupid question.

SARAH I didn't want to. But something drew me back and I saw you.

DAVID I thought I'd never see you again.

SARAH And I you, my love.

DAVID I cry every day. I miss you so much.

SARAH My darling...

DAVID It was so sudden. To have you taken from me like that.

SARAH Yes, I know. I feel the same.

DAVID Do you remember the accident?

SARAH Not really. We were coming home from your reading. I was driving. I think we had music on in the car. But from then on it's all a blank.

DAVID We must have hit a verge because the car flipped and turned over several times. There was glass in my face and the door was jammed. You were unconscious. The fire crew came and the paramedics. They cut open the car and they got you out.

You didn't - you didn't regain consciousness. They took you away and I never saw you again.

SARAH Until now.

DAVID Somehow, I was okay, I could get out of the car myself. I made my way home somehow but there was no music in the air. The sky was quiet. All the birds, all the voices, all fell silent. That's how I knew you were gone.

SARAH I'm sorry too. I've missed you.

DAVID It's this house. This house is cursed.

SARAH No, my love.

DAVID We should never have moved in here.

SARAH It's not the house.

DAVID It's been nothing but bad luck for two years.

SARAH Not all bad luck, David. You wrote your book.

DAVID I can't finish it though. I need to leave this house.

SARAH Why don't you?

DAVID I've always wondered if this house were haunted.

SARAH Well - it is now.

DAVID I - I suppose so.

SARAH It's an old house. Old houses are full of noises.

DAVID Two hundred and fifty years old and I feel those years weigh on me. Like they're in the walls. Like I can feel all of them at once.

SARAH Remember how we used to press our ears to the walls and hear water?

DAVID Yes.

SARAH What do you hear now?

DAVID Breathing, sometimes. Sometimes I think I hear voices.

SARAH What sort of voices?

DAVID Voices like that.

Beat.

SARAH Like what?

DAVID Do you hear that?

SARAH What?

DAVID Listen?

Beat.

Just listen.

The room is silent. The silence thickens in intensity. Very very distantly, we can hear a voice. We strain to listen harder. The silence is overwhelming, it reaches breaking point and -

The silence bursts and with the sound of a vast breath releasing despair, disbelief, and anger we plunge through the layers like water.

It is 1863. A spiritualist session is in progress. SIR WILLIAM is observing it with some scepticism.

FLORENCE (*distant*) The spirits are among us, the spirits are about us, they speak and I shall hear them, they move and I shall touch them. Place your hands on the table, friends, and close your eyes as together we listen to the shades. Spirits! We seek reparation in this house! Come spirit!

SIR WILLIAM (close) I'm right here, you silly ass.

FLORENCE (gasps) I can feel the presence of an Agatha. Agatha, are you there?

SIR WILLIAM Do I look like an Agatha, you humbug?

FLORENCE Robert, do you know an Agatha?

ROBERT I - I'm not sure.

FLORENCE Speak to her Robert.

SIR WILLIAM You, madam, are a charlatan.

ROBERT A - Agatha? Are you there, Agatha?

The layers breathe again and LORD HAVERS, a new ghost, bursts through and collapses at SIR WILLIAM's feet.

SIR WILLIAM Who the devil are you?

LORD HAVERS I'm terribly sorry, got myself a bit lost in the layers. Lord Havers of Bloomsbury.

SIR WILLIAM Pleased to meet you.

LORD HAVERS And you, sir. Call me Nick. What's going on here?

ROBERT Avaunt ye, spirit!

LORD HAVERS Who's he talking to?

SIR WILLIAM Agatha.

LORD HAVERS Who's Agatha?

SIR WILLIAM I am, apparently.

FLORENCE Begone, spirit! I cast you from this place!

SIR WILLIAM *(raising his voice)* I certainly shall not. This is my house! *(to LORD HAVERS)* The lady's a sham.

LORD HAVERS You must be Sir William.

SIR WILLIAM I am he.

LORD HAVERS The founder of 18 Montague Gardens.

SIR WILLIAM I have that honour.

FLORENCE You are not welcome here, spirit!

LORD HAVERS You must have seen us all come and go, I suppose.

SIR WILLIAM I have.

LORD HAVERS Tell me, Sir William, how many ghosts are there in this house?

SIR WILLIAM There are seven in Montague Gardens.

LORD HAVERS And you've met them all I suppose.

SIR WILLIAM I have.

LORD HAVERS You must be quite proficient by now, with the layers I mean.

SIR WILLIAM There's not much to it. You just lean in, listen for the voices, and you pass through. You'll get the hang of it.

LORD HAVERS Yes, I thought I heard something, had a bit of a listen and sort of fell in.

SIR WILLIAM Yes, careful with that. You listen too hard you might pick up next door.

FLORENCE Will you leave this place? Tap once for yes and twice for no.

SIR WILLIAM Oh will you hush.

LORD HAVERS And you can tune in to any time?

SIR WILLIAM Certainly.

LORD HAVERS When are we now?

SIR WILLIAM This crowd? 1860s or thereabouts.

LORD HAVERS I say, I don't suppose you've ever come through one of the layers and met yourself.

SIR WILLIAM Don't be a fool. That's what the layers are for.

LORD HAVERS Really! Well, well. I have a lot to learn before I take over!

SIR WILLIAM You do, indeed.
Before you what, sir?

LORD HAVERS Before I take on the house. You know, as head honcho.

SIR WILLIAM What the devil do you mean?

LORD HAVERS You've been doing it a while and I thought I might bring a bit of youth, a bit of zest, new ideas.

SIR WILLIAM I am an adventurer, sir, a man of affairs, a merchant of the West India Islands, and an agriculturalist of scale. Who are you, sir?

LORD HAVERS I am Nick Havers. Member of Parliament for Whitechapel and St Georges, Paymaster-General in Her Majesty's Government, and latterly Lord Havers of Bloomsbury in the House of Lords.

SIR WILLIAM You think to impress me, sir? Me? A philanthropist, a Paladin for Commerce, and a man of sensibility?

LORD HAVERS I don't dispute that, Sir William.

SIR WILLIAM There are statues erected in my honour.

LORD HAVERS Fewer than there used to be.

SIR WILLIAM Quakers, sir. Jacobins. Malcontents of every stripe.

LORD HAVERS Be reasonable, Sir William.

ROBERT Is there a Charlotte here?

FLORENCE Charlotte.

ROBERT My sister.

FLORENCE (*gasps*) Charlotte is with us. Charlotte, your brother is here!

SIR WILLIAM In this house I do not reside but I preside, sir. And so I shall remain.

LORD HAVERS Will you not listen at least?

SIR WILLIAM You, an amateur, tell Sir Will Hobhouse to listen? I have listened to this house for 224 years. The impertinence.

LORD HAVERS What is the house telling you?

ROBERT If you're there, Charlotte, please, I ask only this. Leave us! Leave us in peace!

From somewhere distant, a voice.

CHARLOTTE Robert?

SIR WILLIAM Listen.

LORD HAVERS What?

SIR WILLIAM Voices in another layer. Listen.

CHARLOTTE Did you call me, Robert?

LORD HAVERS I *can* hear something.

SIR WILLIAM Hush.

They listen hard and so do we. The listening intensifies and then, with the same despairing breath, we plunge through the layers.

It is a decade earlier. The 1850s.

At the top of the house, CHARLOTTE MANNING has risen from her bed. She is holding a candle and wearing a nightdress. She leans over the banister.

CHARLOTTE Robert? Is that you? Did you call me?

Robert?

She takes a step down the stairs but her foot catches in her nightdress and she falls down the stairs, very badly. As she hits the bottom her scream is cut gruesomely short as she breaks her neck.

Running footsteps.

ISABELLE Help! Help please! Come quickly! My mistress has fallen!

Miss Charlotte, Miss Charlotte. Can you hear me?

We hear a grating, splintering sound as dead CHARLOTTE slowly turns her head to look at ISABELLE.

CHARLOTTE I'm not moving, because I've broken my neck.

ISABELLE Miss Charlotte, are you dead?

CHARLOTTE I must be.
You look familiar.

ISABELLE It's Isabelle, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE Isabelle.
Isabelle?

ISABELLE Yes, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE My maid?

ISABELLE Yes, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE The one who died of typhus?

ISABELLE Typhoid if you please, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE What happened?

ISABELLE You fell on the stairs, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE So I did.

ISABELLE And your head hit the floor.

CHARLOTTE And that's it? I died?

ISABELLE Yes, ma'am. Least it was quick, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE I suppose that's a comfort. Why has no one come to me?
Didn't you call?

ISABELLE The living, they don't hear us.

CHARLOTTE Why not? Aren't they able?

ISABELLE They can, but mostly they don't, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE You died.

ISABELLE Yes, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE It was twenty years ago.

ISABELLE Yes, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE I was very sorry to lose you.

ISABELLE I know, ma'am. I saw you crying sometimes.

CHARLOTTE Oh, did you? Well. That's embarrassing.

ISABELLE I tried to call out to you, ma'am, to comfort you.

CHARLOTTE You were a good girl. You'd only been with us, what -

ISABELLE Two years.

CHARLOTTE I remember you grieving too.

ISABELLE I had a baby, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE Did you?

ISABELLE The manager on the Island, old Mister Ellis, he... he used to take liberties with the girls, ma'am. And I fell pregnant.

CHARLOTTE Oh I see.

ISABELLE It was a difficult birth and she was small. She lived by God's mercy for a week but she lives in His Eternal Grace, ma'am, thanks be.

CHARLOTTE Thank heaven for small -

ISABELLE Your brother heard about my case and took me in. It was very kind of him, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE Well it's very good to see you again -

ISABELLE I would have liked another child but Mister Ellis he took me so hard, ma'am, the doctor said I wasn't able -

CHARLOTTE That's all in the past, child. No sense dwelling on it now.

ISABELLE No ma'am.

CHARLOTTE Tell me, Isabelle: am I a ghost?

ISABELLE I think you must be, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE Why? Why me?

ISABELLE Can't say as I know, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE Why are some people ghosts and others not?

ISABELLE I don't rightly know, ma'am. But, I think, sometimes, ghosts have a story they need someone to hear.

CHARLOTTE Oh really. I'm a 40-year-old spinster, living with her boring brother and his dreadful wife. That's not a story anyone needs or wants to hear. I feel like my head is filling with water, is that normal?

ISABELLE That would be blood, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE Ah of course. And what about you? Do you have a 'story' to tell?

ISABELLE Only my time on the Islands, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE Will *nobody* come for me? It's perfectly absurd me lying here like this.

ISABELLE I know, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE I don't have a 'story'. What sort of 'story' would I have?

ISABELLE I wouldn't like to say, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE Who told you ghosts had stories?

ISABELLE There's another ghost. He told me he had come with a story and if his story could be heard he would be free.

CHARLOTTE I dare say you were there and I was not but it sounds to me a little trite.

ISABELLE That's what he said, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE In any case, what story could I tell, even I wanted to?

ISABELLE It's not for me to say, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE My life has been uneventful. My family is unexceptional.

ISABELLE As you say, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE If I need someone to hear my story before I am permitted to proceed towards heaven, I shall be waiting a long time.

ISABELLE I am probably wrong, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE I say heaven. I presume so. I believe my life has been without blemish, but all families have stories.

ISABELLE There you are, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE One is haunted, of course. In a manner of speaking.

ISABELLE Haunted, ma'am?

CHARLOTTE It's all in the past anyway.

ISABELLE As you say, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE I see that look in your eye.

ISABELLE I assure you, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE That was nothing to do with me. The Islands.

ISABELLE Of course not, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE You can't blame me, girl.

ISABELLE I don't know what you mean, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE It's not as though we were made rich by it. Sugar, tobacco. Comfortable maybe but not rich.

ISABELLE No, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE Is this what you want me to say?

ISABELLE I don't want nothing, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE You want me to apologise, is that it?

ISABELLE I assure you, ma'am -

CHARLOTTE You impertinent shadow. You shade.

ISABELLE No, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE Being made to feel guilty for what happened years ago. It's monstrous.

ISABELLE Monstrous.

CHARLOTTE You thing of darkness.

ISABELLE No ma'am.

CHARLOTTE It's all in the past anyway.

Running feet.

ISABELLE Your brother, ma'am.

ROBERT Charlotte! Oh God! Charlotte! Charlotte can you hear me?

CHARLOTTE I can hear him but he can't hear me. Is that right?

ISABELLE All ghosts listen, some want to be heard.

ROBERT Help! Somebody come quickly. Charlotte's fallen.

CHARLOTTE What's your name?

ISABELLE Isabelle, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE No, before that.

ISABELLE Isata.

CHARLOTTE Does it mean something?

ROBERT Somebody send for the doctor! She's not moving!

ISABELLE It means 'sunshine'.

Intensity builds and then with a despairing breath we jump the layers.

We're in 2021. DAVID is in the first-floor sitting room of 18 Montague Gardens. It's late evening. There is a fire in the fireplace that crackles warmly through this scene. He's in an armchair and has just woken up.

ELLIOTT The sleeper awakes!

DAVID *(startled)* Oh.

ELLIOTT Sorry to make you jump, didn't want to disturb you.

DAVID I was fast asleep I think.

ELLIOTT Easily done, the armchair, the fire. I've done it many times.
(extending a hand) Elliott Bailey. You must be the new writer.

DAVID *(shaking)* Yes, that's right. David Abiola. I've only been a week or so.

ELLIOTT Good to meet you, man.

DAVID You're in one of the upper rooms?

ELLIOTT I'm a songwriter.

DAVID Oh, wow, amazing.

ELLIOTT What about you? What's your bag?

DAVID I'm a novelist.

ELLIOTT Cool.

DAVID My last novel won the JJ Thomas Prize and my agent put me up for this.

ELLIOTT It's a great place to live. How long did they give you?

DAVID Two years, rent-free.

ELLIOTT You here on your own?

DAVID My wife, Sarah, she's up in Liverpool, she's just sorting out stuff with the house and she'll be joining me in a week or so.

ELLIOTT What does she do?

DAVID She's a scientist, actually..

ELLIOTT Pretty sweet pad though.

DAVID It's like a dream, really.

ELLIOTT Looked like you were dreaming just a minute ago.

DAVID I was.

ELLIOTT Idea for a book?

DAVID Well ... strangely ... yes.

ELLIOTT Cool. Lay it on me.

DAVID Well, as part of the application for the residency I had to outline the book I want to write and I said I wanted to write about this house. About 18 Montague Gardens. And just when I woke I'd been dreaming about people in this house, I just a dream but you know. It's like the house is telling me its stories.

ELLIOTT House has got a vibe.

DAVID I'm thinking a book of connected short stories set over 200 years or so but all in the one house.

ELLIOTT Lot of history here, man.

DAVID I've been looking into it. There have been writers here at least since the 1930s, maybe earlier.

ELLIOTT Pamela Crawford.

DAVID Pamela Crawford! You know her work?

ELLIOTT I've not read her stuff.

DAVID I didn't know her at all but she's quite something. There are three of her books in the library downstairs. Short stories mostly and they're kind of gothic I guess, but they're pretty grim.

ELLIOTT Grim how?

DAVID There's one called 'The Beaten Wife' and it's kind of haunting.

ELLIOTT What's it about?

DAVID I think it's the very last thing she wrote; it was published posthumously - anyway anyway, it's set in a terraced house, not like this, not a townhouse, more like a suburban house with a garden. The garden's important. And it's this awful marriage. You know, the husband hates his wife but they can't get divorced - you know, the thirties - and he just mistreats her more and more. It starts out he gets angry if he gets home from work and the food's not hot and waiting for him and if it's not he beats her.

ELLIOTT 'The Beaten Wife'.

DAVID Yeah, exactly, and it gets to the point when he just walks through the door at whatever time and shouts 'I'm hungry' and if she's not ready to serve him his meal he beats her up and even if she is ready he beats her up anyway.

So, one evening, he's... I can't remember if he's drunk, I think maybe he is, but he shouts out 'I'm hungry!' and his wife runs into the kitchen and she puts this beef joint in the oven and he's like 'how long is that going to take' and she says 'an hour' and he goes totally ballistic and keeps hitting her and saying each time 'I'm hungry, I'm hungry, I'm hungry' and then he grabs her - it's really horrible the way she describes it - and he smacks her down and her head hits the corner of the stove and she just... dies, right there on the floor.

ELLIOTT Bummer.

DAVID And obviously he panics but he waits till it's dark and he digs a hole in the garden and drags her out of the back door and drops her in there. And the next day he tells the neighbours she's run away and there's a great bit where he knows they've believed him because he can see them thinking 'that's what you just deserve, you brute'. And anyway that evening he's been at the pub and as he comes back home, just out of a kind of reflex, as he opens the door, he shouts 'I'm hungry' and it sinks in what he's done, a murderer standing in his empty house.

And then he hears a noise from the garden, like someone digging up earth, and it gets louder and he goes to look and he sees his wife, pale and lifeless, climbing out of the hole and she walks through the garden to the back door and opens it and staggers to the kitchen and suddenly there's the beef joint again and she puts it in the oven and she's cooking the veg and the husband is terrified and he thinks he's drunk or dreaming but then the wife serves the food to him and he sits and there's something in her look that makes him know he has to eat it and he does with her pale eyes watching him and as he finishes the last mouthful she picks up his plate and washes it up in the sink and then goes out to the garden and gets back into her grave.

ELLIOTT You're kidding me.

DAVID And the next night, he comes home and he opens the door, cautiously, and there's no one there and he just tries it, he says 'I'm hungry' and the earth is moved again and his dead wife walks through the back door and makes his dinner and he eats it with her watching and washes it up and goes back to her grave.

Every night this happens, but it's not just the same, and this is where the story gets really gross, it's not the same because she's starting to decompose so after a week or so, her skin has turned from white to green to red and it's cracked and the muscle is showing. And the beef as well, after a week the

flavour is changing and the texture is slippery and gross but he has to eat it.

After a month, she's this monstrous rotten corpse and the beef is full of maggots and it makes him sick to eat it but she watches him and he has to eat every last bit. And at the end of the novel, he's dying in the kitchen being eaten out from the inside and Crawford describes his wife lying down in her grave, content that her husband has a nice full stomach...

And that's it. That's how it ends.

ELLIOTT Total downer.

DAVID Maybe I'm not describing it well enough because it's actually kind of amazing. I'm thinking of writing to Virago about her.

ELLIOTT Heavy shit, man.

DAVID There's this real intensity to the way she describes it.

ELLIOTT The husband in the story. What's his name?

DAVID I'm not - I can't remember.

ELLIOTT Not 'Jeremy' was it?

DAVID Oh I think it might be. How did you know?

ELLIOTT You gave me a story. I'll give you one.

DAVID Okay, great.

ELLIOTT In the late 30s, Pamela Crawford used to live up in the top part of the house. But in the bottom half, where you are, was an artist, Jeremy Pelham.

DAVID Wait, is this true?

ELLIOTT Sure is my friend.

DAVID Do you mind if I take notes? only it could be useful.

ELLIOTT Right on.

 Jeremy's a painter. On the outskirts of the Bloomsbury Group. Had a couple of exhibitions, sold a few things, but the important thing for our story is, he's in love with Pamela Crawford.

DAVID Right...

ELLIOTT And they're friends and they're hanging out but Miss Crawford doesn't want to be anyone's old lady. More interested in the ladies, dig?

DAVID Got you.

ELLIOTT And she puts Jeremy off, politely at first and then not so politely. And one evening they're in here and maybe a few whiskies have passed between them and Jeremy decides he doesn't want to take no for an answer and Miss Crawford is so not into that and she's been smoking this cigarette and she pushes it through his cotton shirt and presses it into his chest.

DAVID Yikes.

ELLIOTT And he's like 'woah' and she tells him never to come near her again and she goes up to her room and writes a story and I'm going to lay some dollars down that your little tale is the story she wrote.

DAVID Hah, well, maybe.

ELLIOTT Because this is the early 40s and that would be the last thing she wrote because that night a German bomb explodes at number 14 and the blast cuts right through the top floor killing her in her sleep.

DAVID Seriously?

ELLIOTT Now our young Jeremy is wracked with guilt. If he hadn't pressed his luck she might still be downstairs with him when the bomb went off and anyway, she died angry with him, and

he swears he's going to preserve her memory and he decides he's going to commemorate her with a portrait. Two months before it has been in birthday and Pamela had bought him a beautiful big canvas and what could be more perfect. he thinks, and he gets to work.

DAVID (*writing*) This is amazing.

ELLIOTT Jeremy works quickly. He's not working from life, he's working from memory and he wants to get Pamela on canvas before she fades and at the end of the first day he's pleased with himself. He's got most of the face and what he's most proud of is that he's caught this expression she used to have when he knew she was getting an idea for a story, this serene look, like she was here but her mind was walking across the sea.

DAVID Does this painting exist?

ELLIOTT Hang loose, man, I'm getting to that. And the next morning, he gets up and he has a little breakfast, and gets ready for the day and he goes into his studio and he stands in front of the picture and, man, something's not right.

DAVID What?

ELLIOTT Her face. She's not looking laid back at all; she's looking bummed out, kind of confused. And he thinks, okay, well I was working late, the light wasn't so good, I can fix this and he spends the day remaking the face, giving her back her foxy smile, putting the love light back in her eyes, you get me? And he's working on the hairline and the neck and he's roughing out this string of pearls she had on her neck and Jeremy goes to bed pretty pleased with himself.

DAVID Sorry to interrupt. His studio was here?

ELLIOTT Where do you think? But next morning, the picture looks different again. She's not this serene chick, she's scowling. She got these angry eyes and her mouth is clamped shut like she doesn't trust herself to speak, and Jeremy is freaked out.

DAVID Understandably.

ELLIOTT But he thinks maybe it's his subconscious being boss of the brush, you dig? He starts again. He scrapes it across, he lays down a new ground and he starts painting lovely Pamela for the third time. He watches every stroke and they're full of love, love for his lady, and sure enough Pamela's face comes out of the canvas and she's got that twinkle and she's beautiful and she's smiling and he checks and he looks hard and yeah the lady is happy and he goes to bed reassured.

DAVID But the next day...?

ELLIOTT The next day he walks into his studio, full of confidence - he know what he did, man - and he walks around to look at the picture and he staggers back. His hand over his mouth. He going down on his knees, man.

DAVID What is it?

ELLIOTT Pamela is furious. Her eyes are blazing, her teeth are bared, her hair is wild and behind her it's like the room is on fire. And worst of all, what do you think she's got in her hand?

DAVID ... I don't know...

ELLIOTT A lighted cigarette.

DAVID Oh wow.

ELLIOTT And now this guy is freaked. He throws an oilcloth over it while he thinks what to do. He goes out. He walks the streets of London town until he realises he has to destroy it. He goes back to his studio and he grabs the oilcloth and the canvas and he attacks it with a knife and it's ripping through the canvas and there's dried paint in the air and cotton dust flying up and he's smashing up the frame and after an hour of this it's all in pieces and he takes it to the garden and he burns it all.

DAVID Burns it?

ELLIOTT Every last piece.

DAVID During the Blitz, when there were blackouts?

ELLIOTT It's the afternoon, man.

DAVID Sorry go on.

ELLIOTT And he takes the burned pieces and he goes out and he scatters them, right across London, everywhere he goes, he's dropping these asks. And as he does so, he feels a huge sense of relief. His terror starts to fade. He goes back home. He washes. He goes to bed and he's vows, before God, that he will never think of Pamela Crawford again.

DAVID Wow ... that's quite a story.

ELLIOTT And then -

DAVID Oh okay.

ELLIOTT He wakes up. It's pitch dark. He checks his watch. It's three in the morning. He turns over and settles back for sleep. And then he hears a noise. In the next room. Footsteps. Slow footsteps. And now he's properly awake.

 He gets up and he listens. His heart is racing man.

DAVID I think mine is.

ELLIOTT Hello? He calls. Who's there?

 Nothing.

 And he has this dreadful suspicion. So he lights a candle and goes to his studio, he opens the door and he goes in. He approaches the easel, fully expecting the canvas to be back where it was. But it isn't.

 Our man lets out a sigh of relief.

DAVID ... and?

ELLIOTT And then he looks down. And there, on the floor, leading out of the room, is a trail of women's footprints, in paint.

DAVID Holy crap.

ELLIOTT And that's where they found him. Three days later. Expired from pure terror, my friend.

DAVID That's great.

ELLIOTT Like I said, house has got a vibe man.

DAVID Where did you hear it?

ELLIOTT Oh way back.

DAVID I mean is it a *known* story? Could I - could I use it?

ELLIOTT Mi casa, su casa, compadre.

DAVID You have to be careful using real people, I think, because Pamela's obviously real, but there's something interesting about mixing it with a ghost story.

ELLIOTT True story, man.

DAVID Hah, well, maybe.

ELLIOTT As real as you and me.

Beat.

DAVID I'm sure it's based on something real, but -

ELLIOTT But what?

DAVID Well... first, I don't believe in ghosts.

ELLIOTT Oh you're going to believe in ghosts, man, living here, trust me.

DAVID And also, if he sees the footprints and dies, how does anyone know what he saw. He couldn't have told anyone.

ELLIOTT Maybe his ghost did. (*Ghostly*) Whoooooooo!

DAVID Good point. I did not think of that.

ELLIOTT I need to hit the sack. Good to meet you, David man.

DAVID And you too.

ELLIOTT And if you and your lady want to listen to some sweet sad songs, I can always use another pair of ears.

DAVID Oh we'd love that.

ELLIOTT It's good to be heard, man. Good night.

DAVID Good night.

ELLIOTT leaves. DAVID sits taking it all in. He chuckles to himself. The fire crackles. The silence of the room. It builds in intensity.

Voices bleed through the layers. We hear them distantly, like voices from a distant radio station.

ISABELLE I think maybe ghosts remind us of pain, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE I don't need reminding of pain. Pain is all I am, girl. Have you ever broken your neck?

ISABELLE I have not, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE I do not recommend it.

ISABELLE No, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE Are you going to keep following me, like this?

ISABELLE Does it displease you, ma'am?

CHARLOTTE This really is the end. Why am I a ghost? It seems most unfair that I – surely one of the most generous of women – should have been given the gift of eternal death.

ADD EJKEME IN HERE & SIR W

Build the sound and then, with a great despairing breath, we plunge back into 2021, a week later. The door knocker. DAVID opens the front door from the inside.

LADY CAROLINE Now you must be David. Delighted to meet you. I'm Caroline Tobin.

DAVID I'm sorry, I'm...

LADY CAROLINE Lady Caroline.

DAVID Lady Caroline!

LADY CAROLINE I generally like to wear mufti when I'm on Montague Gardens business.

DAVID Do you want to come in?

LADY CAROLINE Thank you.

She steps inside and David closes the door behind her. LADY CAROLINE walks confidently into the hall and through a pair of double doors to the library; we follow nervously with David. The dialogue above and below is continuous.

DAVID Can I get you something to drink?

LADY CAROLINE I really won't be long, I just wanted to see how you were getting on.

DAVID Pretty well I think.

LADY CAROLINE Has your wife joined you yet?

DAVID Yes, she moved in on Wednesday but she's actually visiting her sister today.

LADY CAROLINE Oh what a pity I should have liked to meet her. Perhaps you'll do me the honour of coming for supper one evening.

DAVID We'd like that very much.

LADY CAROLINE And how are you finding the place?

DAVID It's - what can I say? - it's remarkable.

LADY CAROLINE Do sit down, please.

DAVID Thank you - your - Ladyship.

LADY CAROLINE Please, call me Caz, all my friends do.

DAVID *(laughs)* Thank you, Caz. I will.

LADY CAROLINE And most important are you finding it conducive?

DAVID 'Conducive'?

LADY CAROLINE To writing. Is it getting the 'creative juices' flowing?

DAVID It's an inspiring place to work. I'm really at only 'gathering my thoughts' stage at the moment.

LADY CAROLINE Ah! You're not a 500 words a day man.

DAVID I will be, just not yet.

LADY CAROLINE Oh of course you were one who wanted to write about the house. Is that still the plan?

DAVID Yes, yes I think so.

LADY CAROLINE There's a lot of history here of course. And not always in a good way. The pipes need ripping out and replacing. If you hold your ear to that wall it's like you can hear the sea.

DAVID Do you know when it was built?

LADY CAROLINE 1782 I believe. Part of the Bedford Estate. It was built for William Hobhouse.

DAVID Do you mind if I make notes?

LADY CAROLINE No you go ahead. *Sir* William I should say. He was an irascible old sod by all accounts and wouldn't like to be demoted.

DAVID So he built it?

LADY CAROLINE I wouldn't go that far. He joined the subscription for the Estate and bagged one of the houses. He's still around you know.

DAVID (*writing, takes him a moment to catch up*) He's... he's what?

LADY CAROLINE He's supposed to haunt the place. I've never seen him and of course it's all poppycock but there were sightings in the last century.

DAVID How did he die, may I ask?

LADY CAROLINE No one knows precisely, he was found dead of a heart attack, sitting here. Probably roughly where you are now.

DAVID Anyone can have a heart attack.

LADY CAROLINE It is rumoured he was being harassed by a persistent creditor and that may have pushed his blood pressure over the edge but who can say?

DAVID There's a Newspaper section at the British Library I think. Maybe I'll do some research.

LADY CAROLINE The grandfather clock in your room was his.

DAVID Yes, it doesn't seem to work...

LADY CAROLINE No it stopped the day he died, like the song.

DAVID The song?

LADY CAROLINE (*warbles*) 'Stopped short, never to go again, when the old man died'. That's the legend anyway. Stuff and nonsense of course but you might find a place for it in your book.

DAVID I want to say, of course, thank you for this opportunity. The Montague Fellowship, the residency, it's a great honour.

LADY CAROLINE We're very pleased to have you.

DAVID How long has the scheme been going?

LADY CAROLINE Only a few years. You're our fifth writer-in-residence at Montague Gardens. Quite a little community of artists we're building here.

DAVID Yes, I've already met Elliott.

LADY CAROLINE Elliott?

DAVID Yes, the resident upstairs.

LADY CAROLINE The other writer won't be in place until July.

DAVID Really?

LADY CAROLINE You've got the place to yourself for the next three months.

DAVID Oh I see. Maybe I misunderstood.

LADY CAROLINE Possibly a former resident, I let them use the library sometimes.

DAVID That must be it.

LADY CAROLINE I don't remember an Elliott, though, and I would remember. It was my brother's name.

DAVID Oh really? 'Was'?

LADY CAROLINE Yes, well, he died, unfortunately. A drug overdose. 1969.

DAVID I'm so sorry.

LADY CAROLINE He lived here, in fact. He was trying to make it as a songwriter.

DAVID A ... songwriter?

LADY CAROLINE Yes, he wasn't terribly good, I'm afraid.

DAVID Was he a young man, fair hair?

LADY CAROLINE Yes, I think there's a painting of him somewhere. Are you alright?

DAVID Y - yes.

LADY CAROLINE It was partly in his memory that I set up the Montague Fellowship, you know, to keep the creative flame alight here.

DAVID I see.

LADY CAROLINE Partly because of him, but also, well, my family's history is not all it should be.

DAVID Wh-what do you mean?

LADY CAROLINE Sugar plantations, slave labour, overseers, cruelty. It was all a long time ago of course, but one feels haunted by it.

DAVID Yes.

LADY CAROLINE One can apologise of course but I thought put the money to good use. Bring an end to things.

She gets up to go. Through the following we go out into the hall to the front door.

DAVID I see, yes.

LADY CAROLINE Oh. You don't have a ghost do you?

DAVID I beg your pardon?

LADY CAROLINE You don't ever use a ghost. Not for your books obviously but reviews and such. A ghost writer I mean.

DAVID Oh... no.

LADY CAROLINE Shame. I have a speech to give to the Canal and River Trust - we raise money for them in a small way - and I'm lacking inspiration, so I could use some help. If you think of any good canal-based jokes, do send them my way.

DAVID I'll have a think.

LADY CAROLINE opens the door.

LADY CAROLINE Do send my regards to Sarah and I'll have my secretary send you some possible dates for dinner.

DAVID Yes, thank you.

LADY CAROLINE Back to the grindstone. Goodbye, David.

She goes. DAVID closes the door behind her and leans against it for a moment taking it all in, breathing deeply. Then he straightens and starts to go up the stairs.

There is a knock at the door. DAVID turns round and goes back down to answer it.

DAVID *(opening it)* Did you forget someth -

EJIKEME My name is Ejikeme Nwaokocha. I have come to claim my freedom.

DAVID *(closing the door)* I'm sorry, I don't have any money.

EJIKEME I do not seek money, only my freedom. Let me tell you my story.

DAVID Look, I'm rather busy actually -

EJIKEME I would be freed from bondage sir. From the accursed condition of slavery.

DAVID Are you for real?

EJIKEME Do you think I am not?

DAVID Slavery was abolished 200 years ago.

EJIKEME Then why am I here?

DAVID I don't know.

EJIKEME Am I a free man?

DAVID Look I've got things to be getting on with, I'm sorry.

EJIKEME *(as the door closes)* I seek my manumission before God.

DAVID closes the door.

DAVID Godsake.

He starts to go upstairs again but stops because he thinks he can hear something. A faint ghostly groaning, very faint, very distant. He strains to listen.

The listening grows in intensity. The emptiness of the hallway strengthens and deepens. The silence deafens and then, with a despairing, angry breath, we tumble through the layers.

The ghostly moaning is loud and clear.

LORD HAVERS Whooooooooohhhh!

SIR WILLIAM Lord Havers, this is getting quite absurd.

LORD HAVERS *(spooky voice)* Who is this 'Lord Havers' of whom you speak?

SIR WILLIAM Nick, I don't have time for this.

LORD HAVERS *(spooky)* I am not 'Nick'. I am the vessel of a thousand souls!

SIR WILLIAM No you're not, you are Lord Havers wearing a sheet.

LORD HAVERS *(spooky)* This... is the veil of ectoplasm.

SIR WILLIAM *(testy)* It is not the veil of ectoplasm, it's a sheet with holes cut out for eyes.

LORD HAVERS *(spooky)* No, it is the veil of ectoplasm.

SIR WILLIAM I don't have time for this.

LORD HAVERS *(spooky)* Do not approach the veil of ectoplasm!

SIR WILLIAM pulls the sheet away. LORD HAVERS stands revealed.

SIR WILLIAM There.

LORD HAVERS You stubborn old goat.

SIR WILLIAM Wearing a sheet indeed!

LORD HAVERS This is Egyptian cotton!

SIR WILLIAM Well this is my house!

LORD HAVERS Well, it was.

SIR WILLIAM I built this house!

LORD HAVERS I bought this house!

SIR WILLIAM This house is designed to my specifications!

LORD HAVERS I lived here longer than you did!

SIR WILLIAM My spirit has occupied this place for over 200 years, sir!

LORD HAVERS I out-rank you!

SIR WILLIAM You are an impudent swine, sir!

LORD HAVERS No: 'You are an impudent swine, *your lordship*',

SIR WILLIAM You unmannerly scoundrel!

LORD HAVERS According to custom and precedent.

SIR WILLIAM I am the memory of this house. I am its custodian.

LORD HAVERS Some memories are best forgotten, don't you think?

SIR WILLIAM What the devil do you mean by that?

LORD HAVERS Let's say your business practices do not align with our modern values.

SIR WILLIAM My business practices, sir?

LORD HAVERS Oh come now, Sir William. An adventurer? An agriculturalist? You were a slave owner.

SIR WILLIAM I refuse to be judged by the standards of Jacobins, Methodists, and women.

LORD HAVERS Sir William, Britain abolished slavery. That's a feelgood story. It's something we can be proud of. Then you come along, ghost at the banquet, reminding everyone of the previous 300 years.

SIR WILLIAM The infernal cheek.

LORD HAVERS You've done this house some service. Why not sink into the background for a bit? I'll take things from here.

SIR WILLIAM Who's that?

LORD HAVERS Who's what?

SIR WILLIAM (*to the voices he hears*) Damn you, sir!

LORD HAVERS Are you hearing things?

SIR WILLIAM That.

LORD HAVERS I don't hear anything.

SIR WILLIAM Listen.

The emptiness builds. The silence intensifies. We start to hear faint distant voices and then with a despairing, raging breath we plunge into the present.

We are back to the beginning, DAVID and SARAH standing awkwardly apart in DAVID's bedroom.

SARAH Can I touch you?

DAVID I don't know. Can you?

She takes a step forward and reaches out, but her hand goes through him.

DAVID That felt strange.

SARAH I'm sorry.

DAVID I wanted to see you again so much.

SARAH I wanted to see you.

DAVID But I can't touch you. I can't hold you. And soon you'll disappear won't you.

SARAH I will return, my love.

DAVID I've been trying to write, you know. Still trying to write the book.

SARAH About this house?

DAVID Yes. I can't finish it though. I can't think of an ending.

SARAH Can't you?

DAVID I'm stuck. I haven't managed another word.

SARAH I'm so sorry, darling.

DAVID Every day it's like I'm back to square one.

SARAH Ever since the accident?

DAVID Ever since I found out where the money came from that built this house.

SARAH Yes, I remember.

DAVID Is it right to commemorate a house like this?

SARAH These are difficult questions, my love.

DAVID Slavery is the original sin of this house. I can't profit from it.

SARAH Give your royalties away.

DAVID I think the house is cursed.

SARAH It's not cursed.

DAVID The more I've looked into it. All the deaths.

SARAH Everybody dies.

DAVID The accident even. I've started thinking it was the house's revenge on me.

SARAH That's not true, David. You know that's not true.

DAVID I know, but... it just feels like, the last two years, it's been one thing after another.

SARAH It was difficult, I know.

DAVID Thank you for visiting me.

SARAH I had to.

DAVID You did?

SARAH I never got to say goodbye.

DAVID Are you going to say goodbye now?

SARAH I can't stay.

DAVID Will you visit me again?

SARAH If you would like me to.

DAVID I would.

SARAH Then I shall.

DAVID You can be my voices, my ghost writer. Maybe I'll be able to finish the book.

SARAH Maybe.

DAVID Where will you go when you - go?

SARAH Home.

DAVID Where is home... for a ghost?

SARAH What?

DAVID Sorry this is very new to me. Where do ghosts go?

SARAH No, I...

DAVID What?

SARAH No, my love -

DAVID What is it?

SARAH I thought you knew. I thought you understood.

DAVID Understood what?

SARAH My darling, my sweet one, my love. It's you. You're the ghost.

Pause.

DAVID What do you mean?

SARAH In the accident. They cut me out of the car. I was in a coma for three days but they got me through.

DAVID They -

SARAH But you, my love, you died at the scene. The impact of the crash. Your neck broke. I'm sorry. I thought you knew.

DAVID But I, I walked out of the car.

SARAH Didn't you think that was odd?

DAVID I believed I had been saved by special providence.

SARAH No -

DAVID The birds had stopped singing.

SARAH I survived. You're the ghost.

DAVID But I'm here.

SARAH Yes you're here. You can't leave. Every day the same.

DAVID No, no, this can't be.

SARAH I'm so sorry, I'm so so sorry.

DAVID Wait.

SARAH What?

DAVID Do you hear that?

Silence.

SARAH Hear what?

DAVID The clock.

Silence.

SARAH I can't hear anything.

DAVID The clock is ticking.

They listen. We listen. Faintly, we hear a very old grandfather clock creak into action. We listen harder and the sounds of silence intensify. The thickness of the quiet builds until it is overwhelming and then, with a shattering breath, we burst through the layers.

It is 1799, the downstairs library. Evening. There is the very remnant of a fire in the fireplace. The grandfather clock is ticking loudly.

SIR WILLIAM HOBHOUSE is dozing in a leather armchair. We hear light snoring. A snort as he wakes. He opens his eyes and we hear a sound of fearful surprise.

SIR WILLIAM Who are you? How did you get in?

EJIKEME My name is Ejikeme Nwaokocha. I have come to claim my freedom.

SIR WILLIAM What the devil - ?

EJIKEME I ask that you hear my story.

SIR WILLIAM This is my house!

EJIKEME Only you can give me my freedom.

SIR WILLIAM I shall call the servants and have you thrown out.

SIR WILLIAM pulls a bell cord and we hear it jangling elsewhere in the house.

EJIKEME No sir, you will not.

*On the other side of the room the doors to the library
slam shut and lock.*

SIR WILLIAM How did you do that?

EJIKEME I ask only a few minutes of your time, sir.

SIR WILLIAM You may not have them!

*He grabs a poker from the fire and he lunges at
EJIKEME. He falls through him.*

SIR WILLIAM What are you, spirit?

EJIKEME I am Ejikeme Nwaokocha though you may know me as Noah.

SIR WILLIAM I don't know you.

EJIKEME I ask a few minutes to tell my story.

SIR WILLIAM I don't have time for stories.

EJIKEME You must, sir.

*EJIKEME waves his hand and the grandfather clock
stops.*

SIR WILLIAM Very well, spirit.

EJIKEME For eleven years I have toiled in your cane field.

SIR WILLIAM You worked on my plantations?

EJIKEME In the West India Islands, yes, sir.

SIR WILLIAM What of that?

EJIKEME I come to demand my freedom.

SIR WILLIAM You are – or were - a slave then, a chattel, a thing.

EJIKEME Yes, sir. I am a thing, returned as a thing, to speak with you.

SIR WILLIAM You're wasting your time. You should be dealing with one of my managers out in the Islands.

EJIKEME I did speak to your manager, Mr Geffrye.

SIR WILLIAM Yes, indeed. Tom Geffrye, a good man.

EJIKEME Not a good man, sir. Not the worst, but not a good man.

SIR WILLIAM Go on, what are your allegations.

EJIKEME Two years past, I enquired of Mr Geffrye how I might earn my freedom. Mr Geffrye made me a promise that if I saved £40 and brought it to him I should my freedom.

SIR WILLIAM Did he indeed?

EJIKEME But he used me ill. For two years I laboured in the cane fields and also in the provision grounds that I might have a profusion of fruit enough to sell in the Sunday markets.

SIR WILLIAM This is all very interesting no doubt -

EJIKEME The day came when I came to Mr Geffrye with the tickets to my freedom in hand. I gave him the notes but he did not give me my freedom.

SIR WILLIAM Did he not?

EJIKEME No, sir. He enquired what I wanted with him. I said he had the money and now I was desirous of my freedom. *What money,* said he? The money I gave you, said I. *You gave me nonesuch,* said he. I did, sir, as I am an honest man. Mr Geffrye laughed to hear this: honest indeed? *Even if you had this money, which I deny, I dare say you came by it dishonestly.*

SIR WILLIAM So you may have.

EJIKEME No sir, I did not.

SIR WILLIAM What did Mr Geffrye do then?

EJIKEME He said *I will not suffer a dishonest slave to work my lands* and he decided at once to sell me. *Have I not been a good worker to you?* I pleaded but he did not relent and instead told me I would be sold to Mr Ellis on Saint Vincent.

SIR WILLIAM I know young Mr Ellis. A strict man, I believe, but fair.

EJIKEME No, sir, Mr Ellis is not fair. Young, yes, but cruel. There was no one - nor man nor woman - but feared to come before his sight. Which dreadful and alarming decision reduced me to a great perplexity. Mr Geffrye had stolen my money and my freedom and now, by selling me to Mr Ellis, I believe he meant to steal my life. By misfortune I had no more time to plead my case, for a sloop stood at the dock bound for the island and Mr Geffrye got me aboard and instructed the captain. An hour out to sea and I saw land neither before nor behind. For a moment I believed myself abandoned by my Almighty God.

SIR WILLIAM You are a Christian, then?

EJIKEME I was baptised into that religion in the year of our Lord, 1794. I resolved that I would rather die than suffer to be murdered on Saint Vincent. I waited upon the captain's inattention and I ran and threw myself from the side of the ship. I do not swim, sir, and I meant to drown.

SIR WILLIAM Did you drown, sir?

EJIKEME No sir. By some special providence I was saved. I found that I could climb from the water and walk upon surface of the sea. I understood of course that I had become spirit, but I knew this too must be God's will. I watched as the sloop sailed from me and I determined I would walk to England, which I did, sir.

SIR WILLIAM A preposterous story.

EJIKEME It took six months sir, but I followed the moon and stars and I walked at last onto England's earth and I have come to demand reparation, sir, to claim what is due to me under God.

SIR WILLIAM Come come, do you take me for a fool? What should a ghost need with money?

EJIKEME I ask only my freedom.

SIR WILLIAM What is freedom to a ghost? Come to that, why are you a ghost?

EJIKEME I -

SIR WILLIAM Aha, yes. You paint yourself as the injured party but you're the ghost not I. You must have led a bad life, boy.

EJIKEME I hope I have done all that a man may do to be accepted into glory.

SIR WILLIAM Come now, be honest. What sin did you fail to repent?

EJIKEME It is not my sin that must be repented but the world's.

SIR WILLIAM The world's!

EJIKEME I have returned to seek my freedom for my freedom must be found on earth before I may take my seat at the Lord's table.

SIR WILLIAM Well, I deny it. There!

EJIKEME Sir, life is short and death is long - and near.

SIR WILLIAM Are you daring to threaten me, sir?

EJIKEME I say only that injustice has been done.

SIR WILLIAM I deny that too.

EJIKEME This house was built on slavery. This house is an injustice.

SIR WILLIAM Well, what are you going to do about it? Tear it down?

EJIKEME You are not listening to me, sir. You are not hearing me.

SIR WILLIAM I have the Royal Navy behind me and glory of the British Empire before me. What do you have?

EJIKEME None but those who groan under the lash of tyranny.

SIR WILLIAM Well they're not here now, spirit.

EJIKEME How can any man suffer injustice to stand?

SIR WILLIAM Get out of my house.

Pause.

Well?

EJIKEME releases a breath of anger, disbelief and despair. We have heard it before.

I've won, boy.

And now there are three breaths of despairing anger.

What's happening?

A thousand.

Who are they?

A million.

No! No!

Ten million.

END

