

7 Ghosts

by Dan Rebellato

Draft 2 (October 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, 60s, 1860s

Sir William Hobhouse adventurer, 70s, 1790s

Lord Nicholas Havers, 60s, 2000s

Florence Scott spiritualist, 30s, 1860s

Isabelle Dawson servant, 17, 1830s

Charlotte Manning spinster, 30s, 1840s

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 in an large old house. 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. He dries his face and takes the radio into the adjoining bedroom and puts it on the bedside table. He goes and draws the curtains and then 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 unmistakably opens. We hear the man's breath catch.

And then we hear slow, dreadful footsteps on the stairs up to the room. We hear the man's fear in his quickened breath and he tenses in readiness.

The door to the room opens very slowly. The man takes in one 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 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 How could I, my darling?

DAVID How did you get in? Stupid question.

SARAH Something drew me back here 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 sweet man...

DAVID Do you remember the accident?

SARAH We were coming home from your reading. I was driving, I think. But then it's a blank.

DAVID 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 but you didn't - you didn't wake up. They took you away and I never saw you again.

SARAH Until now.

DAVID Yes. Somehow, I was able to free myself 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 damn house. Montague Gardens is cursed.

SARAH No, my love.

DAVID I always said it was haunted.

SARAH Well... it is now.

Beat.

DAVID I suppose so.

They share a hollow laugh.

SARAH Old houses are full of noises.

DAVID Two hundred and fifty years old and they weigh on me. Like I feel all of those years 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 hear voices.

SARAH What sort of voices?

DAVID Voices like that.

Beat.

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 furious breath 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 see them. Place your hands on the table, friends, and close your eyes as together we listen to the shades. Spirits of Montague Gardens! We seek reparation in this house! Come spirits!*

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 don't think so.*

FLORENCE *Think hard, Robert.*

ROBERT *Are you sure it's not, perhaps ... Charlotte?*

FLORENCE *'Charlotte'?*

ROBERT *My poor sister, she died, after a fall some years ago.*

FLORENCE *Yes! Charlotte! I feel her presence!*

SIR WILLIAM Oh of course you do!

FLORENCE *Speak to her Robert! Speak to your poor sister!*

SIR WILLIAM You, madam, are a charlatan.

ROBERT *Are you there, Charlotte?*

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 *(dusting himself off)* Terribly sorry, got myself a bit lost in the layers. Lord Havers of Bloomsbury, but do call me Nick.

SIR WILLIAM Pleased to meet you.

LORD HAVERS And you, sir.

ROBERT *Caroline, if you're there, please, leave us in peace.*

LORD HAVERS Who's he talking to?

SIR WILLIAM Caroline.

LORD HAVERS Who's Caroline?

SIR WILLIAM I am, apparently.

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

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, sir.

ROBERT *Caroline, my sister, I beg of you. Haunt us no more.*

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

SIR WILLIAM There are seven in all.

LORD HAVERS When are we now?

SIR WILLIAM This crowd? 1860s or thereabouts.

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

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

LORD HAVERS Yes, 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.

LORD HAVERS Spirit called Noah. Do you know him?

SIR WILLIAM A jackanapes, sir, take care. A creature of devilment.

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

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 Before you what, sir?

LORD HAVERS Before I take over. 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 some fresh 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 Nick Havers. Member of Parliament for Whitechapel and St Georges, Paymaster-General in Her Majesty's Government, and latterly Lord Havers of Bloomsbury.

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 in my honour.

LORD HAVERS Fewer than there used to be.

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

LORD HAVERS Be reasonable, Sir William.

ROBERT Charlotte! Please! My sister!

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

LORD HAVERS Just listen for a moment, sir.

SIR WILLIAM You, an amateur, tell Sir William Hobhouse to listen? I have listened in this house for more than 200 years. The impertinence.

LORD HAVERS What is the house telling you?

FLORENCE Do you feel something?

ROBERT I... do. I think she's there!

From somewhere very distant and different, 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 angry breath, we plunge through the layers.

It is twenty years earlier. The 1840s.

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? What is it, Robert?

She takes a step down the stairs but her foot catches in her nightdress and she falls with a cry down the stairs, very awkwardly. 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've gone and 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 was it, ten 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. Well. That's embarrassing.

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

CHARLOTTE Why did you come to us? I never quite knew the story.

ISABELLE I had a baby, ma'am. Your brother took me in.

CHARLOTTE My brother?

ISABELLE Not him, ma'am. The manager on the Island, old Mister Ellis,
he used to take liberties with the girls, ma'am. And I fell
pregnant.

CHARLOTTE Ah well -

ISABELLE It was a difficult birth and she was small. She lives in Our Lord's Eternal Grace now, ma'am, thanks be.

CHARLOTTE Indeed, sao -

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: I'm dead, yes?

ISABELLE I'm afraid so, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE So I must be a ghost, is that right?

ISABELLE I think so, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE Why are some people ghosts and others not?

ISABELLE Can't say as I know, ma'am. Some say that ghosts, they have a story they need someone to hear.

CHARLOTTE I feel like my head is filling with water, is that normal?

ISABELLE That would be blood, 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 here and he said he had a story and if his story could be heard he would be free.

CHARLOTTE Sounds 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 unexceptional.

ISABELLE As you say, ma'am.

CHARLOTTE If I need to wait for someone willing to hear my story before I may proceed heavenwards, I shall be here 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 It's all in the past anyway, not worth raking up.

ISABELLE As you say, 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, you impertinent shadow?

ISABELLE I assure you, ma'am -

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

ISABELLE Monstrous.

CHARLOTTE It was all a very long time ago.

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 Some of the living can hear us. Most don't.

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 anything?

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

ISABELLE It means 'sunshine'.

Intensity builds and then with an angry 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.

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 moved in a week ago.

ELLIOTT Good to meet you, man.

DAVID You're in one of the upper rooms?

ELLIOTT Very top. I'm a songwriter.

DAVID Oh, wow, amazing.

ELLIOTT What's your bag?

DAVID I'm a novelist.

ELLIOTT Cool.

DAVID My last 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, right?

DAVID More than sweet. In fact - I'm writing about it.

ELLIOTT Cool. Lay it on me.

DAVID Part of the application for the residency I had to pitch the book I want to write and I said I wanted to write about this house. About 18 Montague Gardens. In fact, when you woke me I'd been dreaming about people in this house. It's like the house is giving me its stories.

ELLIOTT House has got a vibe, man.

DAVID I'm thinking a volume of connected short stories set over 250 years, 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'd never heard of her but she's amazing. There are three of her books in the library downstairs. They're ... pretty grim.

ELLIOTT Grim how?

DAVID There's a short story called 'The Beaten Wife' - last thing she wrote apparently - I can't stop thinking about it.

ELLIOTT What's it about?

DAVID She wrote it in the forties but it feels pretty now, set in 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 and he gets nastier and nastier. It starts that if he gets in from work and food's not waiting for him he beats her.

ELLIOTT 'The Beaten Wife'.

DAVID Yeah, exactly, and it gets to the point that he shouts 'I'm hungry' whatever the time and if she's not ready to serve him his meal he beats her, and even if she is he hits her 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?' and she says 'an hour' and he goes ballistic and he's hitting her and each time saying 'I'm hungry, I'm hungry, I'm hungry' and then he grabs at her - it's really horrible the way she describes it - and her head hits the corner of the stove and she just... dies, right there on the floor.

ELLIOTT Bad scene, dude.

DAVID And obviously he panics but after dark he digs a hole in the garden and drags her out 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 'no better than you deserve, you beast'. But 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 clods of earth moving, and it gets louder and then he sees his wife, pale and thin, climbing out of the hole and she walks to the back door and opens it and staggers to the kitchen and she pulls out the beef joint which is still in the oven and the husband is terrified and he thinks he's drunk or dreaming but when the wife serves the food to him, 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 in the sink and then goes out to the garden and gets back into her grave.

ELLIOTT Woah, man.

DAVID And the next night, gets home, opens the door, and, well, just to see what will happen, he says 'I'm hungry' and the grave opens again and his dead wife walks through the back door and makes his dinner and he eats it with her watching and she washes it up and goes back to her grave.

Every night this happens, and this is where the story gets really grim, because she starts 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 too, 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 foul and it makes him sick 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 inside by maggots and Crawford describes his wife settling down in her grave, proud that her husband has been so well fed...

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

ELLIOTT Heavy shit, man.

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

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 Pamela Crawford used to live up at 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 No fake, my friend.

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

ELLIOTT Jeremy's a painter, outskirts of the Bloomsbury Group, but what you need to know is he's in love with Pamela Crawford.

DAVID Right...

ELLIOTT Problem: Miss Crawford doesn't want to be *any* man's old lady. She don't swing that way, dig?

DAVID Got you.

ELLIOTT But one evening maybe a few whiskies have passed between them and Jeremy doesn't want to take no for an answer and he tries his luck. But for Miss Crawford that ain't cool 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 she tells him never to come near her again and goes up to her room and writes a story and I'm going to lay some dollars down that how your little tale came about.

DAVID Hah, well, maybe.

ELLIOTT But this is 1941 and that night a German bomb explodes at number 14 and the blast cuts right through the top floors killing her in her sleep.

DAVID Seriously?

ELLIOTT Now our young Jeremy is wracked with guilt. If he hadn't made his move she might still be downstairs when the bomb

went off and he swears he's going to preserve her memory with a portrait. She'd bought him a beautiful big new 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 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 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 her mind was walking across the sea.

DAVID Does this painting exist?

ELLIOTT Hang loose, man, I'm getting to that. Next morning, gets up, has a little breakfast, goes into his studio and ... man, something's not right.

DAVID What?

ELLIOTT Her face. She's not looking serene; she's looking bummed out, kind of confused. And he thinks, okay, I was working late, the light wasn't so good, I can fix this and he repaints the face, giving her back that foxy smile, you get me? And it goes well and Jeremy hits the sack pretty pleased with himself.

DAVID Sorry - his studio was here?

ELLIOTT Sure it was. But next morning, the picture different again. This lady's not happy, in fact she's got these angry eyes and her mouth is clamped shut like she doesn't trust herself to speak, and Jeremy freaks out.

DAVID Understandably.

ELLIOTT But he thinks maybe his subconscious grabbed the brush, you dig? He scrapes it over, he lays down a new ground and he starts painting lovely Pamela for the third time. And with every loving stroke her face comes out of the canvas and she's got

that twinkle and she's smiling 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, buzzing - he knows what he did, man - and what do you think he sees, man?

DAVID I don't know.

ELLIOTT Painted Pamela is mad. Her eyes are wild, her teeth are bared, and, man, behind her the room is on fire. And worst of all, what's she got in her hand?

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

ELLIOTT A lighted cigarette.

DAVID Oh wow.

ELLIOTT And now Jeremy is freaked. He gets a knife and he slashing at the canvas and there's cotton dust and dried paint in the air and after an hour it's all in pieces and he takes it to the garden and burns it all.

DAVID Jesus.

ELLIOTT And as he does, he feels the terror lifting. He goes inside. He scrubs himself clean, man. He goes to bed and he promises that from now on he will forget Pamela Crawford.

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

ELLIOTT And then -

DAVID There's more?

ELLIOTT Jeremy wakes up. It's night. He checks his watch. It's three in the morning. He turns over and settles back for sleep. And then he hears something, something in next door, in his studio. So *now* he's awake.

He sits up. His heart is racing man.

DAVID I think mine is.

ELLIOTT Hello? He calls. Who's there?

Nothing.

He lights a candle and enters his studio. He thinks he's going to see the painting back on the easel. But it isn't.

Our man lets himself relax...

DAVID ... and?

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

DAVID Holy crap.

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

DAVID Wow.

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

DAVID Where did you hear it?

ELLIOTT 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.

DAVID Because obviously I don't believe in ghosts.

ELLIOTT Not yet you don't, señor.

DAVID What does that mean?

We hear the front doorbell.

You're not telling me you believe in ghosts!

ELLIOTT You should get that.

DAVID (*getting up*) Park this conversation. This isn't over!

ELLIOTT Any time, my dude.

DAVID Haha!

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

DAVID Oh we'd love that.

ELLIOTT (*also getting up*) It's good to be heard, man.

DAVID You too.

We've been following DAVID out of the room and he opens the front door

DAVID Hello?

LADY CAROLINE You must be David. I'm Caroline Tobin.

DAVID I'm sorry, you're...

LADY CAROLINE Lady Caroline.

DAVID Lady Caroline!

LADY CAROLINE I generally like to don mufti when I'm on Monty Gardens business.

DAVID Do you want to come in, your... Ladyship?

LADY CAROLINE Thank you. And do call me Caz, all my friends do.

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

DAVID Can I get you something to drink, Caz?

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

DAVID Fine. Very happy.

LADY CAROLINE Is your wife here?

DAVID She's tied up with work, moving down in a week.

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

DAVID We'd like that very much.

LADY CAROLINE And how are you finding the place? Do sit.

DAVID Thank you. It's - it's remarkable.

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 very inspiring, though I'm still 'gathering my thoughts' really.

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

DAVID I will be, just not at that stage yet.

LADY CAROLINE Of course you 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 in these walls. And not always in a good way. The pipes need 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 1780s, 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 would hate 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 A heart attack, right.

LADY CAROLINE With poker in his hand, they say. Speculation is a persistent creditor 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 Oh really? It doesn't seem to work...

LADY CAROLINE I know but I can't bear to part with it. Stopped the day he died, apparently, like the song.

DAVID The song?

LADY CAROLINE 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, 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 just met one the other resident.

LADY CAROLINE I don't think so. He won't be in place till July.

DAVID Really?

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

DAVID Oh I assumed he was on the scheme.

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

DAVID That must be it.

LADY CAROLINE I wanted to open Montague Gardens up, get a bit of life into it, blow out the cobwebs.

DAVID What do you mean?

LADY CAROLINE Well, it's no secret my family's history is not all it should be.

DAVID Oh?

LADY CAROLINE Sugar plantations, 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 last of the money to good use. Sort of reparation in a small way, sorry if that sounds crass.

DAVID I suppose it's hard to know what to do.

LADY CAROLINE It's personal too, of course, my brother died here.

DAVID I'm sorry.

LADY CAROLINE Oh don't worry this was a very long time ago. End of the sixties. Drug overdose. He was trying to make it as a songwriter.

DAVID A songwriter?

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

DAVID Wh - what was his name?

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

DAVID Y - yes.

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

LADY CAROLINE He was partly why I set up the Montague Fellowship, you know, to keep the creative flame alight.

DAVID I see.

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.

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. If you think of any good canal-based quips, 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 seek only my freedom.

DAVID Look, I'm rather busy actually -

EJIKEME Sir, I must have my freedom.

DAVID Don't you have it?

EJIKEME I do not. Why else should I be here?

DAVID I don't know. Look - I'm busy, I'm sorry.

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

DAVID closes the door. He chuckles to himself.

He starts to go upstairs again but stops because 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've had enough of this, Lord Havers.

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 are a stubborn old goat.

SIR WILLIAM And 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 'You are an impudent swine, *your lordship*,'

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 Your story does not align with our modern values.

SIR WILLIAM My story, 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 You've done this house some service. Why not sink into the
background for a bit? I'll take things from here.

SIR WILLIAM The infernal cheek!

LORD HAVERS Wait, listen.

SIR WILLIAM I don't hear anything.

LORD HAVERS Yes. I hear sadness - and I hear love.

SIR WILLIAM Don't be absurd.

LORD HAVERS You don't hear everything in this house, Sir William. Just 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 know.

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.

SARAH I'm sorry, my love.

DAVID I've been trying to write, you know. Still working on 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 written a word.

SARAH I'm so sorry, darling.

DAVID Every day I'm back to square one.

SARAH Since the accident?

DAVID Since I found out what money built Montague Gardens.

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 that.

SARAH Donate your royalties then.

DAVID 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. Maybe that was the house's revenge on me.

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

DAVID I know... I know.

Pause.

 Can you stay?

SARAH I'm sorry, David.

DAVID Will you visit me again?

SARAH If you'd like me to.

DAVID I would.

SARAH Then I will.

DAVID You can be my muse, my ghost writer. Maybe then 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.

Pause.

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. 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 No, no, this can't be.

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

DAVID I love you.

SARAH I love you too...

Pause.

DAVID What?

Silence.

SARAH Listen.

DAVID What is it?

SARAH The clock.

Silence.

DAVID I can't hear anything.

SARAH Yes. The clock is ticking.

They listen. A very old grandfather clock creaks into action. We listen harder and the sounds of silence intensify. The thickness builds until, 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. A snort as he wakes. A gasp of fear.

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

EJIKEME You know me as Noah.

SIR WILLIAM I do not know you.

EJIKEME I have come to claim my freedom.

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 minute of your time, sir.

SIR WILLIAM You may not have it!

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

SIR WILLIAM What are you, spirit?

EJIKEME I am Ejikeme Nwaokocha. I must 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 toiled in your cane fields.

SIR WILLIAM You worked on my plantations?

EJIKEME In the West India Islands, yes, sir.

SIR WILLIAM You are a slave then, a chattel, a thing.

EJIKEME Yes, sir. I am a thing, returned as a thing, to speak of things.

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

EJIKEME Your manager, Mr Geffrye.

SIR WILLIAM Exactly. Tom Geffrye, he's a good man.

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

SIR WILLIAM Who are you to judge him?

EJIKEME Two years past, I asked 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 receive a deed of manumission.

SIR WILLIAM Did he indeed?

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

SIR WILLIAM This is all very interesting no doubt -

EJIKEME The day came when I brought Mr Geffrye the tokens of my liberty but he did not give me my freedom.

SIR WILLIAM No?

EJIKEME He asked what more I wanted with him. I said he had the money and now I would have 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,* said I. Mr Geffrye replied: *honest indeed? Even if you had this money, which I deny, I 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 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. He is cruel. There was no one - nor man nor woman - but feared to come before him. Mr Geffrye had stolen my money and my freedom and now I believe he meant to steal my life. A sloop stood at the dock and Mr Geffrye put me aboard and instructed the captain. An hour out to sea and land there was neither before nor behind. For an instant I believed myself abandoned by Almighty God.

SIR WILLIAM You are a Christian?

EJIKEME I was baptised into that religion, yes sir. I resolved I would rather die than be murdered on Saint Vincent. I waited upon the captain's inattention and cast myself upon the waters. I do not swim, sir, and I meant to drown.

SIR WILLIAM Well, did you?

EJIKEME No sir. By special providence of our benign creator I was saved. I found that I could climb from the water and walk upon surface of the sea. I saw that I had become spirit, but I knew this too must be God's will. I determined I would walk to England, which I did, sir.

SIR WILLIAM You mean to say you walked across the ocean to England?

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

SIR WILLIAM Come, do you take me for a fool? What is freedom to a ghost?

EJIKEME My freedom, sir, must be won on earth before I may take my seat at the Lord's table.

SIR WILLIAM Well, I deny you your freedom. There!

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

SIR WILLIAM Do you dare to threaten me, boy?

EJIKEME I say only that injustice has been done.

SIR WILLIAM I deny that too.

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

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

EJIKEME You do not listen, sir. You do not hear me.

SIR WILLIAM I have the Royal Navy behind me, boy, and Empire before me. What do you have?

EJIKEME How can any man suffer injustice to stand?

SIR WILLIAM Get out of my house.

Pause.

Well?

EJIKEME releases a familiar breath of disbelief and anger.

You've lost, boy. *(He laughs)*

EJIKEME No. We will not lose.

SIR WILLIAM 'We'? Who are 'we'?

EJIKEME My brothers and sisters who groan under the lash of tyranny.

SIR WILLIAM Who?

And now there are ten breaths of despairing anger.

What's happening?

EJIKEME Justice ungiven will be justice taken.

SIR WILLIAM Who are these people?

A hundred.

EJIKEME The citizens of your hatred.

SIR WILLIAM They can't be.

A million.

EJIKEME We are come to take our freedom.

SIR WILLIAM No! For pity!

EJIKEME Justice is coming.

Ten million.

END

