

Do you Believe in Ghosts?

That's the sort of question you ask yourself at that part of the night when the ordinary noises of the day have eased into such a deep quiet that it's impossible to sleep.

Three cups of coffee. I should have known this would happen. I lie awake and wonder.

Do you? I don't know if I do. Of course every family has it's little collection of stories. The aunt who saw something once at boarding school. The cousin who woke at night to feel a presence in her room. The Uncle born with a caul on his head who always *knew*.

Some families have more exotic collections. The Uncle who ran away to join the tantrics at an early age, and returned years later to terrify all his nieces and nephews with little tricks that were inexplicable - the dog who howled and cringed every time he was around, the voices in his bedroom at night when he was alone. The aunt who saw the angel of death hovering above those who were going to die, and told them so in shuddering words - and how they shrivelled and burnt up at the words until there was nothing of them left. The cousin who was half an idiot and was possessed at the age of fifteen - how she convulsed fiercely on knotted sheets, and spoke in many branched voices. Carefully the stories are hoarded for the nights when the power fails, and the eerie wash of candlelight makes anything believable. The children huddle together shuddering deliciously, the ghosts dance between the flames and the storyteller, the stories twist and turn blackly on the walls, and it is all true after all.

Perhaps you see ghosts if you've got the setting right. At the trembling midnight rendezvous under the century haunted

peepul. In the crumbling secret house where the years have trickled blackly through the broken window panes. At the ghats where blind stone gazes at the horned moon and three pale stars. By wayside railway stations lying empty and steaming in winter nights. On empty roads where the sound of a dog howling unravels crazily into the twisted distance. In dark places. Preferably dank. Smelling sourly of aching regrets, perfumed with cobalt sadness. But of course the best place to find ghosts is at the scene of the crime.

They say the knotted emotions, the savage event reverberate in the place they occurred, long after they have happened. Perhaps the walls of old houses are steeped with the lives of those who lived there. Perhaps stewing under the peeling plaster, bubbling between the warped floorboards, is a mess of mashed and splintered lives. Several generations after the mass murder, the frenzy hangs like an invisible choking mist in the room. Years after the hopeless suicide the desperation is a colour that seeps into the dreams of anyone who sleeps in the same bed. Decades after knife and fire and knotted rope, the moment stirs restlessly in the place, bulging through time to press for a second against the sleepless eyeball, the unwary ear. Sometimes there is enough of it to coalesce into a mournful phantom lifting weary eyes and warning hand, 'Beware' It says 'Restless I return.'

Why do they return? What do they seek, all these troops of phantoms, these vast shuffling crowds of hollow eyed and rattling spectres? Something they have lost? Something that was theirs in life and which they are now sundered from by all the dry weight of phantom decades? Do they seek revenge for betrayal? Balm for pain? Cool water for healing?

I think perhaps they turn restless on the high wind of the centuries because they are still searching. Searching for all that they never had in life. For happiness, for warmth - for love. Love not as they had in life. Not love garrotted against

the throat. Not love sharp as a knife that stabs and stabs through welter of nerves arteries veins. Not love lying coiled in green poison. Not love twisting and writhing in the heat of flames. But love like a benediction. Like that of a child. Like cool water and blowing grass and slow trickling sunshine.

Note how all the ghost stories end. The rattling chain heavy phantom is restored to it's treasure. Hunger and honour satisfied, it disappears with a glad cry. The phantom pointing one blue and ancient finger to the secret grave touches the unearthed bones lumpy with fresh earth, and is gone with a whimper. The spectre wandering with heavy footsteps through the house hears the heartfelt prayer of blessing and steps through a convenient wall and vanishes. There is a happy ever after for ghosts too. Just as in each of them is a beginning much like any other.

Once upon a time there was a girl who thought she would be loved just as she loved - until he left.

Once upon a time there was a man who lost himself.

Once upon a time there was a person who waited for life to come and find him.

Perhaps then we have all seen ghosts and lacked only the eye to recognise them. Sleeping in each of us lies the void that they wander voiceless in. The timeless chasm that stretches blue and aching across the years. The need that hungers on. For ever after...

They lie much closer to us than we can ever know. Crowding about our heads, grasping our hands, following hopeless in our footsteps are crowds of dissolving phantoms. For a second their memory touches ours and makes it resonate . Deja vu we say. Eagerly they grasp the pencil dangled by schoolgirls. Lay trembling fingers on the coin that dances on the board ringed by snickering teenagers. Borrow for a

moment the slack throat and tongue of the bored medium. We are they say. I am. I loved like you. I hurt. I have lost something. Lost myself and must blow forever hungry in the wind until I am returned to mine own again.

And perhaps each of us is haunted by our own private ghosts after all. The father who loved too much. The mother who never loved at all. The scarred and slow welling abortion. The festering memory of the man who left. We all are drag weighted with the wraiths of secret dolorous sorrows, intimate creaking deceptions, raw and reeking betrayals. Each of us rattles our own collection of hollow bones, awake sleepless at nights.

I was haunted by a man once. He kept me awake at nights. Wondering if he was alright wherever he was. Wondering if he was safe. But that was a long time ago and he is less than a ghost now. Faded to a wraith of himself. I lie awake and worry about the standard things people worry about. If it rains tomorrow will I get to my bus in time? Will there be time enough to squeeze in that trip to the bank? Sometimes I worry about ghosts.

Do you believe in ghosts? Even if you do not, say a prayer tonight. For all those who sleep spectre haunted. For all those who sleep alone. For all those who toss restless, rendered sleepless from need, aching, pain.

I pray, feeling slightly foolish at the words. Lord's prayer turned incantation to ward off those that wander in the night. The sounds that run herald to the coming day begin. The first crow dragging the morning in on it's creaking voice. The early truck nuzzling it's way through the easing light. Darkness lifting up and away.

I say Amen.

I sleep.

