

A Haunting

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The little boy was circling each table in turn and tapping the chairs as he passed them. Carol watched his progress around the half-empty dining room. When he came to Carol's table he stopped dead, staring at her. She stared back. His face was familiar. He looked knowing and insolent.

'It's rude to stare,' she remarked.

The boy sniggered and began his circuit of her table.

'Stop that!' she said sharply. But she felt him surreptitiously tap the back of her chair before he ran off.

'You little – ' she half-rose to her feet, then realised how silly she looked and sat down to her muesli again. The boy had moved on to another table where an elderly couple were smiling at him indulgently. Where did she know him from?

When Carol got up to fetch herself a croissant she took a detour past his parents' table. They were arguing in furious hissing whispers, leaning in to each other across the table. As Carol approached the girl looked up defiantly, as if accusing her of eavesdropping. That wasn't the boy's mother, she was too young. But the man was older, he had thinning greyish hair.

Back at her own table the waiter hovered, offering more tea.

'No thanks.'

'That child is a pest,' he said softly.

Surprised, Carol looked up at him. He had bright brown eyes.

'I saw him annoying you,' said the waiter. 'Last night at dinner he tripped one of the other waiters. A bottle of wine was smashed.'

'Little horror!'

The waiter laughed. Carol found herself smiling back. 'D'you get a lot of them here? Spoilt brats?'

He shrugged. 'It's my first. But I've only been here six weeks.'

'Oh. Where were you before?'

'A different line of work.'

She understood his reply to be fending her off. 'Well, better get going, I have a meeting at 9.30.'

He smiled and stepped back, waiting for her to leave the table before he began to clear it.

It was nearly nine already. Carol still had to put on her make-up and pack her bag. In the lobby she passed a group of air-hostesses slumped around a toppling pile of flight cases. Poor things, they must have just come in from a long-haul flight. Their dark uniforms and tired eyes marked them out as creatures of the night, in comparison to the shower-fresh, summery-clad guests wandering down to breakfast. Mentally checking through the order of her agenda, she took the stairs two at a time. It might be better to start with the budget cuts while everyone was fresh. They would hold their fire in case there was worse to come, then she could surprise them with the positive inspection reports. Good news would take the wind out of any belated protests. A fraction of her mind noted that the stairs were pleasingly empty, flooded with light from the huge windows, and generously carpeted. It was unusual now;

more often than not in a hotel she had to admit her claustrophobia like a guilty secret and gain access through a locked door to a dingy concrete stairwell.

Room 113. 'Hope you're not superstitious!' the receptionist had joked, as she checked in. 'There's nothing wrong with 113,' she had replied. 'Just don't give me 13.' The receptionist had laughed. It was a very nice room, 113, but she had not slept well. Something in her dream was rushing her along, she hadn't been able to stop or hardly even breathe. She'd woken in a panic. There was an aftertaste of fear which reminded her of being little again.

As she applied her eye-liner she considered timings. She was booked on the midday train back to London. There wouldn't be more than twenty at the meeting, they only had three care homes in Greater Manchester. If she chaired them firmly they could be done and dusted in an hour. Ten-thirty. Eleven at the outside. There would still be time to come back up here and change into her comfy shoes and trousers before the train. Good. No need to check out now, she could do it later.

As her thoughts raced on to the report she would start on the train, and therefore be able to finish by tomorrow morning, she moved to the window and looked down. Sunlight was streaming down onto the square in front of GMex, glinting on tram rails and car windows and the brightly coloured clothes of pedestrians. Her eye was caught by a trio crossing the road. A couple, holding hands, and a young boy dawdling behind them – walking backwards in fact – walking backwards with his arms stretched out in front of him. A car had to slow for him. What was he playing at? She knew instantly it was the boy from breakfast. But when the couple turned to shout at him she had a shock. She knew the father. It was John. Her brother. He stood on the pavement facing her and shouted at the boy. Her brother John,

unmistakeably. She took an instinctive half-step back from the window. But he was not looking at her, of course, he was looking at the boy.

John, still here in Manchester? Well, why should he move? And the boy – no wonder he looked familiar. She lowered herself onto the edge of the bed and for a moment her head went blank. Breathe, she reminded herself. Breathe. How long since she had seen John? She was seventeen when she left, so, twenty-two years.

She stood to check again but they had disappeared. Something was squeezing her lungs; she needed more air. She leant forward to put her weight into heaving open the old sash window. But it would not budge. Painted shut? She turned to try the window beside it and noticed a sticker on the glass. *Dear Guest, due to Health and Safety Purposes this window does not open.* For Christ's sake. It wasn't even English.

Out. She must get out into the fresh air, it was suffocating in here. Mechanically she gathered her things and took her key card from its slot. Out into the corridor and down the empty stairs. Breathe. Breathe. Through the lounge and down the steps to the lobby; she could see the sun sparkling on the pavement, through the glass double-doors. But as she moved towards the exit a hand touched her arm. 'Carol! They've given us a different room, didn't they tell you?' It was Jeff, director of the Cheadle home; steering her by the elbow and launching into an account of the 100th birthday of their most celebrated resident, he took her through to a high ceilinged meeting room where the others were already assembled. 'Here she is, I told you Carol was never late!'

Smoothly her mind changed gear; smiling and nodding and greeting her colleagues by name, Carol laid out her notes, pen and reading glasses, and asked them to draw their chairs into a circle.

The meeting passed without incident. By 10.50 the last goodbyes had been said and Carol paused to thank the girl who was clearing their coffee cups, then followed the others into the corridor. They had already melted away. She allowed herself to relax. Plain sailing now; she could change and checkout and have time to pick up a nice salad from M & S at the station before she left. Suddenly the doors at the end of the corridor behind her banged open and there was the thud of running feet. The boy – her brother's boy – came charging towards her bellowing. Shock rooted her to the spot. At the last second, when he was clearly about to barge right into her, she flattened herself against the wall. His mouth was open in a horrible yell, like a soldier charging into battle. He disappeared ahead of her in a blast of sound and speed. And the corridor was empty again. Unsteadily, she hitched her briefcase over her shoulder and started walking.

They would be coming after him. Her brother and his girl. Carol glanced behind her then took the first right turn that came; a narrower corridor, curving round and ascending three steps, leading past unmarked doors. Her heart was still pounding. There was something wrong with that boy – not just naughtiness. He was like John. She almost broke into a run, then forced herself to slow down. No reason why they should come this way. The hotel was vast, it was freakish that she had seen them more than once. The corridor led her round and up into the Octagon lounge; perfect, close to the main stairs. She allowed herself to be soothed by the dimensions of the room. Only a pity it had no natural light. That was what was so pleasing about the spacious lobby, she realised – its glass roof, the light radiating through. But as she crossed the lounge to reach the stairs, she glimpsed, at the far side of the lobby, her brother and his girl entering the space. There were other people about, plenty of people, entering and leaving the lifts, sauntering across the

lobby, chatting with the receptionist and concierge. There were plenty of people between them. But she knew that he had seen her. She darted up the steps behind the grand piano, through the fire doors and into the stairwell. Soon she would be in her room. But what if they were in the room next door? What if, even now, they were walking into the lift, and riding up to the first floor to emerge slap bang in front of her as she ran down the corridor to her room?

She was being ridiculous. Like a silly child. But the pounding of her heart was like the sound of her brother's fist pounding on the wardrobe door as she crouched inside, holding it shut with her fingernails. When he finally prised it open he had dragged her out and pummelled her, and she had let drop the key which she had been clutching. Then he had seized his chance; shoved her back into the dark wardrobe and locked it. His voice came muffled but triumphant from the other side. 'Tell and you're dead, cry-baby Calpol!' Calpol. That had been his last trick. To make her drink a whole bottle of the thick pink gloop, so that she was sick all over her bed. Inside the wardrobe it was silent. How long she was in there she didn't know, but the darkness had solidified and pressed itself into her face, so that she could hardly breathe. It was a well-made wardrobe; no chink of light penetrated even around the edges of the door frame. It became hot and damp and she was sweating and thirsty and then desperate to wee, and she held it as long as she could and then wet herself, feeling the shameful hot liquid dribbling down her legs and the stink of it enveloping her. She tried pushing the clothes to one end so that she could stand but they slid back smotheringly into her face. Shoving the shoes into a heap, she cleared a space to sit but it was impossible to slow her panicky breathing and the faster she breathed the more oxygen she used up and the sooner she would die. The hot darkness was a thing that pushed itself up her nose and into her mouth and ears and

pressed against her eyeballs, it blotted everything out and filled up her head until she could not even hear her own gasps for breath anymore.

When her mother found her she was furious. What a stupid game, didn't Carol know it was dangerous to hide in a place like that? Disgusting child, going to the toilet in the wardrobe, absolutely disgusting. Did she think she was still a baby?

Carol has been mounting the stairs automatically, flight after flight; now she sees she is approaching floor 6. She stops, to turn and descend, and hears footsteps coming up behind her. No one uses the stairs. Who is following her? She tiptoes on to the doors into the sixth floor, and leans her weight against one of them. It swings open slowly and she holds it as it closes. Is it her brother? Silently letting herself out into the corridor, she turns left and is greeted by the welcome sight of a chambermaid taking towels off a linen trolley. Carol draws a deep breath. The girl looks up and smiles. Carol will walk on, past the girl, and keep turning right until she ends up back at the stairs. Whoever was coming up behind her will have gone by then.

These corridors are amazingly long. When she does turn the next corner she is convinced they must be using mirrors to create the illusion of length. The beautiful intricate patterns on the green wallpaper repeat between the matching white doors, as do the patterns on the carpet, reflecting on and on. The corridor is wide, well-lit, perfectly tranquil, completely empty. Carol realises she does not have a reflection. She is walking down this mirrored corridor but she cannot be seen. She feels a kind of incredulous delight. She is invisible!

When she arrives at the mirrors, though, she finds they are open fire-doors, and that she can walk through them and on into the further stretch of corridor that exactly resembles that which she has already traversed. She glances at her watch.

11.15. The size of this hotel is astonishing. With no one to witness her foolishness, she begins to jog. Perhaps it would be quicker to turn round and go back the way she came. But she's nearly at the corner now. She rounds the corner and there's the boy. Thirty yards in front of her. Grinding something into the carpet with his foot, staring down intently. As she sees him he glances up with a look of pure malevolence. He recognises her. He – he –

Carol turns and runs blindly. If John is behind her and the boy is in front – she hurls herself at an unmarked door and it opens and she's in. A dingy place with shelves of cleaning stuff, if he follows her in here she's trapped. But there's a metal door sliding open – she stumbles forward and it's a lift and before she has time to think the door clangs to and she's lurching upwards, gasping for breath, unable to take it in. A tiny metal lift in a dingy lift shaft like backstage in the theatre, and her going up god knows where and John and – that boy –

The lift settles, the door slides open, and she steps out to face a door with brilliant daylight showing round its edges. She opens it, and there's the sky. Light and hot and light. The fresh air pours into her gasping lungs.

She stumbles out onto the flat roof of the Midland hotel. Through the railings in front of her she can see the tops of the concert hall, converted warehouses, churches, pubs – all shimmering in the sunlight, and the huge cloudless sky overhead. The roof is carpeted in roofing felt and fenced with wrought iron railings. There are a couple of garden chairs standing by one of the gigantic brown-glazed chimneys. There are even plants, she realises, in big rectangular wooden boxes. As she stares she notices a man crouching with his back to her, gathering leaves into a bowl. A roof garden. This is a roof garden, and the sunshine is pricking her skin and

the breeze flowing over her and filling her lungs so that she is ready to float like a helium balloon, or like a swimmer buoyed up by a warm tropical sea.

'Hello?' The man is rising to his feet, rubbing his knees. 'Oh, hello, we met at breakfast.' He smiles.

'Yes.' Her waiter. 'I didn't know there was a garden up here.'

'The chef likes to use fresh herbs and salad leaves. How did you get up here?'

'There's a little lift –'

He laughs. 'I meant, I've been told guests are not allowed.'

'I was trying to get away from that boy.'

'The boy who was messing about at breakfast?'

Carol nods, feeling foolish.

The waiter comes around the box of greenery, towards her. 'You must complain to his parents. Look, I'll come down with you -'

Carol shakes her head.

'No, seriously. If their child is terrorising guests –'

'Please. Leave it.' She turns and looks around. 'It's so beautiful.'

'Isn't it? In the old days they used to serve afternoon tea up here. There were tables and chairs and parasols.'

'Well why don't they now? People would love it. You can even see the Pennines!' She stares at the green line of moorland rising on the horizon.

'I think there are safety issues.' He stoops and arranges his bowls in a crate. Carol can see basil, lambs lettuce, marjoram.

'Can I walk to the other end?'

'I'll show you.' He moves his leaves into the shade of a chimney and joins her. They are above everything in Manchester, apart from Beetham Tower. Carol has never realised what a low-rise city this is. The black felt underfoot is lumpy in places. 'It's covering differences in roof levels,' he explains, and leads her across to a railing which encircles an open courtyard shape. 'The light-well.'

Carol peers down and it is indeed dazzling. 'I didn't know it was called that.'

He laughs. 'You see what they've done to maximise the light for these inward facing rooms? They've glazed the bricks that lovely creamy yellow, whereas for the outer walls they've gone for sober Victorian maroon.'

Carol stares again; it's true. At the bottom of the light-well there's a glazed roof. 'Is that the lobby?'

He nods. 'Beautiful conversion. Unlike the botched job on the other side.'

'What d'you mean?'

'They put in a ceiling, to save money. Blocked off the natural light.'

'Above the Octagon lounge?' He nods. 'You know a lot about it.'

'I used to be an architect.'

Carol digests this as they walk on to the far side of the roof. It is an enormous area; she realises that the hotel occupies an entire city block. 'What happened?'

He shrugs. 'The recession. Lots of architecture firms lost staff; last in first out is the norm.'

'And you became a waiter?'

'Via a few other jobs. But this one suits me.'

'Don't you mind?'

'Not as much as I thought I would. It gives me time.'

'Time?'

'To see people. To notice things. And at the end of my shift I'm a free man.'

Carol cannot imagine the end of a shift. Her work is continuous. After the report comes detailed analysis of the new budget. After that there'll be staff queries and complaints from this round of meetings, and quite possibly trouble from the union. Then there will be redundancy packages and a job description for the post of director of the Leicestershire homes they are amalgamating, which must be worded in such a way as to discourage applications from existing staff. Then there's emails, and forward planning, and... if she did not keep three steps ahead there would be chaos.

'Plus –' he gestures – 'I love this building. The attention to detail, the quality.' They are approaching a little turret. Carol realises there is one at each corner of the roof; a round tower with a pointed roof and circle of windows for looking out in all directions.

'Can you go into the turret rooms? They're just big enough for one.'

'You'd need a ladder, I suspect.'

'It would be a good place to sit on your own, in peace.'

He smiles. 'Watch-towers. You know the hotel was built for railway users, and had a covered walkway linking it to the old Central station, to save passengers from getting wet?' He tells her the history of the building, continuing to point out its features, and as they walk around in the sunshine Carol is paying attention. But at the same time her brain is chasing several other hares. The boy downstairs, rampaging around the corridors. Her brother – no, don't think of him. Her train. Well she's missed it. Suddenly she is properly here. Up on top of the world, above everything in the city, opening like a flower in the sunshine. The breeze is shushing over her with the sound of waves on shingle. As they approach the great white dome

of the library she sees that its shape echoes the vast blue dome of the sky above, which stretches up and out and away to freedom on every side. She sees that she is at the plumb centre of the world, here on this roof in the sunshine with this gentle man. She can stop rushing. She can be still.

Her trance is broken by the clang of the lift. Her brother comes out onto the roof and stops, shading his eyes. He turns three hundred and sixty degrees, scanning, and Carol thinks he is moving in slow motion. But there is nothing slow about his voice.

'Calpol! Cal-pol, why d'you run off?'

The waiter speaks softly in her ear; 'Who is he?'

'Come and meet my boy, Calpol.' The way he names her is more hateful than anything; the two syllables are sodden with sneering contempt.

'Let me deal with him.'

'No.' Carol steps forward and finds her voice. 'I don't want to see you, John. Or your boy. I want you to turn around and go downstairs and never speak to me again.'

'Oh Cal-pol!' he mocks.

Her courage surfaces. 'I mean it.' And she is suddenly advancing on him, furious and powerful, with something – what has she grabbed? – a garden spade in her hand. And he wavers then moves, smartly, back down the steps to the lift shaft. The door opens and closes. He's gone.

Carefully, her head spinning, Carol sets down the spade. She feels embarrassed. But the waiter smiles at her.

'Want to give me a hand with these salad leaves?'