

**AFTERNOON
TEA**

Jackie Kay

Jackie Kay was appointed writer in residence at The Midland Hotel in spring 2012 and was co-commissioned by The Midland and Manchester Literature Festival to write a short story set in the hotel. The resulting story, *Afternoon Tea*, was performed at a special Afternoon Tea event as part of Manchester Literature Festival in The Midland's French Restaurant on Thursday 18th October 2012.

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But it is only in the ashes that a story endures. Nothing persists except extinguished things - Montale

Only when I'm about to be leaving The Midland Hotel do I see them in The French Restaurant. I'm astounded - them again. They must be uncommon rich to have afternoon tea here three days in a row. The woman's had on a different pretty dress every day, according to Ruby, and the man has worn the same jacket but a different shirt and tie. And he always keeps his hat on. And, according to Ruby, who works in the French with me as a waitress, they sit engrossed in conversation and hardly pay any attention to their scones or what is inside their sandwiches. They stare, Ruby says, just stare into each other's eyes. And they hold hands and only drop hands to have a sip of tea. It's not often that you get regulars that regular, Constance, Ruby says to me, like she's just invented a new expression: *regular regulars*. And she throws back her head and laughs. She has one of those laughs that makes you laugh even if you can't see what's funny.

Most people, even rich people, come as a treat - once a week maximum, and usually less than that - and they might buy a new hat from the Milliner's Parisian (what prices!) and they might hear a concert (Chopin or Debussy; if you stand outside the doors to the hotel's Concert Hall you can rest your ear to the door and listen to the piano ripple the dreams you had when you were a girl, or gallop like a horse) and they might have a Turkish bath (if they are a gentleman and not a lady), and they might have tea in the Ladies' tea room (if they are a lady and not a gentleman) but they won't usually come three days in a row for afternoon tea and especially not when they don't pay attention to what is inside their sandwiches.

It was a mystery all right and it put us all on edge. It made us think of things we didn't understand like the Wyvern mythical beast

or calculus or French or wealth. The latter was the hardest, I think. I learned *'the latter'* not that long ago - I know. It's an addition all right. (I might sometime in the future learn French formally. I was already full of things folk didn't think I should be full of - grace notes) and yet I found just being close to wealthy people a bit frightening if I'm to be honest. Which I mostly am - honest. It shows on my face too quick if I try and lie. The colour rushes to my face and my chest, and it's not worth it - the hot, shifty feeling of not telling the truth. Ruby said to me one day, 'You're blushing, fancy that; I didn't think blushing would show on skin your colour!' I said, 'Did you think only white people blush like only women bleed?' Ruby blushed then. She had a pretty face, a few freckles and brown curly hair. I wasn't to know that line would appear in a song years ahead but it did: the expression was carried down the thin corridor of time and ended up on the other side, *Back to the Night*.

The rich are a different race as far as I'm concerned: the smell of them and the look of their clothes! The confidence, even the way they walked through the doors of the Midland Hotel and up the steps to the French Restaurant filled me with a strange sensation. Those ladies had smooth legs and false faces and expensive shoes and handbags, and hats and gloves, even when it wasn't cold, and they were like another breed of women altogether from me and my mother and my sisters. We all worked in the hotel and the Midland was like a family to us in some ways - but mysterious as the Wyvern in others. We knew the workings of it all right, the secret passages and the basement, the corridors and the bars, the staircases, all the places you couldn't be seen by the public, the invisible places, the kitchen and laundry, but we didn't know what it felt like to have afternoon tea, in the French Restaurant.

And it was always changing, The Midland, it seemed to bring the fashion in before it arrived, if you know what I mean. You'd see people wearing the next new thing before you knew they were setting a

trend; *the clientele* were as quick off the mark as the new Royce car or the jitterbug waltz.

How could someone come and spend what we earned in a week on afternoon tea when it wasn't even very filling? And why did scones always look so pleased with themselves? And who decided the tier should have three tiers? And why did people always sound snobby when they said the word *Darjeeling*? I was five years working in the French before I was allowed to serve a customer and before that I worked as a chambermaid so I would say I am somebody who by the time she was only twenty-two has seen people in every way you can see people, if you know what I mean, *nudge-nudge, wink wink*.

There are four hundred bedrooms in here with their own fireplace and own telephone. But not many of them have their own bath. If you want a bath you have to telephone for one and then I'd be the girl that would run it and then knock on your door and say, *oopsa daisy* your bath's ready. I'd test the temperature with my elbow not too hot, not too cold, unless that person had been rude earlier in the day! Hot enough to be a bit uncomfortable when you first step in, but not hot enough to scald. And I'd be the one that in my imagination would undress you in the bath and see what you'd got under all those fancy clothes. And usually if you were a gentleman, I'd furnish you with a small you-know-what or a big ugly one, and if you were a lady, I'd put strange hairy moles in surprising places. Often when I came to your room to clear the ashes from the fire, I'd think of everything that might have happened in the room, room 455, room 443, the goings-on that had gone on in there, the hijinks, and I'd appall myself and frighten myself all over again, just imagining. Sometimes when I stripped the bed and remade it with crisp fresh sheets, I'd lay down for a little moment's slumber, so short you couldn't call it forty winks, maybe only five winks, enough time to lie and then suddenly spring back up off the bed with the heart going like the clappers in case, and my chest red. The pillows are so soft. And the bed is so comfortable. It seems a waste that it is only slept in usually for one night. Those

times I'd lie down for a moment and the whole of the future would flood in like light through the bedroom window; the time when years from now when every room would have its own bath. Strange it was for me all that seeing ahead.

My favourite thing was sitting by the stairwell waiting for the ashes to cool. The sign read: *No paper or hot ashes to be put down here on any account.* A Towle. That was his name, the hotel manager. Imagine being the manager of a hotel with a name like A Towle! The towels are thick and amazingly white here. You should see the amount of sheets and towels in the laundry, enough to clothe a thousand ghosts. You should see the steam. And so I sat and waited till the ashes cooled and got paid to sit on the cold cement stair here, waiting, waiting until they cooled, and even the word 'cooled' I loved the sound of in my mouth and would ask myself, 'Have the ashes cooled yet? No they have not cooled. Not yet, my dear, can I throw those ashes down the shute.'

I found myself speaking to her in my head. Not yet. So I sang on the step, and let my voice carry for no one would hear me, a song my mother sang to me, an old Scottish ballad; her father was Scottish and her mother from the West Indies, *My Nut Brown Maiden*. It was our family joke, that song and yet strangely it touched us and our eyes filled with tears every time we heard it. *Ho ro my nut brown maiden. Hee re my nut brown maiden. Ho ro ro maiden. For she's the maid for me.* It's when I do most of my dreaming when the ashes are cooling.

There's a staircase in this hotel that leads nowhere and gives me the creeps. Who would make a staircase that leads nowhere? Sometimes I go and sit at the top of that as well, just to stir my imagination. I stir it up all the time, just to give myself the heebie-jeebies so I don't get bored. I stir it, like I see them stirring their tea sometimes in the French Restaurant, slowly, with poise.

After a few years, I changed from being a chambermaid to a chef's helper and I got moved right into the French Restaurant and

trained up behind the scenes. No more cleaning toilets, stripping beds, making beds, running baths and emptying ashes. It was the ashes I missed most. How can you miss ashes? But you can because they are already all over. The fire's already burnt and out and all that's left is the proof that there was once a fire in a room where a stranger slept in a bed for a night, maybe a stranger who was having a romance, who had afternoon tea that very day.

But today, Thursday, there they are again, that same couple that were here yesterday and the day before, and the day before that and the woman in a different pretty dress and the man in the same smoking jacket. Is it a smoking jacket? To be honest I don't really know what a smoking jacket looks like. What I do know is that here they have smoking concerts in the Concert Hall some nights and I suppose the men will wear their smoking jackets to hear the beautiful music. I'm ready for them - I've noticed they arrive at the same time. I ask Ruby if I can just serve them, even though I'm not really ready yet. Ruby says yes, but be quick.

I go to ask them if they would like some more tea? And the man looks up from holding the lady's hand and says, 'No thank you', and I'm surprised because there are tears in his eyes and tears in hers. He notices me looking concerned and manages to say, 'And how are you today?' And I'm surprised too that his voice is so soft and light. It's a shock to see them. I didn't think rich people cried. I didn't think there was any need for it. I try and calculate it. I think of the French for it. I wonder if after this they will go and have a drink in the Wyvern bar, a gin and tonic maybe and if they will weep into their gin. It's all mystery. Life is all mystery and it just goes to show. You never know the minute before the minute has gone. 'How are you?' 'Fine thank you, Sir, very fine,' I say. Nobody ever asks me how I am so I'm not sure if that is the correct way to answer! I walk off back to the kitchen door backwards almost. I can't take my eyes off them.

The lady is dabbing at her eyes with a proper cloth handkerchief and smiling a bit apologetically and the gentleman gets his

handkerchief from the top pocket of his jacket, the same one he has worn for four days, but the handkerchief looks freshly ironed. It is checked. He also dabs at his eyes and looks furtively round the French restaurant and sees me observing him, so I quickly avert my eyes and don't look and don't see any more. It is the strange thing about working here. You only ever get part of the story. They could walk out today and I might never see them again. I will never find out why they were both in tears. Or they might be in tomorrow for afternoon tea for a record five days in a row. Or ...goodness. I told you it is mysterious business, money. And the only other thing I can tell you is that each day they had Darjeeling. They didn't try Earl Grey and the lady didn't try Lady Grey. They never asked for Assam or Ceylon or Russian Caravan.

And each day they only ate one finger of a sandwich, the one with ham and mustard for the gentleman and the one with egg and cress for the lady and the woman appeared bored by her scone but the man wolfed his down on that last day, slapping on generous helpings of gooseberry jam. But mostly they left it. Why go out for afternoon tea if you're not going to hardly eat anything? Well, more for us later. I wonder who imagines us greedily wolfing the leftovers; who imagines us like we imagine them. That's what I thought one time when I was waiting for the ashes to cool. I thought I bet you the man and woman sleeping in their comfortable bed with their crisp cotton sheets and beautiful blanket are not picturing me on the staircase here, cold, shivering with a bucket of ashes waiting for them to cool. No, I would be surprised if any of the rich imagined my life. But that's the surprise thought that I came to with the cooling, fluttery, delicate ashes, more delicate than tea leaves. The poor imagine the rich; the rich can't imagine the poor so therefore the poor are richer than the rich.

They leave the hotel separately. I rush down the stairs to watch them head off towards Central Station then hurry back. I imagine she returns to her husband who thinks that she has been to buy a new

hat and nothing more; and he goes back to his wife who is pregnant with their third child and is poorly and he feels disgruntled the minute he walks through the door and when his son asks him to listen to his piano scales he can't bear a note of it because all he is thinking of is how he'll come back to the Midland Hotel for the live piano music and she'll be gone, and every so often he'll peek into the French Restaurant where they had their afternoon teas all that time ago, when they couldn't eat properly for excitement in each other's company and the tea was delicate and then he'll look in and he'll see me looking at him, and he won't recognise me, but something in my face will perturb him. But the thing is I will remember him; and that will be another strange thing that I think about as a cooling-of-ashes-type-of-thought: the poor can recognise and remember in detail the faces of the rich; to the rich one poor face is much like another's.

The very next day, a strange thing happened. I went out at the time we'd come to expect them because they had by now become a bit of a sensation in our Midland Hotel. But they didn't come at 3 o'clock. Another couple came and sat at their table, and Ruby said, you're fine now, you serve, you do a good job, you do. And you have a nice way with you. Ruby was only four years older than me, but she'd been working at the Midland since she was fourteen.

The first thing I recognised was the hand: the hand followed by the face. I looked into that face. I would recognise that face anywhere even if by now the body attached to the face no longer had a hat on, was no longer wearing a jacket and a tie, but had long light brown hair and was wearing a navy blue and silver striped skirt and an eggshell blue blouse. She looked into my eyes and I swear she knew I knew it was *him* from yesterday because she said, 'And how are you today?' and I recognised that light voice again, and she said it with a familiarity, as if she'd already asked me that question, which *he* had, it seemed like ages ago. I said, fine, thank you. She was sat at the exact table that he had been sat at before - when '*she*' appeared as a '*he*', I should say. Now she was with her husband, I presume, who

rubbed his hands together and said, 'What an absolute treat coming here! Now I wonder if you can just order any tea or if they have a standard one that goes with the afternoon tea?'

'You can order any,' I heard her say.

'You sound like you know that for a fact,' I heard him say.

'Well, I would imagine,' she said, faltering a little.

'Can I help you?' I said. The husband said, 'Can I have a pot of Assam with my afternoon tea?' 'Yes you can,' I said. She smiled at me. 'Darjeeling for me,' she said.

Another couple arrived a few minutes later and sat down at the table across from the first table, a lady and a gentleman. It was with a sudden shocking start that I noticed she wasn't looking at her husband any more; she was looking at the woman at the next table who had just arrived. They allowed a small smile, quick, but I saw it. The other lady settled down and her husband scanned the menu. 'This is rather fun,' he said. 'I don't know how I let you talk me into afternoon tea, but now I'm rather glad I came,' I heard him saying. I saw her look across at the other pretty table. I could feel that she felt she was at the wrong one and that being together and yet not being together was strange for her. It was like they were meeting half way, mid way in the Midland Hotel.

I served both tables. I smiled at both women. For some reason I felt lightheaded and bubbly. I was the only one who had noticed the secret. I was keeping it. For some reason – and perhaps the future held it, those two women made me feel like I had drunk a glass of giggling champagne, like dancing around the pantry, skipping in the scullery, like throwing my head of dark curly hair back to the North West wind, like catching a train and whizzing off somewhere till the lights dimmed from the city and the country dark cloaked the cows invisible in the fields and the sheep laid low too, till the dawn light lifted again and now you saw them, everything there was to see in the country. They made me feel I had a watch set for the future, that time

would come and meet me. I wasn't worried any more. Not about Ruby, not about anything.

It was the first time in my life that I'd ever felt anything in common with a rich person and it made me dizzy with excitement. I saw the lady at the other table smile at me. She passed me a note and nodded her head in the direction of the other lady, knowing I knew. I took the note. My heart was going like cutlery. I took the note, gracefully as I could, a *grace note*, and when I got to the other table I pretended to stumble and slipped it under the bowl of jam. Jammy, I thought, because I saw her notice. I took a note from the other and passed it back. I was midway between the two women. I was practically dancing. Ruby came out as I was clearing the plates. She followed me into the kitchen. 'What's making you smile today?' Connie, she said softly, touching my bare arm. 'I don't know,' I said. 'I'm just feeling unaccountably happy.' 'Have you lost your senses?' Ruby said, half smiling. 'Oh no, Ruby,' I said. '*Je t'aime.*' And she said, 'What's that when it's at home?' 'Oh just a bit of French I learnt.' I said, '*Je t'aime*' again. And she said, admiringly, 'You're a smart one, Connie MacFarlane. Nothing much gets past you.' I nodded. We went back into the French Restaurant and stood looking out onto the elegant room with the lovely high ceiling in our smart uniforms. I smiled at one half of each couple and willed them to join. I wondered if I'd ever see them again. If they'd ever come back, just the two of them, and what coat 'she' that had been a 'he' would be wearing if she did. A coat of many colours! I thought. Ruby smiled. 'Is that you having one of your *cooling-of-the-ashes* thoughts?' 'It is.' I said: 'The ashes haven't cooled - not yet.' Perhaps the ashes will never cool.