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SUPPLEMENT

the haunting

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THE CHANGEOVER

the
haunting

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1

Barnaby's Dead

When, suddenly, on an ordinary Wednesday, it seemed to Barney that the world tilted and ran downhill in all directions, he knew he was about to be haunted again. It had happened when he was younger but he had thought that being haunted was a babyish thing that you grew out of, like crying when you fell over, or not having a bike.

‘Remember Barney’s imaginary friends, Mantis, Bigbuzz and Ghost?’ Claire – his stepmother – sometimes said. ‘The garden seems empty now that they’ve gone. I quite miss them.’

But she was really pleased perhaps because, being so very real to Barney, they had become too real for her to laugh over. Barney had been sorry to lose them, but he wanted Claire to feel comfortable living with him. He could not remember his own mother and Claire had come as a wonderful surprise, giving him a hug when

he came home from school, asking him about his day, telling him about hers, arranging picnics and unexpected parties and helping him with hard homework. It seemed worth losing Mantis, Bigbuzz and Ghost and the other kind phantoms that had been his friends for so many days before Claire came.

Yet here it was beginning again . . . the faint dizzy twist in the world around him, the thin singing drone as if some tiny insect were trapped in the curling mazes of his ear. Barney looked up at the sky searching for a ghost but there was only a great blueness like a weight pressing down on him. He looked away quickly, half expecting to be crushed into a sort of rolled-out gingerbread boy in an enormous stretched-out school uniform. Then he saw his ghost on the footpath beside him.

A figure was slowly forming out of the air: a child – quite a little one, only about four or five – struggling to be real. A curious pale face grew clearer against a halo of shining hair, silver gold hair that curled and crinkled, fading into the air like bright smoke. The child was smiling. It seemed to be having some difficulty in seeing Barney so that he felt that *he* might be the one who was not quite real. Well, he was used to feeling that. In the days before Claire he had often felt that he himself couldn't be properly heard or seen. But then Mantis had taken time to become solid and Ghost had always been dim and smoky. So Barney was not too surprised to see the ghost looking like a flat paper doll stuck against the air by some magician's glue. Then it became round and real, looking alive,

but old-fashioned and strange, in its blue velvet suit and lace collar. A soft husky voice came out of it.

‘Barnaby’s dead!’ it said. ‘Barnaby’s dead! I’m going to be very lonely.’

Barney stood absolutely still, feeling more tilted and dizzy than ever. His head rang as if it were strung like a bead on the thin humming that ran, like electricity, from ear to ear.

The ghost seemed to be announcing his death by his proper christened name of Barnaby – not just telling him he was going to die, but telling him that he was actually dead already. Now it spoke again.

‘Barnaby’s dead!’ it said in exactly the same soft husky voice. ‘Barnaby’s dead! I’m going to be very lonely.’ It wasn’t just that it said the same words that it had said earlier. Its very tone – the lifts and falls and flutterings of its voice – was exactly the same. If it had added, ‘This is a recorded message,’ it would not have seemed very out of place. Barney wanted to say something back to it, but what can you say to a ghost? You can’t joke with it. Perhaps you could ask it questions, but Barney was afraid of the answers this ghost might give him. He would have to believe what it told him, and it might tell him something terrible.

As it turned out this ghost was not one that would answer questions anyway. It had only one thing to say, and it had said it. It began to swing from side to side, like an absent-minded compass needle searching for some lost North. Its shape did not change but it swung widely and lay crossways in the air looking silly, but also very frightening.

'Barnaby's dead!' it said, 'Barnaby's dead! And I'm going to be very lonely.' Then it spun like a propeller, slowly at first then faster and faster until it was only a blur of silver-gold in the air. It spun faster still until even the colours vanished and there was nothing but a faint clear flicker. Then it stopped and the ordinary air closed over it. The humming in Barney's ears stopped, the world straightened out; time began again, the wind blew, trees moved, cars droned and tooted. Down through the air from the point where the ghost had disappeared fluttered a cloud of blue flakes. Barney caught a few of them in his hand. For a moment he held nothing but scraps of paper from a torn-up picture! He caught a glimpse of a blue velvet sleeve, a piece of lace cuff and a pink thumb and finger. Then the paper turned into quicksilver beads of colour that ran through his fingers and were lost before they fell on to the footpath.

Barney wanted to be at home at once. He did not want the in-between time of going down streets and around corners. There were no short cuts. He had to run all the way, fearing that at any moment he might be struck by lightning, or a truck, or by some terrible dissolving sickness that would eat him away as he ran. Little stumbles in his running made him think he might have been struck by bullets. His hair felt prickly and he wondered if it was turning white. He could imagine arriving at home and seeing his face in the hall mirror staring out under hair like cotton wool. He could imagine Claire saying, 'Barney, what on earth have you been up to? Look at the state of your hair.' How could he say, 'Well, there was this ghost

telling me that I was dead.' Claire would just say sternly, 'Barney, have you been reading horror comics again?'

As it happened it was not Claire who met him when he got home but his two sisters, one on either side of the doorway – his thin knobbly sister Troy, stormy in her black cloud of hair, her black eyebrows almost meeting over her long nose, and brown, round Tabitha, ready to talk and talk as she always did.

'Where have you been?' she asked. 'You're late and have missed out on family news. But it's ok – the family novelist will now bring you up to date.' By 'the family novelist' Tabitha meant herself. She was writing the world's greatest novel, but no one was allowed to read it until she was twenty-one and it was published. However, she talked about it all the time and showed off by taking pages and pages of notes and talking about those, too.

'I stopped to . . .' Barney began. He felt his voice quaver and die out. He couldn't tell Tabitha about his ghost, particularly in front of Troy who was five years older than he was and silent and scornful. But anyway – Tabitha was not interested in his explanations. She was too busy telling him the family news in her own way.

'We are a house of mourning,' she said in an important voice. 'One of our dear relations has died. It's really good material for my novel and I'm taking notes like anything. No one I know has ever died before.'

Barney stared at her in horror.

'Not Claire!' he began to say because he was always afraid that they would lose Claire in some way, particularly

now that she was expecting a baby which Barney knew was dangerous work. But Tabitha was not upset enough for it to be Claire.

‘Great-Uncle Barnaby . . . a Scholar relation,’ she went on and then, as Barney’s face stiffened and became blank she added, sarcastically, ‘You do remember him don’t you? You’re named after him.’

‘I’m going to be very lonely,’ said a soft, husky voice in Barney’s ear. He felt the world begin to slide away.

‘Hey!’ Troy’s voice spoke on his other side. ‘You don’t have to be upset. He was old . . . and he’d been ill – very ill, for a while.’

‘It’s not that!’ Barney stammered. ‘I – I thought it might be me.’

‘Lonely!’ said the echo in his haunted ear.

‘I thought it *was* me,’ Barney said, and suddenly the world made up its mind and shrank away from him, grown to tennis ball size, then walnut size, then a pinhead of brightness in whirling darkness. On the steps of his own home Barney had fainted.

2

The Lost Great-Uncle

Barney's faint was only a very little one. Within a few minutes he was in his room having his forehead bathed by Troy and with Claire holding a glass of water to his lips. Tabitha watched with interest. Now she was over the fright of having her brother fall limp and pale at her feet she became very businesslike about it all.

'I might never get another chance like this,' she told anyone who could be bothered listening as she moved to study Barney from a different angle. 'We're such a healthy family, the chance of anyone fainting in the next ten years is absolutely nil. And my novel will be published by then.'

'You silly old thing!' said Claire gently to Barney. 'Just lie still for a bit, there's a good boy. You're looking better already.' She set out to make life enjoyable for him, put a fresh flowery pillowcase on his pillow, made Tabitha and her notebook go grumbling out of the room, and then

went out herself to make him a lemon drink. Barney thought about pretending to be sicker than he was just for the pleasure of being looked after. It seemed a bit babyish, but after all, before Claire had come he had not had much kindness and fussing so surely he was allowed to make up for it now.

However, he looked and felt so much better by dinner time that, when Claire said he could get up if he wanted to, he did, and that was enjoyable too, for Claire sat him in the most comfortable chair, covered him over with a rug and gave him his dinner on a tray. Everyone else was having meat and vegetables but Barney had an egg especially poached to a beautiful yellow and white on a thick slice of hot, buttered toast. He was having all the fun of being an invalid without actually being sick. Sometimes his mind flicked back to the blue velvet ghost and then pulled away sharply. It was like no other haunting he could ever remember. Even now it seemed as if somewhere in just-past time some other Barney was still standing, staring at that smiling pale child and still hearing the husky voice repeating its odd message.

‘Fancy our Barney fainting!’ said Barney’s father. ‘You must have been thinking too hard at school, Barney.’

‘If people fainted because of too much thinking I’d scarcely ever be conscious,’ Tabitha began at once. ‘I think and think all the time, and I’ve never fainted – not once.’ She looked over at Barney enviously. ‘Why do the best things always happen to other people and not to a promising writer?’

'If people fainted from too much talking . . .' began Troy and then fell silent. Seven words were a lot for Troy to say all at once like that.

'It could be the hot day – though it wasn't very hot,' Claire said, 'or shock of some sort, or just tiredness . . . The doctor didn't seem too worried.'

Tabitha smiled in a superior way as if she knew a great deal more about fainting than a mere doctor.

'People are supposed to faint if they get sudden bad news . . . if a girl friend is killed in front of their very eyes or they lose their money or something. Barney hasn't got a girl friend – not that we know of – and he hasn't got much money because I know where he keeps it and I counted it last week. There's not enough to be worth fainting over. And it can't be the great-uncle dying, can it? I mean Barney didn't know him much.'

'Barney's a sensitive boy,' Claire said thoughtfully.

'But he said that he thought it was *him* – he-himself-Barney – who was dead, didn't he, Troy?'

'Yes!' agreed Troy, staring at Barney as if he were a riddle and she might work out his answer.

'It was a pretty funny thing to say,' Tabitha went on. 'He said, "I thought it was me," twice, and then he just keeled over. I've got it written down in my notebook. I might get you to sign it later, Barn, just to prove it. You won't mind, will you?'

'Honestly, Tabitha, the sooner your novel is written and published the better,' Claire said crisply, seeing Barney was being made uncomfortable by these comments. 'No

more talking about Barney's faint. He's better now – that's the main thing.'

'Ok – let's talk about funerals,' Tabitha replied at once.

Settling back into the big chair Barney felt comfortable again. There was no way he could have explained about the ghost or its repeated message. No one would have believed him and he did not like remembering such strangeness. Partly to get over the memory of it he looked at his family, appreciating their usualness – his father, John, tall and rather bald, giving him an anxious glance and then grinning as their eyes met, Claire with her fair hair tied back from her face with a blue scarf, smiling around the table, Tabitha, fat and golden brown, and frowning Troy who seemed to move around in the heart of her own private storm, struggling against tempests no one else could see. They did not change or float in the air and vanish. They stayed still and were always themselves.

'Can we go to the great-uncle's funeral, Dad?' asked Tabitha. 'I've never been to a funeral before. We're allowed time off school for funerals and I'll tell you what – if I go I won't write any notes until I get home and no one's watching.'

'No!' her father said, very firmly. 'I might go but there's no need for the rest of you to be there. Though I think we should call in on your Grandfather and Grandmother Scholar, not to mention your great-grandmother sometime in the weekend . . . tomorrow afternoon, say.'

'I say "No" to that!' Tabitha cried at once. 'Visiting that great-grandmother is too much like visiting some witch

who has lost her magic, but kept her nastiness. Let's just stay at home and send them a card.'

'Tabby, that's not very nice,' Claire said reprovingly.

'Well, *she's* not very nice,' Tabitha argued. 'Visiting her is like having a long refreshing drink of vinegar.'

Barney, Tabitha and Troy had three sets of grandparents. There were their father's parents, the Palmers, whom they had always known and whom they visited every Christmas or New Year, and there were Claire's parents, the Martins, who were new grandparents and whom they saw nearly every week and certainly on birthdays. But in between these families was another set of relations, a spare set as it were. There were Grandpa and Grandma Scholar, the parents of Dove, the children's dead mother, and there were a few great-uncles: Great-Uncle Guy, Great-Uncle Alberic and Great-Uncle Barnaby, now dead. There was also a great-grandmother – Great-Granny Scholar – a terrible old lady, a small, thin witch, frail but furious.

'She's probably very nice once you get to know her,' Claire said firmly.

'Not her!' Tabitha said cheerfully. 'I don't mind seeing Grandpa and Grandma Scholar – they're nice – but I can't stand Great-Granny with those little fierce eyes and all those wrinkles.'

'She can't help being wrinkled,' her father said. 'She's very old really, close on ninety.' But he did not sound as if he minded hearing Tabitha's criticism.

‘I don’t mind her being wrinkled,’ Tabitha replied in surprise. ‘It’s just that all her wrinkles are so angry. She’s like a wall with furious swear words scribbled all over it.’

This was exactly what Barney thought, but he stayed silent. In the years before Claire had married their father, silence had become a habit with Barney, particularly as Tabitha seemed determined to take up all the talking time. Perhaps that was why Troy was so silent, too.

‘I don’t think I’ve ever met her,’ Claire said thoughtfully. ‘Nor the great-uncles either for that matter – well, only very briefly – so I can’t give an opinion.’

‘I’ve got a picture,’ Troy observed. ‘A photograph! Of the uncles, that is.’

‘That photograph!’ Her father looked pleased. ‘Have you got it handy, Troy? Run and fetch it.’

For a moment Troy looked as if she might argue. Then she pushed her chair back and went off down the hall to her room. When she came back she had the photograph with her.

Her father showed it to Claire.

‘That’s Grandpa!’ he said. ‘Ben! And that’s Alberic, isn’t it?’

‘Guy,’ Troy corrected him.

‘Guy, then. He’s the doctor. Well *that* must be Alberic, and that’s Barnaby.’

‘What about the little one!’ Claire asked as her husband hesitated.

‘I don’t remember his name,’ he said. ‘He’s dead! At least I think he’s dead. He grew up to be rather a black

sheep – ran away from home and was never heard of again. That sort of thing!’

Tabitha was delighted.

‘What a day!’ she exclaimed. ‘Things have been going on, boring, boring, boring, and then all of a sudden a death and a faint and a lost great-uncle. I didn’t know we had an extra one, did you, Troy? Perhaps he isn’t dead and one day he’ll turn up really rich and loaded with presents. He could be a millionaire by now. In a book he would be.’

‘There *was* something funny about him,’ mused her father. ‘One of those – you know – not-to-be-talked-about-things, and no one *did* talk about it, so I’ve never found out what it was. I don’t think Dove knew herself. Nothing disgraceful or catching: nothing you’d inherit . . . just mysterious.’

‘He may not have had anything disgraceful you’d inherit,’ Claire studied the photograph carefully, ‘but someone *did* inherit something, all the same. He looks just like our Barney. Or rather Barney looks just like him.’

‘Barney can’t see! Let Barney see,’ Tabitha cried generously. ‘Look Barn . . . the four main great-uncles plus the lost, odd, mysterious, runaway, little, new great-uncle, with nothing disgraceful or catching, except that he looks like you.’

Barney only half wanted to see the photograph. He had to command his hand to reach out and take it gingerly.

Four tall young men and one boy! Like ghosts, the old faces of the present great-uncles could be seen haunting the faces of the young great-uncles in the photograph.

Uncle Barnaby, whose name had been passed to Barney, looked out, smiling a fifty-five-year-old smile at him. Great-Uncles Guy and Alberic, and Grandpa Scholar too, all smiled the tired, patient smiles they still had. But the smallest great-uncle of all looked away at the side of the picture. He seemed to be standing a little apart from the others, added in carelessly at the last minute, the photographer not caring much whether he was looking at the camera or not. Barney was very relieved. He had been afraid that he might recognize this unknown great-uncle, but he did not. Perhaps the great-uncle did not look like him, he couldn't be sure of that, but he could be sure of one thing . . . he wasn't wearing a velvet suit and he did not have a head of fair curls.

'A lost great-uncle!' Tabitha repeated, unwilling to let this sensation go. 'Terrific!'

'I don't see why,' her father objected. 'None of us is ever likely to meet him.'

'At least he's *there*,' Tabitha pointed out. 'We're mostly so ordinary with our car and our lawn-mower and things. I want life to be a lot more mysterious than that. Didn't Mother ever say anything to you about him – anything at all – just one single thing that you can remember?'

'Nothing but what I've told you,' her father declared. 'No – hang on a moment. I do remember once asking just *what* was wrong with this chap and Dove laughed and said he had a golden piece in his mind. Make what you can of that!'

It was plain to see that Tabitha would make a lot of it.

‘That’s great!’ she breathed. ‘Can’t I just take one note, Claire, before I forget?’

‘You won’t forget that,’ Claire assured her.

‘I like things written down,’ Tabitha mumbled. ‘Then you’ve got them for good.’

Later, when Barney was in bed, not thinking of great-uncles, dead or alive or even mislaid, not even thinking of the ghost, he felt something strange begin in his mind . . . a kind of stirring and opening as if some butterfly were struggling out of its chrysalis and trying to unfold crumpled wings.

A picture was trying to form, a face was trying to make itself seen. As soon as he opened his eyes it vanished, but when he closed them once more the unfolding patiently began all over again.

Barney was not alarmed. There was none of the dizziness, none of the droning that had announced the appearance of the blue velvet ghost. It felt more like one of those dreams that come before you are properly asleep. Watching, as the face struggled towards him, it seemed to him that it reminded him of someone but he couldn’t think who.

Just before he dropped into sleep, soft as a hand stroking the pillow beside his ear, a voice spoke.

‘Are you there?’ it said. ‘Are you there, Barnaby?’

But it was very faint and far away. Barney did not reply. His closed eyelids were still, and the voice was just another one of the voices of the people and animals that stalked the boundaries of his dreams.