

The Winter Visitor

BY JACKIE KAY





I CAN almost see her: she is standing by the window looking out at the snow falling. She looks at her watch. It is January. She puts some lip gloss on her lips so that they don't crack in the eight below freezing temperature outside. Though it is night time now, and the moon is blurred behind the snow fog, she puts on her thick, grim coat, long gloves, hat and boots. There is nothing I can do or say that will stop her coming. She wants to be here by morning, before I'm even awake. Her suitcase is already packed, a small hard suitcase with a few clothes for her stay. Though she plans to stay for months, she has packed very little: very few toiletries, just a toothbrush and a comb, a few pairs of knickers, tights and a couple of long thick skirts. She smiles a tight dry smile. She is coming for me and there is nothing I can do.

She walks through the night, carrying her suitcase. She has an almost uncanny sense of balance, and so the slipperiness of the snow does not faze her as it would me. She walks with the determination of someone on a mission, up through Rushholme, turns right into Pratt Lane, turns left into The Princess Parkway, turns right into Mauldeth Road, turns right again into Barlow Moor Road. Her long boots have good grips. She knows she is close. She can see her own cold breath flare out of her mouth. She's come to me before, so the streets, even

in the snow and the snow-lit dark are not new to her. Over the years, she's come like this, and yet each time she takes me completely unawares. She is always a surprise. There's no planning, no date in the diary. She just turns up – first thing in the morning – punctual and precise. The last time she came it was three years ago, and I was certain then, when she left, that I'd never see her again. Perhaps she enjoys the fact that she comes unannounced; she's terribly arrogant. It's difficult to tell because she says very little. Maybe the interesting question is why I have her, why I let it happen, time and time again. I genuinely don't know the answer.

I wake. That's something I suppose, I wake. I wake though I'm not sure if I've slept. I've been in and out of the ether all night, and quite a few times I got up and looked out into my street. One time I saw a black cat walk up the street. It looked so black in the white snow. It looked like it owned the street. Another time I got up for a glass of water. I was shocked because I'd clearly drunk a whole glass of water already but had no memory of doing so. Another time I stared at a pile of books and tried to read their titles. Now it is much later, and I've not eaten anything. Since I've woken, I know I should get up. But my body feels heavy, leaden, and I can't manage it. I try and sit up, and pull a book from the bedside

table, but the words swim in front of my eyes and I can't read. None of it makes any sense. I'm starting to feel frightened. I daren't call my mother because she will recognise the thick sound in my voice, the sound of my own fear. I don't want to talk to anybody. I'd like them all to leave me alone.

When I wake again, I know she is in the house. I sit up in my bed and listen. There are noises down stairs, a battering of saucepans and a clattering of cutlery. She knows this sort of noise sets my teeth on edge. I fold my pillow over the top of my head so that it covers both ears. I can scarcely breathe. The truth is I'm terrified of her. I know that with her arrival, nothing will be possible. She won't let me out to see friends; she won't let me use the telephone; she won't let me read, or let me sleep. She seems to already have me doing her work for her just before she gets here, because yesterday I found reading difficult, I think. It's all a sort of jumble. She comes claiming to order my life, and is fanatical about sorting out cupboards, but we both know it is not to do with order. There are other motives, stranger and more difficult to pinpoint.

I take the pillow off my head and listen carefully. I can hear nothing. The house is as silent as snow. It's cold, very cold, even underneath the duvet, and it is early. I look at the face of the clock



on my bedside table. It says it is seven in the morning. One night before I went to sleep, I remember looking out of the window. There was a black cat on the road on its own. There was snow thick on the branches of the trees in the street. There were no people. One light was on across the road. Why does she insist on coming so early when she knows I'm a late riser? Now that I'm awake, I won't get back to sleep and the whole day is stretched out ahead like a field of frozen snow. The banging starts up again. I ought to get up and go down the stairs and confront her, but I can't. I'm immobilised. I don't think I can even get out of bed. I try lifting a leg and pulling myself around, but I can't make it. I lift my leg back under the covers. The only place to trust is the bed, and the wall facing the bed. The only thing I like when she

comes is to lie still, and quiet with my face to the wall. I can keep it up for the longest time, while she is downstairs, pulling things out of the cellar, yanking cupboards and cabinets open and chucking things away. Last time she came, she found a box of my old love letters and shredded them. I don't think she even wants me to have a past. A time ago, I found out my lover was unfaithful. It only takes one infidelity to alter the landscape of love beyond all recognition. Frankly, it was a relief she shredded the lying *love you, love you, love you*, but she wasn't to know that.

I don't really care what she does when she comes. Perhaps she is trying to get me interested. She could chuck out every frying pan, saucepan and pot. I've noticed that the wallpaper in this bedroom is thick and that when she comes I'm prone to peeling little bits back. The other thing I do is pick at my lips. In this weather my lips chap easily and so the constant peeling them does not help, but I can't stop. I find my hand there and I try and take it away. I wonder how long it will be before she comes up here and says something? She's got a nerve, coming in and going straight for the utensils. I hear the kettle whistle. I'm not hungry which is just as well. The sight of her takes away my appetite. There's something so appalling about her features. It is not too much to say they revolt me. I despise her. There. I've

said it. I despise her. Her long skirts and her grim smile. She is an abomination.

I hear her feet on the stairs. There's nowhere for me to go and I can't get up. I hide under the covers. I lie there trembling, hearing her footsteps get closer and closer. She is coming for me. She is coming for me. If I could shout Help I would. If I knew shouting Help might help I would. But nothing helps. Nobody would believe me. I hear my bedroom door open. It creaks. It needs oil, the door. I live in a house that frightens me and I have not even done the simplest of things to stop myself being frightened. I have not bought oil for the door. I know I should struggle up so that at least I am in a sitting position, but I can't. "Get up," she says. "Sit up." I lie cowering under the sheets. Three years. I thought she'd never come back. I feel so disappointed. A crushing weight of disappointment, heavy enough to break my bones. She pulls my duvet back. "Sit up. You must eat. I've brought you some porridge." She helps pull me up and I stare at her blankly. "You must eat." She puts the tray down beside me. She has descended on me; I must now eat her disgusting food. And yet she knows I don't like her porridge, cooked with salt and not with sugar. "I will feed you if you won't feed yourself," she says.

And she is not joking. The last time, she sat across my chest and force fed me. She





sits at the edge of the bed, waiting. Slowly, I pick up a spoon and try and shovel some of the slush and sludge into my mouth. Some people have no food, she says. Some old people are snowed in and have no food at all. Get that down you. She looks at me with total contempt. It is hard to swallow the sludge. It is the most terrible thing. "How long have you come for?" I ask her. I can't stop my voice trembling, betraying my own fear. "I've come for as long as it takes," she says. "I never come for any less than it takes," she says enunciating each word as if English was a foreign language to her. "For what?" "There's no point now in you trying to fight me being here. You know this. I'm here now. It's a little late for that." She walks to my bedroom windows and yanks open the curtains. The daylight advances without mercy. Soon she will tell me I'm lucky to have a roof over my head. The snow is bright on the ground, thick. There's a pinkish light where the sun hits the snow. "Later, we must walk out in the snow. You have boots?" "I can't go out," I say. "I can't go out." "Drink your tea," she says. "I have let you have a sugar. We will see later about going out on a walk. You will see the snow on the trees and the frozen lake near here. Down the hill, there are people sledging on FOR SALE signs. There's the recession for you. You are lucky to have a roof over your head. It hasn't been frozen like this for ten years,

I hear people say." She hasn't changed in three years. Her hair has some grey in it, but so does mine. We are both middle aged now. Her face is perhaps a little more lined. There's tightness around her lips and eyes. Just looking at her makes my skin tingle, my chest heave, my heart heavy. Behind the sockets of my eyes are small barrels full of salt water. My eyes sting. I feel so full of regret. Why did I let her come here and do this to me again? What is wrong with me that I cannot assert myself, and am drawn to these dictatorial types who want to tell me what to do and what to eat, who have no regard for me.

When I've eaten as much of her porridge as I can muster, she picks up the tray and says, "You should wash now." I find myself in the bathroom with a cloth to my face and my hand taking the cloth over my cheeks. She's standing behind me and I can see her reflection in the mirror. "Good," she says. "The cold water is best. Don't forget teeth!" I look at my toothbrush holder with some horror. Her toothbrush is already in there along with the paste she likes, the fennel toothpaste. Her small black toilet bag is on the floor next to the sink. It contains a razor, and Elastoplasts. I know that she regularly shaves her

moustache from the marks left around her top lip.

She had planned to make me take a walk today, but of course she underestimated how heavy my limbs are. I managed down the stairs and I waded into the kitchen. I opened my cupboards and saw that she had rearranged my jars of treacle and honey, and ordered my spices. I looked inside my bread bin and saw that she had tidied it up. "Your bread bin was a disgrace," she said, but her tone held no judgement. "Your kitchen is a mess," she said, matter of factly. "You are lucky to have all these spices - cardamom, cumin, coriander, chilli, paprika... Yet I don't ever see you cook." "I don't cook when you are here," I say to her. One thing I like about her is that I can say exactly what I like. Right to her tight, grim face. I don't need to speak behind her long back. "I wouldn't cook for you if my life depended on it." Which made me realise another thing; I would rather be dead than have her descend on me. "Who do you think you are to turn up here and sort out my cupboards?" I scream. She shrugs and smiles her tight smile, pleased to have got a reaction from me, I suppose. "It's hardly a crime, cleaning your cupboards," she says. "Besides you deserved it."





It is a long time I think since she first arrived, though I can't be sure. One day has pretty much slid into the next, and the snow is still here, covering everything. There have been extra inches of it fluttering and floating to the ground, every day she has made me eat her

house and is making me eat porridge every day? I would sound ridiculous. Even I know that. There's nothing I can do except wait for her to shift of her own accord.

At least now that she has unpacked and settled in and been here for two weeks or is it three, maybe even four,



porridge, her soup and her stew. She is not a good cook; she seems to take pleasure in serving up gruel. Every day she has dressed in more or less the same clothes, heavy long tweed skirts, wool tights, polo neck jumpers and cardigans. I can see she has grown to depend on looking after me. I'm going to have some trouble kicking her out. I wonder who I could ring to get rid of her. It occurs to me that you can ring all sorts of people to get rid of all sorts from your house: cockroaches, wasps, bluebottles, wood lice, mice, rats, burglars, fire. But I have no one to ring to get rid of her. What would I say if I called the police exactly? There is a woman claiming to know me who has moved into my

I'm not so scared of her. She makes me come down to the table to eat the meals, and when I come into the kitchen she stands up, and rubs her hands together. "Good. Now we will eat," she says. And we eat in silence. We don't do anything else. Sometimes I go through to the living room and we sit on the sofa and stare at the wall for ages together in a most companionable fashion. "There is absolutely nothing on television," she says every day. "And anyway you don't want to become a couch potato."

One day I ask her where she comes from. Where does she live when she is not living with me? But she refuses to answer personal questions, though I imagine she is from a cold place, a

very cold place since these extremes don't bother her at all. Today, she says, I insist that we go for a walk. She ties a scarf around my neck and buttons my coat, as if I were incapable of doing these things for myself. I am not a child, I say. I am a middle-aged woman. You certainly could have fooled me, she says, and for the first time I see a real smile on her face, and catch a glimpse of her teeth.

If you don't walk, I will carry you on my back like a sack of potatoes, she has said. This amused me because although she is taller than me, she is much slimmer, and I weigh thirteen stone and four pounds. Her arms are strong looking and full of muscle. I pictured me being carried across her back through the snow like a bag of coal or a sack of potatoes or a dead body heading for a mortuary. I chose to walk. She opened the front door and there it was: the freezing cold air. Minus nine today, she said, almost cheerfully. We braced the bitter biting wind together. She even looped her arm through mine. We got as far as Chorlton Park. The school was closed. In the park were huge snow penises and massive snow men, but the penises were the surprise, I'd never seen one before, a snow penis, complete with balls and everything. She stared at me staring at it. "You've never seen one before?" she asked me. "No," I said. "Never!" She laughed, and her laugh had a trill to it, like a little frill



on the end of a serious skirt. “You haven’t lived,” she said. I realised she had quite a sense of humour; in a bizarre way when I’m with her I can see the absurd things in life. There were lots of birds on the trees in the park, robin red breasts and other birds whose names I have forgotten. “So many birds will die,” she said sadly. “Can we feed them?” I said. “Can we go and get some bird feed?” She looked at me astonished, as if I’d asked her if we could fly to the moon. “Can we go and get some bird feed?” she echoed. I nodded. “It is early for you to be asking such a

question,” she said, sounding a little sad. “What do you mean?” I said. But she didn’t reply. She trudged with me through the thick snow. I hated the thought of the birds dying because of the snow. The snow lay on the fields in the park and it looked blameless, implacable, like it would never admit to anything, to tripping anyone up or trapping an old person in a house.

We walked along Barlow Moor Road till we came to the shop opposite the post office. “We can get bird feed here,” she said, softly. “You go.” “On my own?” I asked her.

“Yes, of course. You can do it.” I was astonished to notice that her eyes had welled up. When I came out with a bag of bird seed for wild birds in my hands, she was gone. I couldn’t see her anywhere. I stood waiting for a while, thinking she might have gone to post a letter. Then I crossed the road and looked in the post office, but she wasn’t there. The last time she came, I remember she disappeared just as suddenly. Odd behaviour, really. I made it home, alone. I listened in the hall just in case she’d gone home early to test me. I looked for her in the kitchen; she might be putting the kettle on for our tea. I went upstairs to check she hadn’t started on the bathroom cupboards. The last time she came she did them. But no, she was nowhere, nowhere to be seen. I didn’t know what to feel. I didn’t feel relief. I felt something more complicated than that. I looked out my bedroom window to see if I might see her in the street. Something puzzled me. There was no snow on the ground at all.

© Jackie Kay, 2010



I WROTE this story during this year’s very heavy January snow. I was thinking about how January is such a long month, and often people get very depressed. I started out with an idea of a woman who spends the month with her face to the wall, who feels like she has been visited by depression, as if she has no

will in it. Then I decided to make the depression into an actual visitor. A while before, I had bumped into a friend’s mother, a friend who suffers from mental illness. I’d said to her mother, you must feel as if some stranger has taken away your daughter. Her mother said that’s exactly what I feel like. The story explores the complex

and intimate relationship people can have with depression. As I continued writing the character of the depression surprised me by having some positive aspects, allowing my character to say things that she would never usually say and do things she’d never normally do.

Jackie Kay