Lily

A Ghost Story

Adèle Geras

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Extract

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I SAW ZOE AGAIN last night. I was standing at the bus stop at six o'clock, on my way home from the shops. It was nearly dark and there were lights on in some of the houses. I wasn't thinking about anything much. Then I noticed a bus driving up to the stop. It wasn't my bus but as it set off again something bright caught my eye. It was her pale pink coat. She was on the bus – my little daughter, my Zoe.

I felt myself holding my breath. I couldn't help it. Zoe was there, sitting by the window, near the back of the bus. She stared right at me, with one of her hands spread out on the glass of the window. If the bus hadn't been moving, I could have put my hand on the glass too. We could almost have touched, my hand on her hand, but she was gone before I could do that.

I stood there for ages, unable to move. My bus came and went but I didn't get on. I didn't want to go home yet. I thought about Zoe. I'd actually seen her. I must have imagined it, because she wasn't there. She couldn't have

been, but I knew I'd seen her. How mad was that? I'd seen Zoe again, and she wasn't even alive. She had never been alive.

My name is Marie Cotter and I want you to believe me. Every word of this story is true. This is what happened to me. I'm back home again now. Sometimes, when I think about Bowdon House, I feel as if I was someone else when I was there, taking care of Amy. I'm trying to get back to normal, but I miss Amy so much. Also, I can't stop the dreams coming at night.

I'm seventeen. My hair is mousy but I put blonde streaks in it. Gran thinks I look like Rachel in *Friends* but I don't really. My gran loves me. She reckons I'm pretty. She thinks nice things about me, whatever I do. She's looked after me all my life.

I've never known who my dad was. Gran says he was in and out of my mum's life all the time. Some people think that mums always love their kids, but sometimes they don't. My mum didn't like me much. I know she didn't, because she ran away and left me with my gran. My mum fell in love with a man who lived in Spain and that was that. She left me behind. I got a Christmas present from her once, but that

was years and years ago. Until I was five, I used to get birthday cards.

I can't remember my mum. Sometimes I dream that she's singing to me. That's just in my head though, because Gran says she never did that. 'She was too busy going to pubs to sing to a baby,' she says. 'I'm the one who sang to you, Marie. Don't you forget it.'

Gran and I get on fine. We always have. She's not old, for one thing. She's only fifty-two and she buys her clothes in Primark and Matalan. 'There's no need for me to turn into an old lady just yet,' she says.

'That's the trouble with us in our family,' she told me once. 'We grow up too fast in some ways and not fast enough in others. For instance, we don't wait until we're grown-up before we have kids, do we? And dads don't stick around for long, either.'

She used to laugh when she said this, but not how you do when something's funny. She laughed in a way that made you think she wanted to cry, really. My mum was born when Gran was twenty, and my mum had me when she was dead young too. As for me, I was younger than either of them when I had my baby, but I was punished for that.

We live by the sea, near Eastbourne. The town is okay in the summer but dead in winter. The sea's good. It's there all the time, changing with the weather, and you can look at it whenever you're bored. The sea makes you feel small. It says, *I'll be here when you're dead. I was here before you were. I'm the sea and you're nothing, less than nothing*. I like that. I like watching it, especially in winter. The waves come crashing up on the promenade when it's stormy.

'Can it get up as far as here?' I used to ask my gran when I was a little kid.

'No,' she said. 'This estate's too far away from the front. We'll be okay. Don't you fret, pet.'

I laughed. That was our joke, that rhyme. *Don't you fret, pet*. It comforted me when she said that, whatever was wrong.

Gran works in the small supermarket on the corner of Framly Lane. She's a manager now, but she used to be a checkout lady. I liked going to see her after school. The other checkout ladies gave me sweets. I pretended that I was helping Gran. I wasn't really. I just sat about in the canteen until she was ready to go home. Sometimes, when the boss was out, Gran let me stand near her at the checkout and I loved that.

I liked seeing what people had in their trolleys. The best thing of all, though, was the babies.

Some mums don't know how to cope with a crying child. The mums I hated were the screamers. They yelled at the poor little things and made them cry even harder. Other mums tried to shut the babies up with sweeties. Didn't they care if their kids had rotten teeth? No, they only wanted a bit of peace. When she saw a baby in the queue, Gran used to wink at me. Then I went to chat to the kid. I always asked the mum to tell me what her child's name was. You can't play with a baby if you don't know what to call it. I tickled their toes. I stroked their hair. I made silly noises, and they laughed at me. Their mums sailed through the checkout with no problems.

'Isn't she good with babies?' some of them said.

'She'll be a lovely mum,' Gran agreed.

I loved the babies. I liked their silky skin. I liked their smell, of baby powder and shampoo. I liked their little fingers. I liked the way they gurgled when they laughed. I liked their tiny teeth. When they left the supermarket, I felt sad. I must have looked sad too. Gran used to

say, 'Cheer up. You'll see another baby tomorrow. There's no shortage of them round here.'

I was never much good at school. I had a couple of friends, called Jeannie and Suze. They were all right. They used to come round to my gran's flat sometimes. That's on the Grange Estate, which is more grotty than rough. I never minded living there. Everyone I knew lived somewhere a bit grotty. Until I went to Bowdon House, I thought only movie stars and celebrities lived in posh mansions. I used to look at pictures in *Hello!* and *OK* but I didn't believe what I saw. I thought that I was looking at some place that wasn't real – Magazine Land.

I didn't get on with the teachers at school. They thought I was slow. I wasn't, not really, but it was a struggle to keep up. I think I was bored a lot of the time. What did I care about algebra or science? I liked history. I liked seeing pictures of olden days, but some of the books were hard. I had a problem making out some of the words. Writing was okay, but I made lots of spelling mistakes. What I think is that I didn't fall behind quite enough to get special help. I muddled along. I stared out of the window. I drew pictures on the covers of my notebooks. Jeannie and Suze helped me with homework. I

got four GCSEs but my marks were rubbish. I scraped through. I was happy to leave school. I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a nursery nurse. I could look after babies and get paid for it. How cool was that?

Gran was so proud of me when I was accepted for the course that I wanted to do. I felt grown-up. I went to college every day. I felt clever for the first time in my life. I was going to get a proper job in a nursery. I knew about nurseries. There was one on the Estate and I often looked in through the windows. Jeannie and Suze didn't understand.

'You should come to Brighton with us,' Jeannie said, 'and look in the shop windows there instead. There's nothing to see in a nursery.'

I didn't answer. I thought there was plenty to see – pretty dolls, bricks in bright colours, a Wendy house with a yellow roof, and lots of kids: playing, crying, or cuddling teddy-bears. A row of hooks with small coats hanging on them. I loved it. I couldn't wait to work in a place like that.