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MARIANNE DREAMS

The Mirror Image Ghost

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The mirror hung in Fanny's room, opposite the windows which looked out on to the small London gardens at the back of the house. Now the mirror reflected light: the morning sun, the English sky, often streaked with clouds, the scanty, pale modern English furniture of Fanny's bedroom.

It was not an English mirror. It had been made in Germany, nearly two hundred years before. It had a heavy frame of dark, carved wood, and it was long enough to show the reflection of a grown person, full length. Now the person it showed most often was Fanny; but in its long history, it had shown a great many people doing many different things. It had shown people being born, growing up and dying. It had shown people laughing and crying, loving and quarrelling, eating, drinking, celebrating, praying. There was nothing that people do, whether kind or hateful, comforting or terrifying, which the mirror had not seen and reflected in its time.

But it was silent about these memories. It did not tell what it had seen. It held all this within its silvered glass and the wooden frame. Perhaps it could have spoken only to another mirror. A mirror like the little hand looking-glass which lay just in front of it, on Fanny's dressing-table. It would not be until the two mirrors were placed so that each reflected the other that any of their secrets could be told. And this did not happen until Lisa . . .

But this is the beginning of Lisa's story and must be told in the right order in a new chapter.

'Have you ever seen a ghost, Grandma?' Lisa asked.

'What's put you on to ghosts?' her grandmother said.

'Been reading.'

'Ghost stories? Frightening?'

'Some of them are. Most aren't. Just ...' She looked for the right word.

'Eerie?'

'What's that mean?'

'Means ... strange. Not sure what's real and what isn't. As if there might be another world you can't quite see or hear, but you think might be there. All round you.'

Lisa tried the word out. 'Eerie. Did you ever feel like that?'

'Not often. John says I'm too matter-of-fact to have feelings I can't explain.'

'Has Grandpa seen a ghost, then?'

'He's not sure. Any more than I am.'

'You mean you did see something? Both of you? Together?'

'Lisa! Go and wash your hands before supper.'

'But I want to know what you saw.'

'Another time,' her grandmother said.

'Please, now!'

When her grandmother said, 'No,' in that special voice, there was no appeal. Lisa washed her hands and joined her grandparents in the kitchen. She'd meant to tackle them at once about ghosts, but the subject was driven out of her mind by her grandfather's first remark.

'Peter is almost exactly your age, isn't he?'

'He doesn't like being called Peter. He says his name is Pierre,' Lisa said.

'Peter ... Pierre, they're the same thing. His age is the same, whatever you call him. Eleven, isn't he? The same as you?'

Lisa said, 'No, he's twelve. Just.'

'And the girl? How old is she?'

'She's ten.'

'I can't remember her name.'

'Alice. She calls it Aleese.'

'That's the French pronunciation,' Lisa's grandmother said.

'I think it sounds silly,' Lisa said.

Lisa's grandfather ate for a time in silence. Then he said, 'Why don't you like Pierre?'

'He's horrible,' Lisa said.

'Teases you?'

'Sort of. He and Alice talk French to each other so that I can't understand.'

'It is their mother tongue.'

'Their what? You mean because their mother is French?'

'Mother tongue means the language you learn when you are a baby. Your first language. As mine was German. I suppose they can speak English too?'

'Yes. That's why it's so mean of them to talk French when I'm there.'

'You could always learn it,' Grandpa said.

'Don't want to. It sounds silly.'

'It is silly to be so prejudiced,' Grandpa said.

'How do they behave to your mother?' Grandma asked.

'They're not so bad when she's there. Laurent won't let them be horrible to her.'

'Do you get on all right with him?' Grandpa asked.

'I don't see him that much. He's out all day.' Her voice said what her words didn't: 'Thank goodness, I don't want him around.'

'He makes your mother happy, Grandpa said, in the voice he sometimes used when he didn't like the last thing that had been said. If she had been with anyone except Grandpa, Lisa would have said, 'He doesn't make me happy.'

After they'd cleared the table, Lisa and her grandmother walked round the garden to decide what the next day's jobs were to be. At first Grandma didn't talk about anything except the weeds that must be cleared and the chrysanthemums which should be tied. She warned Lisa not to get mulberry juice on her clothes because it was impossible to wash out. But under the Ribstone Pippin tree, she stopped and said, 'Is there anything else besides them talking to each other in French?'

It took Lisa a moment to realize what Grandma was talking about. Then she said, 'Alice tells tales.'

'About you?'

'Mostly about me. She told Laurent I'd said I didn't want a French stepfather.'

'Was it true? Had you said that?'

'Only after they'd said a lot of things about us. Pierre said English ladies couldn't be proper mothers because they liked dogs better than children.'

'And I suppose you said French people ate frogs and snails?'

'Yes. And horses.'

'I expect we've all done that,' Grandma said.

'I haven't!' Lisa said, outraged.

'You wouldn't have known. Anyway . . . You said their father makes them behave properly to your mother?'

'Ye-es.'

'They don't say that sort of thing to her? Do they do what she tells them?'

'Generally they do. Sometimes they pretend not to understand. But it's stupid. They know English perfectly well.'

'So what does Fanny . . . your mother . . . do about that?'

'Says it in French. The first time, it was funny. They didn't expect her to be able to.'

'Your mother speaks French very well. She lived in France for more than a year.'

'That's another thing. They say her accent is not Parisian, whatever that means.'

'Say so to her?'

'No. To me.'

'Stupid kids,' Grandma said, and Lisa was encouraged to go on with the story. 'So we had a fight.'

'Do you fight a lot?'

'Quite a lot,' Lisa said, and thought it was peculiar that if Grandpa had asked this question, she would have answered differently. Grandpa would not like the idea that she and those French kids fought, but Grandma, she somehow knew, did not mind. She might even be quite pleased to think that Lisa would have won.

Thinking about Pierre and Alice had made Lisa forget about ghosts, but later that day she remembered. She had a feeling that when her grandmother had said she wasn't sure if she'd seen a ghost or not, that was almost as good as admitting that she had.

'You did see a ghost once, then, Grandma?'

Her grandmother said, 'Oh, Lisa! You do go on, don't you?'

'I just want to know. Did you?'

'I don't know. He could have been just an ordinary boy who happened to be in the house.'

'What house?'

'In John's house. In London.'

'Did he just suddenly appear out of nowhere?'

'No, he didn't. And he wasn't carrying his head under his arm, either.'

'Weren't you frightened, though? Was it dark?'

'It wasn't dark at all. It was the middle of the afternoon.'

Lisa was surprised. She hadn't thought of ghosts appearing in daylight.

'Why did you think he was a ghost?' she asked.

'I didn't, not then.'

'But you did think afterwards that perhaps he was a ghost?'

'It was what he said. John . . . Grandpa . . . thought that an ordinary boy wouldn't have known so much.'

'What did he say?' This was getting interesting.

'Lisa, I really don't want to talk about it.'

'But Grandma . . .'

'Come and help me tie up the little trees. Here! You carry this.' 'This' was a bowl of corks, each with a hole at one end.

'How can you tie up trees? Tie them what to?' Lisa asked.

'You'll see.'

In the garden shed Lisa's grandma collected canes and twine and secateurs and they walked down over the lawn, where Grandpa was at his endless job of rooting out dandelions, to a row of little cypress trees, which were now just tall enough to need support for their feathery heads. Lisa's grandma thrust a cane into the ground next to the first baby tree and tied its soft upper stem to the stick. 'There, little tree! Now you won't bend over and break if it snows,' she said. She put a cork on the top of the cane. 'So that I don't get that sharp top in my eye when I'm looking to see that it's all right,' she said.

It was quite a long row of little trees, and by the time each one had been tied up, Lisa was tired of standing still. She went into the vegetable garden and found half a handful of tiny wild strawberries. She picked a bean pod and shelled out five small pink beans, which tasted sweet and surprised to be caught so young. She contemplated the plum trees; it had not been a good plum year, her grandma said. Last year they had had more plums than they knew what to do with; this year there would not be enough for a single pie. There were plenty of apples, but they were still small and green and Lisa could feel, without tasting one, the acid dryness that it would bring to her mouth. She went back to the lawn. Grandpa was there, digging up the tough roots with a long forked tool. When she got near, Lisa could hear him singing softly to himself under his breath. He saw her bare legs above red canvas shoes coming to a halt beside him, and he looked up.

'Have you finished with the tree babies?' he asked.

'Mm. Grandma's gone back to the house.'

He looked at his watch. 'Another five minutes and I shall stop and come in for some tea.'

Lisa remembered that she had a question she wanted answered, and that she must ask it when her grandma wasn't there. Best to take Grandpa by surprise. She said, 'What did the little boy ghost talk to you about, Grandpa?'

He stopped pushing the forked tool down beside the bold yellow face of the dandelion and said, 'What little boy ghost?'

'Grandma said . . . She sort of told me about him. She said he might have been a real boy and not a ghost at all. But he was, wasn't he? She said he was in the house you lived in. In London.'

One of her grandfather's habits that Lisa liked best was his slow way of doing things. He spoke slowly, he moved slowly about the house and the garden – though he could walk very fast when he chose to. And he generally took time to answer questions, which showed that, unlike most grown-up people, he really considered what you had asked.

He took a longish time now, before he said, 'I think it was not a real boy.'

'Because he disappeared? Did he disappear suddenly?'

'No. Not because of disappearing. Because of what he said.'

'What did he say, Grandpa?'

'He said what a real boy of that time would not have been able to tell. He could not have known.'

'What was it?' Lisa asked.

'I am not going to tell you all that he said. He told me of things that had not happened yet. Bad things. Terrible things. Things I would never have dreamed of.'

'Are they going to happen now? Soon?'

'They happened a long time ago. Before you were born. Hopefully they will never happen again.'

Lisa was relieved, but at the same time disappointed. She didn't exactly want terrible things to happen, but the idea of

them was exciting as well as frightening.

'So the boy was right. He did know,' she said.

'He was right.'

'When did you see him? Grandma said in your house in London. I thought you and Grandma had always lived here.'

'We have lived here for more than thirty years, but we both lived in London when we were children.'

'You mean, you saw the ghost when you were quite little? Weren't you frightened?'

'You have forgotten. I didn't know then that he was a ghost.'

'But you would have been frightened if you'd known?'

'Probably not as frightened as I would be now.'

'But you're grown up!' Lisa exclaimed.

'I suppose you think children are the only ones to get frightened. I can tell you, grown-up people can be terribly frightened too.'

'Of ghosts?'

'Of worse than ghosts. Frightened of other men and women. Their neighbours. Their friends, even, and that is worst of all.'

'How could they be frightened of their friends?'

'People who have been friends and who have changed.'

'That's horrible! I wouldn't have friends who did that.'

'There can be difficult choices,' Grandpa said. He pushed the fork further down and pulled up the dandelion. It had a long straggly root. 'Poor flower. Although I know it is necessary, I don't like destroying something like this that has worked so hard to get its living,' he said.

Lisa wasn't interested in dandelions. She wanted to hear more about the ghost. 'Did you say anything to the ghost boy?' she asked.

'I think I asked him who he was. I didn't remember seeing him before.'

'And then he told you the terrible thing that was going to happen?'