

Rebecca F. John was born in 1986, and grew up in Pwll, a small village on the South Wales coast. Her short stories have been broadcast on BBC Radio 4. In 2014, she was highly commended in the Manchester Fiction Prize. In 2015, her short story ‘The Glove Maker’s Numbers’ was shortlisted for the *Sunday Times* EFG Short Story Award. She is the winner of the PEN International New Voices Award 2015, and the British participant in the 2016 Scrittura Giovani project.

Her first short story collection, *Clown’s Shoes*, is available through Parthian. She lives in Swansea with her three dogs.

The
HAUNTING
of HENRY TWIST



REBECCA F. JOHN



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RUBY



It is not only because of the smog that Ruby Twist fails to notice the grumbling approach of the bus on this cold, spooky morning. Though the mist is thick and fast-swirling and London squats behind it like a fading dream, Ruby hardly notices. She is not thinking of the weather, or of stepping carefully, or of the danger of the road ahead. She is thinking only of Henry. It is an embarrassing habit – one she is glad to have kept secret – but sometimes, when they are apart, Ruby finds herself rebuilding his face in her mind. She fits one fine feature over the next, word by careful word, until he stares back at her from behind her own eyes. She does it just so that she can look at him, and every time, she discovers something different about the face she knows so well.

‘Your hair is the colour of wet sand,’ she’ll say to him afterwards, as though the observation is a casual one. ‘Your hands belong to an artist.’ Today, she considers that his eyes are the deep, soft shade of green olives and that perhaps, if they have a girl, she will have her daddy’s eyes. They chose their names months ago. After a night full of ‘nos’ and ‘maybes’, they laid them out in the silence of a splintering dawn, pleated into each other beneath the quilt Ida had patchworked for them as a wedding gift. It was before the real cold came, when the baby

was still a tight, invisible knot only Ruby could feel or know.

‘Harold?’

‘No! Bleddyn?’

‘What?’

‘Gruffydd?’ She was teasing. She didn’t want a Welsh name.

Henry huffed. ‘I can’t spell it, or even say it. Billy?’

‘Yes!’ she squealed. And that’s how they had continued, slinging names around until something stuck.

When Ruby suggested Elizabeth, after her own middle name, and Henry said, ‘Yes, Libby,’ Ruby had bounced up, swung herself astride him, and kissed his nose. ‘You, husband, are a perfect genius,’ she said. ‘You ought to father a thousand children and find them all perfect names. Billy for a boy. Libby for a girl. Those are the ones, definitely.’

And the choices did feel definite, in a way their earlier ideas had not. Ruby had imagined then, though she had not admitted it to Henry, that they would have at least one of each; that neither name would go to waste. Now, with only two weeks more to wait, she feels comfortable despite the taut pull of her belly. She feels light. She feels confident she can do this again and again, for Henry.

She takes a detour onto narrower Stanhope Terrace. She has time to waste and she wants to break the monotony of the straight track onto Oxford Street. Here the mist, trapped between closer buildings, spins in darker circles, and Ruby waves a gloved hand at it, as though she can persuade it to clear for her. She feels this powerful. Her heels clip-clip against the pavement. Her bright red coat flashes with each forward step. The lipstick she swept on to match it clings heavy to her lips, but it is a weight she enjoys: it reminds her of how pretty she felt this morning, when Henry stood behind her in the mirror, his hands around her stomach, and winked at her as she twisted the thick ends of her hair one way then the other.

He’s the kind of man who can deliver a wink, she thinks;

he's handsome enough for that, her Henry. She shakes her head, laughing at herself. Even here, alone, she is being smug.

As she walks down Brook Street and re-joins Bayswater Road, the world grows lighter again, and Ruby tips back her head and peers past the buildings laddering the sky to look for signs of snow. It is cold enough, crisp enough. It is the only thing that could improve today. But she knows she cannot ask for more, not so much as the ghostly flurry of snow in this early winter morning, because she has everything she has ever wanted. Almost everything. All along the street, the dark curves of men's hats gleam in the damp air. A corner of grey suit-jacket pushes out of the whiteness then disappears again. Briefcases swing in and out of sight, gripped by disembodied hands. And Ruby reaches for the rhythms of the city. She has come to love these sounds: the clacking of feet on the pavements; the talk, passing or sustained, which gathers like rain clouds before dropping its stolen words onto strangers; the low rattling pulse of the traffic, nosing through London's labyrinthine grid. Each is reduced to a whisper by the next. Nowhere in Wales could you locate that same jumbled din.

To her left, a long row of white Georgian houses wear the fog as a dancer might a feather boa, draped over a shoulder or looped around an arm, half-revealing themselves. Ruby had thought this place impossibly grand the first time Henry had shown her to the flat. Now, she is comfortable here. She knows every small street which darts away from the park. She has walked this way – from home to Monty's private garden – a hundred times.

A short, round-hipped woman passes and returns Ruby's smile, nodding at the dome of her pregnancy as if to say, 'Yes, I know, I remember that', and Ruby stands a little taller to push out her stomach, delight rippling through her. One day, she thinks, she will step past a younger woman and do the very same thing; she will send the most profound sort of satisfaction rushing through another expectant mother. Because Ruby

knows what it is to endure a wait. She waited so long to come to London, to find a job, for Henry to propose, for the eventual dawn of their wedding day. And soon, very soon now, she will be able to stop. Then, she has decided, she will sit in the wide bay which fronts their flat, look out at the private comings and goings of the street through the opened window, and write a letter to her parents and Ida which might just persuade them to pen a real reply.

She has already planned how she will begin. She will simply say, My son has arrived, or, My daughter has arrived. And then, she realises, she will begin waiting all over again.

All Ruby has gained in these last three years, and somehow, along the way, she has managed to lose three whole people. They have not exchanged angry words, nothing like that, but a gap has opened up between the Myrtle Hill house she used to race around, trying to tempt Ida into adventure, and her Bayswater Road flat, which words do not seem able to straddle.

Sometimes, when Henry is at work and Ruby is alone, she closes her eyes and feels her way around that big detached house, trailing her own distant spirit from room to familiar room.

She enters the living room and sees her father, drying after his bath and dozing in the fire heat, his half-lit face smooth and tired, his still-straight shoulders wrapped in a towel worn flat by so many identical evenings. She sees her mother, hunched, small-eyed and content, over the next in a great line of books she has stacked into an alcove, already in the order she has decided they must be read. She wanders into the kitchen and sees Ida crouched below the sink, clutching the leg her mother has slapped and blowing the skin pale again. Elizabeth's hands always could deliver the most unavoidable slaps, administered with a deep breath on both parts when Ruby snuck down to the sea and clambered over the rocks or tore her skirts fighting with a boy at school.

And she hears them, too.

Her mother calling from the kitchen: 'What's on the wireless, John?'

'Nothing but dust, Elizabeth.'

This is how Ruby communicates with her family now – in the past. But she is sure not to mention this sadness in the letters they reply to with such brevity. She feels she would be letting John and Elizabeth and even Ida down, to set out on her big adventure and then admit to missing any one thing she had been forced to leave behind.

Twenty minutes later, Ruby is still strolling towards Monty's, her pace slowed. She is unused to the breathlessness which comes upon her now during longer walks, but she will not curse it. She has decided not to. The houses to her left have grown into sprawling department stores. Bunches of people press their faces to spotless windows, shivering in the rectangular shadows of rolled-away awnings which drop over their heads; shop signs loom outwards, their giant letters distorted by the perspective of those on the pavement below; doorbells shake frenziedly as doors are flung open and never properly closed. The hard scents of Capstan Full Strengths and Woodbines thicken around her.

On a side-street corner, two hulking black horses stand patiently, snorting hot plumes of steam into the bitter air and shifting from leg to leg while piles of newspapers are unloaded from the cart they are harnessed to. Ruby pauses to put a hand to one of their noses. She removes a glove and touches the soft heat around its nostril. She inhales their strong, earthy smell.

Somewhere down the street, a shout bursts through the crowds and the horses prance backwards, worried. The cold reclaims Ruby's hand and she shuffles it back into her glove, squinting towards the growing commotion. People are bobbing around, their jolting and pushing drawing attention even through the sheets of mist. More shouts go up, clanging against each other. And then there is a quicker movement

amongst the shoppers, and a sharp clatter as something is dropped or thrown to the ground, and a smaller figure, a boy, pushes his way out of the ring of people and tears up the street towards her, a bag of something flying behind him like a balloon, bouncing to the rapid thump-thump-thump of his feet. Despite the month, he wears only a vest, a scarf and a pair of shorts, his socks pulled high to his blueing knees. His breath wheezes out from beneath the peak of a too-small cap. His shoes slip on slivers of invisible ice, but he does not slow. He cannot slow. He is a thief.

Ruby steps down into the road as he rushes by. Two passing men flatten themselves against a shop window to avoid a collision, and as the boy pounds away, fast as a dream, Ruby finds herself nodding a greeting to them.

‘Someone should get after him,’ the larger of the men says. His slighter companion grunts in agreement.

‘No,’ Ruby says. ‘He was hungry.’ The larger man raises his eyebrows at her. ‘Apples,’ she explains, because she had seen them, fleetingly, hard and green and beaded with watery cold, bumping against each other in the bag. ‘They were just apples.’

The man shrugs. He considers the length of her through uneasy eyes, the way people do when your stomach is stretched round with a new human being. ‘Are you hurt?’ he asks.

‘I’m fine. Thank you,’ she answers. And why shouldn’t she be, she wants to add. But she doesn’t. She never does. Ruby Twist is not interested in causing offence. She watches them straighten their coats and move off, already beginning to embellish the details of what has just happened. ‘He could have killed someone, barrelling about like that,’ the slighter one says, and while the other hums his concurrence, Ruby turns back to the horses.

‘Don’t people tell themselves the oddest things sometimes,’ she whispers. ‘Don’t they? Hmm?’

The horses watch her through sad brown eyes and chew

on their bits, mouths moving as if they have something to say. Ruby wonders if the metal sends sparks of pain through their teeth in these temperatures; she wonders what it would be like, to know pain and not be able to say so. Then one of the animals pushes his warm, pink tongue out to taste the sleeve of her coat, and she laughs. Later, she will tell Henry about this, and he will ask her questions as though a simple disturbance in the street were the most important thing in the world. Henry has always done that for her – made her feel important.

At first, she had thought he was poking fun at her, this serious-looking man who had his jacket buttoned though they were at a dance; who kept his tie perfectly knotted while the rest of the room came undone; who smiled with just the two crescent-shaped wrinkles around his mouth. But Henry has never poked fun at anyone. Humour is something he only receives, with a twitch of a smile and a cough which flutters in his throat like a trapped bird.

The thrill of discovering these details has faded now, in comparison to the early days. It has been dulled by the everyday proximity of her husband. But still Ruby can't keep her mind from wandering presently towards the pull of his neck: the specific way his beard sneaks under his jaw and down into two tapering points when he's been too lazy to shave; of how, when she puts her lips to the thinner skin there, it is always warm. There is a width to Henry's arms and chest which makes her, in some incidental way, proud. It shows him, she thinks, to be superior to the strings of skinny boys who parade around London, draped in all manner of vibrant, girly clothing, lamenting the fact that they missed those four unknowable years Henry refuses to speak about.

Women, she knows – every variety of woman, young and old and married and widowed – are jealous of her. But Ruby can't hold that against them. She would be jealous, too.

She does not linger at the shop windows. Now and then, she sneaks a sideways glimpse at her hefty reflection and finds

herself pleased with the new solidity of her frame, but she does not pause. She did not come out to buy anything. She came out because Matilda had asked her to and, though she and Henry had stumbled out of Coco's Café with Matilda and Grayson only ten hours previously, Ruby is keen now to get to Monty's garden and listen to what her friend has to say. It is Matilda's way to be dramatic, yes, but there had been something, a cut to her voice perhaps, which had persuaded Ruby that Matilda really was hurt this time.

'Come to Monty's by ten,' she'd whispered, while the men were distracted. 'There's something I need to ask you. Something important.' And Ruby had promised she would.

Near the entrance to the Tube, she stops to check the road. She watches soft shadows sliding through the gloom and tries to distinguish their shapes. She listens for the mounting drone of oncoming traffic. A train of suited people rattle past her and disappear below ground, knocking her bag from her shoulder as they go, and Ruby grabs the strap of it with her opposite hand and drags it back up her arm. She has only to cross the road, turn through a complicated but rapid series of lefts and rights, and she will arrive at Monty's. Within five minutes, she will sit down with Matilda and proffer her best advice.

She suspects that what Matilda wants to discuss is Grayson. She has noticed the snippy exchanges between them lately, the way they move gradually apart when they sit to a meal. She has thought about it carefully, just this morning in truth, in the hour before dawn when Henry flinches through his worst dreams, and she has already decided on the right words. Give him another chance, she will say – because she likes Gray, and really, deep down, she thinks he has just got a little bit lost in his love for his wife. Ruby can appreciate that. There are times when Matilda's mood veers towards a less predictable place than the rest of them know; than they have perhaps ever known.

But, as Henry keeps reminding her, it is not her job to right

all of Matilda's wrong moods. And as she glances about herself one last time and decides it is safe to cross the road, Ruby vows that, once she leaves Matilda this morning, she will not think on other people's troubles again today. Today, just for a while, she wants to think only on herself, and Henry, and the surfacing inkling she has that, yes, she is definitely carrying a girl. Today, somehow, the baby feels like a girl. A little Libby. Ruby allows herself to acknowledge that she has wanted a girl all along, and then she steps off the pavement.

Off the pavement and into the deafening blast of a horn.

Off the pavement and into the screech of a stranger's scream.

Off the pavement and straight in front of one of those bright red, big-wheeled, double-decker buses which had so thrilled her the day she arrived in London; which had made her believe, finally, that she'd done it, got here; which she'd pictured, right down to the way they would shine when the rain fell on them, from her bed in the back room of her parents' house in Pwll.

She does not recognise the impact. She does not have a chance to. The bus hits her, and the driver shuts his eyes, and the brakes squeal and groan as she is flung limply forward, and the vehicle stops just short of ploughing over her, and Ruby Twist – twenty-four, nine months pregnant, and happy, happy – is left lying in the middle of Oxford Street, her arms and legs splayed out in fractured points, the surface of her domed stomach rolling as her daughter moves about inside her. And all she can think of is the pram she can now see, upturned before her, its wheels at right angles to the pavement; the baby's mother lying on the ground, mouth open to a silent scream, still gripping the handle between white fingers; the pram's black hood, hooked forward, hooked forward, yes, but surely not substantial enough to protect the baby from the fall it must have had when it was tipped to the ground.

Ruby tries to step forward, to help right the capsized child,

but she finds she cannot move her legs. She reaches out, but there is only a trembling from her arms. She does not understand why no one is rushing towards them, this mother and baby, and so she calls.

‘The baby. The baby,’ she says.

And then there is a voice at her ear, a man’s voice, and it is saying, ‘Don’t worry, love. We’ll take care of the baby. Don’t you worry now. We’ll take care of you both.’

And she wants to say, No, no, not me. The baby. *That* baby. But she has lost all her words, and she closes her eyes with the effort of trying to find them, and there is no trace of Henry behind her lids now; there is nothing there but the black square of an upturned pram against the white glare of the morning, and the heart-stopping possibility that the baby is hurt. That heart-stopping possibility.