

The Ghost Boy by Elinor Nash

The irregular drumbeat delighted Jake Bennett with its marshmallow sound. From his special blue chair in the overfull living room, each bam-bam-te-bam brought the pinky white balls flashing into view then out again, into view then out.

‘Ugh, my head.’

Jake smiled at his mother and began to rock his own head side-bam to side-bam, trying to catch in his open mouth the here then gone again marshmallows.

He knew they weren’t real marshmallows. Jake wasn’t a fool, despite what some people thought – strangers mostly, with veiled eyes and overloud voices. These marshmallow beats were a gift given to him on the day he turned from a Hardy Teenager racing his bike to school to an upside-down Ghost Boy.

Marshmallow beats weren’t the only gifts. There was the custard swirl of the fan, looping from left to right, the grass green zigzags of rain against the window, the scurrying crimson dashes of his dad turning the pages of the newspaper. Jake

sometimes yelled for the place to be quiet just so he could see his smoky grey breathing.

After several more minutes of marshmallow beats, Jake’s vision filled with the horror of the vacuum cleaner. Jake hated the vacuum’s orange squash sound. The colour leached into those delicious marshmallow beats and made them sticky.

Jake tried to not let it upset him. When Jake got upset his otherwise weak legs got upset which made his feet kick out which ultimately upset whoever happened to be near them. As the whirr of vacuum continued, Jake felt the upset travel from his crying eyes down to the elasticated waistband of his dark blue jeans. Jake tried to stop the upset trickling down his legs but his mother yanked the vacuum cleaner next to him and – flick – he kicked the upset right into her shin.

Jake often thought his mother was made of glass – the thin frail glass that had shattered around Jake when his world had spun upside-down. She was jagged like glass: sharp elbows and knees and hips and cheekbones. She was transparent like glass. Jake could peer inside and see her slow-beating heart, her broccoli lungs, her china bones. She could break like glass – crash – with one kick of his upset foot.

His dad wasn't glass. His dad was wood, solid and knotted and unmoving. Jake's foot didn't kick his dad so often. It hurt Jake's foot to do it and the upset would bounce back along Jake's legs and up his tummy and it would taste sour in his mouth and then Jake's upset would send him spinning upside-down, over and over like a recurring nightmare and he'd cry out in a pool of sweat.

The marshmallow beat continued and Jake, who'd stopped crying (having kicked the upset to his mother, whose lavender sniffs seemed to Jake to alternate with the drumbeat) listened and watched, no longer trying to catch the marshmallows in his open mouth. He listened and watched until the lavender sniffs went away and his mother helped him to his wheel-ie-walker which he pushed along to the newly fitted bathroom.

The bathroom used to be upstairs which had given his mother Terrible Backache. After long discussions about money

and builders and other things that Jake couldn't help overhearing, a man called Gary came for several weeks and made lots of blood-red star bangs and strange lemon yellow whooshes and (Jake's favourite sound) the indigo velvet spiral of the drill. Gary came into the living room especially to show Jake the drill and the hammer and the screwdriver. Gary told Jake about the new pipes he had to fit and where the stopcock was and the amazing toilet which washed the sitter afterwards. Jake listened and gave Gary his best smile because he liked Gary and the interesting noises Gary made and he especially liked the idea of the toilet which would wash him every time he used it.

His mother readied her hands as Jake manoeuvred himself onto the new shower seat but he could manage well enough. The shower, like the rain, fell in grass green zigzags and washed the stickiness from Jake. It felt so much better than the old bath which had given his mother the Terrible Backache as Jake was a big boy and very heavy and his mother was fragile glass.

Jake's mother wrapped him up in a fluffy towel and he noticed the marshmallow beats had stopped which meant his sister, Ava, had stopped drumming. He had a vague notion of what the drums looked like, metallic blue and silver, but as they were upstairs in what was Jake's old bedroom, he now only ever heard them. He'd like to watch Ava play and have the drumbeat so loud the marshmallows would be twice as big.

Ava was younger than Jake by something less than two years but more than one and she had the same mousy-coloured hair as Jake and the same mousy-coloured eyes as their mother. She was, every day and by little but significant increments, growing more and more like their mother. Jake kept the observation to himself, aware that telling Ava about this growing resemblance would make her screw up her face and send her skin a ghostlier pale, the way it did when she had to help Jake with his breakfast in the morning.

Jake had flashes of memory, like the here-then-gone-again marshmallow beats. In those flashes he saw a small Ava

cuddled up on the sofa with their mother. He saw Ava's feet, and his own, sinking in the sand as a wave drew back. He could stand once, unaided, he knew because of the wave memory and because of the dance memory, where he had moved his feet side to side opposite a pretty girl who made his tummy flutter. But that was when he was a Hardy Teenager who could race his bike to school.

In pyjamas now, and back in his special blue chair, Jake saw the light outside fading. His neck wasn't very strong so he rested his head on the high-backed chair and looked ceiling-ward. This meant he only really saw the ever-changing sky out of the sitting room window. The fading light told Jake his dad would be home soon.

'Hey Jakey,' Ava sing-sang and swooped her face into view. Jake said hey Ava and gave her his best smile because she'd brought him his ball which was squashy in his hand and if he squeezed it hard enough – which Jake could sometimes do and sometimes couldn't – the ball vibrated and played a little tune. The tune was the colour of baked beans and he liked the tickly vibration on his palm.

When Jake's hand was too weak to squeeze the ball, Ava squeezed it for him even though she didn't like the tune the colour of baked beans and called it 'annoying.' Sometimes she said it was 'bloody awful' to which their father would say 'language' and Ava would reply 'you say it.' This sort of comment usually made their dad go rigid and Ava would tell him not to get 'stressed out' which would make him much more stressed out.

At times like this, Jake tried to ease the situation with a song. His favourite was The Wheels on the Bus because Miss Cunning sang him that one and Jake loved Miss Cunning because her voice was the colour of bananas and Jake loved bananas. But Jake's singing didn't produce the banana hue Miss Cunning's did so it was good when his dad brought his knotted face level with Jake's and smiled and joined in. Jake's dad's voice was woody and made Jake's tummy warm and full. Sometimes, though, Jake's dad wouldn't join Jake singing The

Wheels on the Bus but would leave the room. On one occasion he'd stormed out of the house and was gone a whole day and night. When that had happened, Jake felt the upset flood down his chin and chest and along his legs to his feet and Ava (who was sometimes as quick as a cat and sometimes too angry with either their mum or dad or even Jake) had – thud – been given Jake's upset hard on her calf.

Ava's upset poured out of her hands, her feet, her mouth, her hair; it spread from her like a storm cloud, in all directions, including Jake's. She'd showered Jake with hailstones and her upset had hurt him like the stones had hurt him upside-down when only a moment before he'd been a Hardy Teenager racing his bike to school.

Much worse than Ava's upset, though, worse even than when she'd lashed out at him that she 'wished he'd died' that day, worse than when she'd yelled at their parents that they loved '*stupid* Jake' more than her, was Ava's grief.

Ava's 'grieving' was there in the bluish smudge under her mousy-coloured eyes. He'd heard it in the croak of her voice and the silence of her drums. He'd felt it in the lightness of her

touch. Jake didn't know what it was until he heard his mother on the phone: 'The school counsellor told me she thinks Ava's... *behaviour* is because she's grieving for Jake...'

Jake had hated Ava's grief. It was shiny and black and it spiked him and he'd wanted to crawl far away from it, from Ava. Because Jake knew people grieved for the dead, the way Gary with his indigo blue drill said he missed his mother, who'd had cancer; the way Jake's grandpa got lost sometimes, thinking of Jake's grandma. But Jake knew he was not dead. He remembered, upside-down, when the breath was forced from his lungs. He remembered the effort to force the breath back in. Ava's 'grieving' had told Jake he was a Ghost Boy.

Being a Ghost Boy was like being half-alive. People whispered around him, about him: 'What a tragedy,' they'd hiss. They strained to avoid his questioning eyes or instead shouted empty encouragement: 'GOOD LAD, KEEP FIGHTING.' They cried over 'poor Jakey' and said how they missed him, even

though he was there, just there, sitting, listening.

Lately at least, Ava was freer of shadow. She played the drums and shared with Jake the delicious marshmallow beats.

Ava drew the sitting room curtains and then turned on Jake's special ceiling light. Jake's special light changed from blue to violet to red to yellow and then flashed on-off, on-off and then dimmed and then brightened.

As Jake and Ava watched the light, Ava told Jake about her day, which seemed to Jake to involve a lot of things Ava found 'so dull' because Ava's school, which had once been Jake's school when he was a Hardy Teenager, was 'stupid' – not like Jake's school which had Miss Cunning and the music room and trips to the farm.

When their mother came in she said something in a soft way to Ava which Ava liked because she stayed in the sitting room when often she'd leave to go to her room to be 'alone.' Their mother brought her face level with Jake's and she told him that the bruise on her leg was the worst yet and that she was sorry not to have vacuumed before when Jake was at school but that she'd been at work all day and had not had time to tidy up the

spilt breakfast cereal from that morning and could he please not kick her.

Jake gave her his best smile which always made her smile and then she blew a raspberry on his cheek which always made him laugh and laughter to Jake looked like confetti falling.

He squeezed the ball, because laughter made him strong. The colour of Ava's sigh joined the baked bean tune. Jake closed his eyes and watched the colours, noises far removed from the sky-splitting crack of the car which had hit the back wheel of his Hardy Teenager racing bike and spun him upside-down only fifteen months ago.

Jake's dad's face was suddenly level with Jake's and he said: 'Hey Jakey.' Jake said hey dad in his special way that his dad had quickly understood and then his mum and then Ava and now Miss Cunning. Not many others understood Jake, not even grandpa whose eyes watered when he looked at Jake even when Jake sang The Wheels on the Bus or was telling him

happy things like marshmallow beats.

Not that anyone really understood about the coloured sounds. Sometimes he thought Ava understood. Once, as they both listened to the heavy drumbeat of The White Stripes on the iPod, Ava had left him for just a minute then had come back with a bag of marshmallows – actual soft, pinky white ones. She'd put one in Jake's mouth and as the sweetness melted and he listened to Seven Nations Army, Jake Bennett thought he'd never in his life been so happy.

Source:

Nash, Elinor (2014). "The Ghost Boy". In: Jude Higgins et al, ed. *The Bath Short Story Award Anthology*. Bath: Brown Dog Books. 5-11.

Google Books [Online]:

https://books.google.ca/books?id=ntluDwAAQBAJ&pg=PT10&lpg=PT10&dq=%22the+irregular+drum+beat+delighted+jake%22&source=bl&ots=oOPEEAwjPk&sig=MkRwHqdrfgVtFQ7V5ECP_zSICPE&hl=en&sa=X&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=%22the%20irregular%20drumbeat%20delighted%20jake%22&f=false [2017, November 7].