

The Time of Ghosts

A Dani Lancing Story

P. D. Viner

Introduction

I am writing this story to commemorate and celebrate a date that has become very important in my life. February 7th 1989. It is the date that the world, and most importantly Patricia and Jim Lancing, discovered the death of their daughter Dani Lancing. She was only twenty-one years old when she died... was murdered.

As I write this, on February 3rd 2014, I am just a few days away from the twenty-fifth anniversary of her death. From that point in history, like a stone dropping into a lake, I am charting the ripples her death makes in the lives of her family and friends. I have planned three novels and five linked novellas to tell this story... but I had not considered the importance of this date on my tale and on me personally. So here is a short story. It is my gift to Dani on her death-day.

She burns. She has no other word for it. Fire flows through what once were her veins, capillaries and arteries – a system that once allowed life to flow, now filled with darkness and loss. She tries to quell it; she eats up the air as she swarms through the park, hoping the movement might cool her... though she knows it cannot. The air can't touch her dead skin. Had she forgotten that?

Overhead the moon is a fat fingernail gleaming on the wet ground below, the Earth sodden from a month of rain. Glossy mud smears the park all the way down to the Thames. It is wet and mild, just like a rubbish boyfriend. She looks to her left, over to the cityscape. Magnificent... and all so different now, so different from when she was alive. She remembers the excitement when Canary Wharf was being built, her Dad is an architect and he said it signaled the transformation of London...

‘We’re going to be like New York and live and work in the heavens.’

He was right... though she was dead before the final stone was laid. Dead and reduced to ashes.

Since then everything has changed – shards, domes, gherkins, cable cars and Olympic parks all now occupy the vista ahead. Little has stayed the same, merely a few constants in the tide, like the Maritime Museum and the Royal Observatory. They have laid roots deep in the history of London and stand tall against the encroaching modernity. But so much that had seemed solid has shifted, even the Cutty Sark has moved and now floats in air rather than water. There are still no jet packs... but the world marches on as she forgets to age. Twenty-five years dead and still she looks just twenty-one, and... she hurts. What was once her skin burns, it feels like she wants to shed, to shuck off this non-mortal coil like a snake. But what would lie beneath?

‘Dani!’ She hears her father’s voice from behind her. ‘Come back.’

She turns to him, he is little more than a speck on the edge of the park, searching for her, worried about her – just like always. She opens her mouth to reply as the heavens open and huge black twisting drops dive from the sky – they fall through her eyes, her mouth, her whole body, striking the ground beneath her and pooling together to make puddles and seas. If her father shouts anything else she does not hear it, the rain rips the words apart before they can reach her. The air seethes with water and any view of him is obliterated. She turns away and moves on; slower now. As she breasts the hill, she can see the majesty of the Royal Observatory rise up.

She aims towards it as, around her, the rain turns to hail and the bullets of ice tear at her, scratching at the miasma that is her form, cutting little bits off her that turn to steam only to reform and attach back to her a moment later. She reaches the closest and oldest part of the observatory and slides through the wall and inside.

The tattoo of the hail has changed in tone, but not in insistence. She closes her eyes and listens, as it hits brick, copper and lead above her – syncopating oddly between the three. She feels calmer here, entombed in the comfort of a place of science. The building carries so many happy memories that it feels almost like a home from home. Her dad brought her here a lot when she was a child, he had a friend who was an astronomer and they could come and go whenever they wanted. As a toddler she got to look through her first telescope one evening after the place was closed up. She doesn't recall it but her dad has told her many times how excited she was to see the stars that first time. She bets she was.

Everything is black. Dani doesn't like it, she is still a little afraid of the dark. Even though she tells herself that she's dead, and you don't get worse. It does not calm her though – it is still dark and things still lurk in there. Though the plus side is that while she might stagger around in the dark, she can't bump into anything. So that's positive. She hasn't come here more than three times during the night but has been hundreds of trips during the day, so she knows more or less where she is heading to. To the meridian line – to the beginning of time, sort of. There is a brass line. Most of it runs outside so hordes of Japanese tourists can take their photos straddling it, like a time-travel conga. But it starts here... or there... or someplace around... the fire burns in her again. Is there some kind of ghost menopause? She's only forty-six, well she was twenty-one when she died and that was twenty-five years ago. Exactly twenty-five years. There is a furnace in her chest, it hurts... not like a hurt in life, not like a cut or a burn or a broken bone... no this is pain inside that sucks at your very being. She feels like her soul is burning...and it hurts. It really–

'Help me!'

The cry cuts through Dani, though she knows there was no physical sound. She felt this cry inside, in whatever made her who she is – whether you call it soul or essence or chi or whatever. It was like the awful wracking sobs of Sarah Penn that demanded

her attention. Except now Sarah is gone... released from the torment of having to stick around on earth—

‘Please.’ The cry stretches out, seeming to collapse time around Dani as the depth of suffering twists the air between her and the voice.

‘Who’s there?’ Dani shouts into the darkness. ‘Can I help?’

‘Please.’ The voice sounds closer, drawing Dani forward and through brick to...

She remembers a Halloween party from decades before, a childhood tantrum at the costume her dad made for her. ‘That’s a sheet.’ Dani had told them angrily.

‘But look.’ And her dad had flicked the light switch off and plunged the room into darkness.... Except.

‘Wow!’

He couldn't see her, but Jim had heard how pleased she was. He'd soaked the sheet in phosphorous paint, it glowed in the dark.

‘It really looks like a ghost.’

‘We just need to cut eye holes and a mouth and you’ll be the best ghost in town. But you will need to wear gloves and a balaclava underneath it and clothes you don’t mind throwing away after. The paint will burn your skin otherwise.’

‘Oh!’ Dani tells him. ‘That’s less wow.’

Before her lies a filigree of shadow and half-life, it does seem to glow or at least pulse with something that is lighter than the absolute black of the shadow.

‘Please.’ The voice emanates from it somehow and sounds like a woman, an old old woman and yet... ‘I can’t see. Are you—’ the shape moves, sits up so that Dani can see an almost human shape there. Like a person size doll whose stuffing has all gone and the fabric is worn to nothing in places.

‘I can’t...’ Dani’s words die away. This is the scariness that is tucked inside her, the darkness of a child’s dreams.

‘Are you dead?’ The creature asks.

‘Em...’ Dani is not sure how to answer.

‘I mean you aren’t some kind of medium or ghosthunter are you... I have tried to reach so many of them but none of them have been able to see or hear me.’

Dani sighs. ‘No. No I am dead like you.’

‘Oh.’ The creature says with such a deep disappointment Dani feels like she might cry. Then it shifts again and seems to lie back and fade into the black floor.

‘Please, please at least talk to me.’ Dani finds she almost begs. ‘Who are you?’

There is a sound that emanates from the floor, it takes Dani a moment to realize it is laughter. ‘I have not used my name in so long... so many years.’

‘I’m Dani, Dani Lancing.’

‘Hello Danny... are you a boy, your voice sounds–’

‘Danielle.’

‘Ah.’ There is silence, Dani wonders if their conversation is over and then–

‘Ruth... Belville.’

‘Hello Ruth.’ Dani says softly. ‘Why did you call for help?’

There is a rasping noise and the figure shifts again and now Dani can see a wisp of something that almost seems like skin – hands and a face but sunken or carved, like a mask made of ice that melts as soon as it is touches the air... and once more, Ruth is just a web of rags.

‘I am almost gone. Done.’ The rasp comes again. Dani recognizes the sound from the last time she saw her granny in the hospital, riddled with emphysema.

‘I don’t understand.’ She tells Ruth.

‘You are young. You are lucky.’

‘I am dead.’

‘Luck is relative.’ Dani hears the rattle of her laughter again. ‘I do not mean to patronize you Danielle... it is just from my vantage you seem... can you tell me the date?’

‘Yes.’ Her voice drops low and there is a tremble there. ‘It is February 6th.’

‘And the year?’

‘Two thousand and fourteen.’

There is silence. The date weighs heavily on them both.

‘You died tonight.’ Ruth finally breaks the silence between them.

‘How?’ Dani begins to ask her question but suddenly the answer crawls into her mind, as if it was always there but she just needed to be pointed towards it. ‘You too?’

‘Yes. We share our death-day. Perhaps that is why you are here... please help me.’

‘What do you need?’

‘Just... stay with me.’

‘I...’

‘I died alone... not again. Please?’

‘I don’t understand.’

There is a shift as the rags begin to move and—

Dani screams.

Her fingers curl around Dani’s and squeeze.

‘Shhhh my dear. You are fine.’

Dani feels like an electric current has run through her, every cell in her body weeps and her hairs stick up straight, there is the smell of burning in the air, but it is not her... and then she realizes she can smell again – for the first time in twenty-five years. Her senses are overwhelmed.

‘What have you done?’ She turns to Ruth and... the woman before her is in her late thirties, maybe forty. Dark hair piled up on her head, a pretty face with no make up and with a pale complexion. Then she realizes they are no longer in the dark but...

‘Where are we?’ Dani looks around, the air is custard thick and under her feet the ground lies cobbled and wet, but not rain wet. The air smells of burning and something sweet underneath.

‘We are where we were... still in Greenwich, we have not moved physically.’

‘This is not the observatory.’ Dani says with anger overlaying the fear she feels deep down.

‘No. No I suppose not.’ Ruth looks around. ‘This is my memory – we are in the city, a little way past Blackfriars bridge. I am on my rounds.’

‘I...’

‘Maybe the best question is when are we. This is February 6th 1864. It is the day—’

‘You died.’

Ruth smiles. ‘I spend a lot of my time here, in this moment. Before I died... Come on.’ Ruth takes her hand and leads her forward. The smog is thick and still, their bodies cut through it as they walk. Dani is amazed, she has form again – even if only in a dying ghost’s memory. They turn a corner and, ahead of them are two men, unmoving... frozen.

‘Who are they?’

‘I don’t know his name.’ Ruth says pointing to the smaller of the two men who wears a bowler hat and is in a three-piece suit. Dani sees the shoulders are covered in dandruff. ‘He is the confederate of this man here, she points to the second, much larger man. His name is William W Harris. He is the man who killed me.’

‘Oh Christ.’ Dani lets it slip involuntarily. Ruth looks aghast at her language.

‘Your parents would be shocked to hear such blasphemy.’ Ruth tells her.

‘I am sorry but... he is your murderer?’

‘Not at this moment. This is some thirty minutes before he kills me. I don’t want to relive the actual moment again, not now. But yes... soon he will kill me.’

‘Murder?’

‘Yes.’

‘Jes...’ she stops herself.

They are back in the dark of the observatory. Ruth’s hand is no longer solid and Dani cannot keep a hold.

‘What happened?’ She asks.

‘Please do not ask me to re-live the moment.’

Dani feels the fire in her chest again. ‘You died one hundred and fifty years ago?’

‘Too long.’ She sighs. ‘I am burned to nothing now.’

‘What do you mean burned?’

‘Do you not feel it through your bones – am I misremembering? Does it wait until fifty years? I thought–’

‘No, no I feel something, just tonight. It only began this evening. It is like an acid where my blood would have been.’

‘Yes,’ she says wistfully, ‘that is what it feels like. I had forgotten.’

‘And you feel it too?’

‘The anniversary... it hollows you out in some way. Death is not forever Danielle. I think this is my last night.’

She feels her eyes hot, burning. ‘The dead die?’

‘I suppose death is not the word to use... but we do not stay forever. I suppose that may depend upon how we are remembered, who can tell stories of us, but... do you have someone you talk to – alive I mean?’

‘My dad, he said he called me back, when he needed me... that he screamed for me and... I came.’

Ruth sighs, it sounds like old dry leaves in a storm. ‘I could talk to my father too. I needed it, it kept me from going mad... then he died. I think I actually did go mad then.’

‘What do you mean by *mad*?’

‘You know the stories, the ghosts who howl and move things, ghosts that disturb the living... I was one of those.’

‘You could be seen, by the living?’

‘No, not really – but I was angry, so angry and that did something to the air around me, made it darker, like a shadow... I think sometimes when the rage was at its highest then my shadow could be seen.’

‘And you were angry?’

‘Oh my dear I was so full of rage... I railed against injustice. I screamed and screamed and screamed... sometimes enough to wake the living.’

‘Where did you haunt?’ Dani asks the filigree of shadow.

‘Close to where I died, in the heart of the city, there was a church just around the corner from the spot where I fell.’

‘Why there?’

There is silence for a while. ‘The priest from the church walked by me, while I lay dying. He almost kicked me with his boot – didn’t see me there until the last second, the fog was so thick.’ She pauses, the old voice cracking with the strain of the memory.

‘Did he call the police?’

‘He called me a whore. As I lay there bleeding to death, my skirt was above my knee from falling... and he cursed me. Let me die there like vermin, when perhaps he could have saved me. He could at least have stopped and blessed me.’

‘So you haunt his church?’

‘I don’t think it was such a direct decision... but yes, the injustice drew me like poison drawn by a poultice. I died alone. I lay there on the street for hours while I bled into the cobbles. The smog like a blanket around me, I could hear people pass occasionally, laughing... but I couldn’t see them and could not call out to them. So I died there.’

Dani feels Ruth's words nuzzle into her bones like a cat worming its way into a warm spot. She is right... it is so lonely being dead. And exhausting – never resting or sleeping, like a shark always on the move. Alone. Dani had lived with her father for 12 years. Just the two of them when her mother finally gave up the ghost of their marriage and left him. That was when Dani returned to give them both someone to talk to. It had saved them both from lunacy – the company. During the day they talked and went for walks, sometimes even to the cinema. Silver screen for old people, cheap ticket and free biscuits, ghosts don't need to pay at all. She enjoyed it, loved her father's company... until the night came. Then he would sleep his nightmare strewn, fragmented nights of sleep... and while he slept she thought she would go mad. Too many lonely hours to think. He left the radio on for her but often it was mindless bigots arguing into the night – not always the sanest people up and ranting at 3 a.m. And she couldn't change the channel... can't do much of anything, not when you are dead.

Slowly she pulls herself out from her own thoughts and back to Ruth.

'But why are you here, in the observatory.'

'Ahhhh, the observatory. I love it here. This was so much a part of my life.'

'You worked here?'

'Not quite. I sold time.'

'I don't–'

Ruth stretches her fingers out to Dani and... they are back in Ruth's memory again, but not in the London fog. Now they look down on the observatory as a woman sits and drinks tea with an official.

'That is the porter, a most pleasant man, always highly professional.'

'The woman is you.' Dani recognizes her from before.

'It is a Monday and so I am at the observatory – my work.'

'What did you do there?'

'I collected time.' Dani scowls. 'I am sorry my child, I forget that your world is so different to the one I knew. In my day there was no radio signal beaming the correct time into people's houses – the observatory housed the only clock in London that was accurate. Greenwich literally *kept time* and the clock-makers of the city had to come here to set the clocks they made.'

'That sounds crazy.'

‘Certainly was a waste of a lot of talented people’s time. Until I came up with a solution... I would go to the observatory every week.’

‘On the Monday.’

‘Exactly, I would bring a good quality chronometer here and set the time – which would be verified by the porter, Mr Cristian.’

‘Over a cup of tea.’

‘And sometimes cake.’ Dani cannot see her face but she hears the smile in her voice. ‘Then he would sign and date a certificate to verify I had the correct time. Then I would walk back into the city and go from clock-maker to clock-maker selling them the time.’

‘That’s clever.’

‘It was an elegant solution. I had almost fifty customers who subscribed to my service. It was quite a thriving business – especially for a woman to run alone.’

‘And you saw each customer–’

‘Every week.’ She pauses and Dani hears a clatter in her throat. ‘Each week for twelve years – I built up from just one customer. Then *he* stopped me in the street one day.’

‘Harris?’

Dani feels her shiver.

‘”William W Harris”. It was written on the card he handed me.’

‘What did he want?’

‘He wanted me to pay him protection money. He told me that I should be *careful*, a slight thing like me walking all over the city for days on end... “*you could get hurt*”, he said.’

‘What did you tell him?’

‘I told him to jump in the river.’

‘That was brave.’

‘Was it... a month later, when the fog was as thick as smoke, he killed me. He took everything I had, put an employee of his in the job, the man with the dandruff shoulders. Of course on the Monday my lovely Mr. Cristian was shocked when somebody new came. He refused to give them the time and...’

Dani feels her pain. ‘They hurt him didn’t they.’

‘Very badly. I watched.’

And before Dani's eyes she sees time speed up and the man in a small rounded hat approach the observatory gate and knock. The porter answers and there is a heated debate before the man pulls a knife and—

Dark steals everything away once more. The two of them are back, in the present, in the black once more.

‘He took his eye. Poor Mr Cristian, blind in one eye. After that I could not come here for more than fifty years. Too long.’

‘What made you come back?’

‘They tore down my church – the church I was mad in. They built a bank, I suppose another form of sacrosanct building, on top of my church. I could not haunt a bank. Too vulgar.’

‘So you returned here?’

‘Everything I knew was gone. No family any more – London was being rebuilt and little remained... except the Observatory. My anchor in a fast changing world.’

In the darkness, Dani nods her head, understanding the dread of seeing the world mature around you, while you stand still, unable to participate. A dinosaur.

‘You asked for my help.’

There is silence for the longest time and then they slide again... into the past.

The fog is cold and... Dani is amazed to feel again. Her skin can sense the air is wet and her clothes dampen and cling to her, the fog wraps itself around her body and its tendrils force their way into her nose and mouth – there is the smell of decay and rot – she gags.

‘You will soon get used to it. It was disgusting back then.’

‘How can I feel anything.’

‘You are in my thoughts, you experience the physical through me. I am sorry.’

‘Why are you sor—’

The blade slides into her like a hot knife into butter. Dani feels her stomach rip apart, his breath is on her – rancid. The teeth are brown and broken. William W Harris smiles and then his hand is at her throat, crushing her windpipe so she cannot call out. It won't kill her, no the stomach wound will do that... slowly.

‘You should have done what I said. Stupid girl.’ And he lets her fall to the ground.

Dani feels herself strike the cobbles so hard she chips a tooth. God it hurts. She clutches her stomach, she can feel the blood in them, it is warm. Her breath is cold steam that mixes with the fog in an instant, she thinks she sees her father’s face in the cloud... just for a moment. Her stomach is numbing, getting cold – even though the blood is so warm in her hands. She puts pressure there to stem the flow... ‘Oh sweet Jesus.’ She feels her body spasm. Shock. She can hear voices close by, she opens her mouth to call out but there is nothing in there, she can only rattle and rasp.

‘I am sorry my dear.’ Ruth tells her and she feels a warm hand on her forehead. Dani looks up and sees... herself. She looks down and Ruth lays there – young and pretty and bleeding to death.

‘Help. Help me. Help.’ Dani screams at the top of her voice. ‘A woman needs help.’

A figure comes out of the fog.

‘Thank god you heard me, this woman needs–’

‘Whore.’ The priest spits at Ruth and walks on.

Dani goes to grab at him, full of anger, but her hand turns to smoke as she touches him. ‘He can’t hear me or see me.’ Dani realizes. ‘I’m a ghost of a ghost.’

‘Please help me.’ Ruth croaks so softly that Dani can barely hear her.

‘I can’t help you Ruth. I can’t get help.’

‘I don’t want to die alone.’

‘Oh.’ Dani stretches out her fingers and takes Ruth’s hand. She can help after all ‘You don’t need to die alone.’ She tells the old, old ghost.

The two women are back. February 6th 2014. For Dani it feels like she has sat with Ruth for many hours, holding her hand and telling stories while her life washed away. Now she sits in the dark with the gossamer shadow of the woman, 150 years later.

‘I died alone all those years ago... died slowly. No-one should have to face the oncoming darkness alone.’ The voice croaks in little more than a whisper.

‘No,’ Dani agrees and she leans down and slides her hand under the shadow and picks her up. Then she walks her through the wall and out into the air of Greenwich Park. There is a mist coming through the trees as the night is about to give way to morning. The ground is muddy and the air damp – but it is not actually raining

now, a brief respite. Dani carries Ruth to a bench and they sit on it together. Ruth sighs.

‘I have been in the dark for decades.’

‘I am sorry for that. We need to air ourselves out as often as we can.’

On the horizon there is a smudge of colour, a yellow and orange tint to the far hill. The air is suddenly filled with birdsong, as rays of light start to crawl over the land. Dani imagines she can feel the first ray touch her face, warming her.

‘Isn’t this wonderful,’ she asks Ruth. ‘Isn’t this life?’ She looks across the bench. It is empty. Ruth is gone, burned to nothing. Dani sits alone in the sun. ‘Goodbye Ruth,’ she whispers after a while, as she watches the sun try to claw its way up into the heavens as the anniversary of her own death begins.