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TO BE HAUNTED: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

By

Kallye Virginia Smith

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford, MS

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Approved By

Advisor: Professor Chris
Offutt

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Reader: Dr. Annette Trefzer

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DEDICATION

To my ghost because you have haunted me for so long that I don't know what I'd do without you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I just want to start this by giving a big thank you to my advisor, Prof. Chris Offutt, as well as Prof. Dustin Parsons and Dr. Annette Trefzer, my second and third readers, for taking the time to read this short collection.

I'd like to thank all of my peers that read the pieces in this collection, from friends such as Madison Hamilton and Kylie Rogers, to the Spring 2021 ENG 401 Fiction Workshop class. It's thanks to you that this collection is possible.

Thank you to my parents, Lavonda Lichte and Bill Smith. I wouldn't have made it as far as I have without the encouragement (and the gas money).

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ABSTRACT

KALLYE VIRGINIA SMITH: *To Be Haunted: A Collection of Short Stories* (Under the direction of Chris Offutt)

This thesis is a work of collected pieces of fiction that seek to explore what it means to be haunted. By exploring the concept of ghosts, the pieces in this collection attempt to take a fresh approach to the traditional paranormal story.

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Introduction

From a very young age, I was fascinated with ghosts. My grandmother has told me, several times, that I used to tell her that I saw her mother. It's important to note, here, that her mother died several years before I was born. I was a child when I started seeing my first ghost, I guess, and I've been seeing them ever since.

The first story that I ever enjoyed reading was a ghost story. Before that point in my life, I said, "Absolutely not" to books. I wanted nothing to do with them. Let me go play in the grass or watch Scooby Doo. I didn't want anything to do with books. But then I found one, and it was like my brain said, "There you are. I've been waiting for you for so long." It was like a bomb went off in my brain, and I had to consume everything else that I read. One little ghost story (*The Old Willis Place* by Mary Downing Hahn) changed everything for me. It was from reading that I eventually started writing. It was from writing my own short, shitty snippets of ghost stories that I ended up here.

This collection is a short one, just three stories. However, with each story, I try to do something fresh with the way that ghost stories are told. Now, this isn't the easiest feat; ghost stories have been told over and over again. What you see is what you get. But I like to believe that no two hauntings are the same. Each ghost was once a person, if you believe in that kind of thing, and so each person has a different story to tell. I simply tried to capture three of these stories as well as I could. The key, I think, to capturing a ghost story, is to tell a story about a ghost, not from a perspective of the ghost, though I do blur these lines a bit in the last story.

The first story, “Wine Stains on the Table Cloth,” is a third person, past tense, story from the perspective of a waitress named Jo who gets caught up in the story of the young woman that is haunting the restaurant that she works at. The ghost, Anne Brewster, is heartbroken and sad. When she interacts with Jo, it’s as if she’s not interacting with Jo at all. Instead, Anne is, like the good actress she’d been in life, reciting lines, never properly able to stray from the script of her life, despite what Jo asks her. Jo cannot get proper answers from a ghost because Anne Brewster has no agency to provide these answers.

Anne Brewster is a ghost that is stuck firmly in the past. All of her dialogue is something that she would have said to the waitress that served her on the night that she died. She has to “live” the night of her death over and over again, from start to finish, from the time she is enjoying her dinner to the time that her fiancé leaves her at the table crying by herself. She isn’t a cruel ghost. She doesn’t bother anyone. She just exist, living the worst and last night of her life over and over again, and there’s nothing that could break her from that. Even Jo’s sympathies at the end are just that: sympathies for a ghost.

I got the inspiration for this story from Taylor Swift’s “right where you left me,” which is the song about a narrator who gets left at a restaurant forever and never moves on. I heard it, and I couldn’t help but think that it sounds like a ghost story. Ghosts can’t move on. They never move on. They’re just trapped wherever and however they died. Sure, some ghosts move, or they haunt people, as I write about in my next piece, but I think that some of them just relive their situations over and over again. They don’t bother anyone, but they’re stuck. In the end, for me, a ghost story isn’t about horror; it’s about tragedy. There is something so tragic about being stuck somewhere, living or dead.

This second story in this collection, “Possessive Behavior,” is told from first person and goes between present and past tense as the narrator, Stevie, tells the story of the ghost in her apartment. She met her ghost while in a coffee shop, and the ghost, once realizing that she could be seen, decided to take over Stevie’s life. Possessions are a staple with ghosts, though it is also a staple with demons. The thought of losing one’s agency to another force is terrifying. It’s not unlike a bad relationship where a romantic partner takes complete control of your life.

Stevie has to not only deal with a malevolent presence that is actively pursuing her, but she’s also under a lot of stress. She’s a college student dealing with finals, and she hasn’t slept properly in weeks. She really just wants a nap. However, an eternal one isn’t quite the nap that she’s looking for. After telling how she ended up in this situation, Stevie has to literally confront the ghost that would do nothing more than take over Stevie’s entire world if she was only given a chance. The ghost here has no name, she has no life before she met Stevie. Unlike Anne Brewster, whose tragedy was that she couldn’t leave her past, the tragedy, to me, with this ghost is that she is forced to be in the present but unable to participate until she meets Stevie and shoots her shot at life.

“Possessive Behavior” was inspired by my own lack of sleep. For my last semester in college, I’ve been developing and suffering from insomnia, which only seems to get worse as time goes on. I cannot say how many times I’ve told my friends that I would “kill” or “die” for some sleep. Then I thought about it. Would I really die for sleep? What is death if not a permanent sleep? But, no, I would not. This story was also inspired by really shitty relationships, romantic or platonic, where the person that you are with wants every single part of you for themselves, and you have to find the place where

you draw your salt circle on the floor and say, “No! What right do you have to my body?”

The third and final story in this collection, “The Queen of Ghosts,” is a third person, present tense story. The story’s narrator seems to ride on the back of a teenage girl, the queen of ghosts, as she rides through town, and it pops the reader into the heads of the people that she encounters. Each of the people who encounter this girl all have varying yet similar thoughts about her: she’s strange, she’s sad, and she’s meant to be pitied because her parents were taken from her when she was young. The town itself (the buildings and cars and doorways where people linger) don’t seem to enjoy the girl’s presence quite so much. The town sees the girl as strange and foreign. However, the land accepts her, and the land loves her. The land reveres her as the queen of ghosts.

The question of how a living girl becomes the queen of ghosts is only alluded to in the story, but this is a story about sacrifice. It is about giving back to the land from which we all came. It’s so hard for us to do now because people these days, when they die, fill their bodies with preservatives and place them in titanium boxes, but the land provides nourishment for us our entire lives. Should we not provide nourishment for it with our deaths. This is something that the queen of ghosts seems to understand as she offers things to the land at the end of the story, and, in return, she is given a title and a crown.

I got the inspiration for this story from a creepy dream, to be quite frank. The image of a young girl with a crown made of antlers and twigs holding a heart in her hands while spirits danced around her is a fascinating image, if a disturbing one. I wanted to know more about her because little girls have lives, right? They have people looking over

them. They have places that they can't go on their own. But I thought about what might happen if she didn't have people constantly monitoring her, or, if she did, it was out of sympathy, not fear for all the weird shit she got up to. A sort of "she's just expressing her trauma" and "kids will be kids" mentality. I also wanted her to be unwelcome, perhaps not by the towns people but by places where people lived. She's a queen of ghosts; she can't be welcome in living spaces. This is a story about sacrifice, but it's also a story about the lengths that small town people will go to ignore the weird in their lives.

I could explain these stories for pages and pages, but that does no good unless the stories are read and appreciated for themselves. So, without further fanfare, I present my collection of short stories.

Wine Stains on the Table Cloth

“I cause no harm, mind my business. / if my love died young I can’t bear witness...”

“right where you left me,” Taylor Swift

It was near enough to closing at Russo’s Fine Italian Restaurant that Jo shouldn’t have been on a smoke break, but there she was, leaning out the back door with half a cigarette between her lips as she breathed in, breathed out.

“Yo, you better not be smokin’ in my kitchen!” the cook called out.

“I’m not!” Jo said, throwing the cig on the ground and stomping it beneath her shoe. “Jesus, I’m—”

Izzy, one of the other waitresses, bumped into Jo’s shoulder. “—About to get in trouble if you don’t get off your ass.”

“I’m not even on my ass,” Jo said. She shut the door, fixing her hair a bit and adjusting her shirt. She followed Izzy through the rest of the kitchen, towards the register. Izzy began printing out the receipt for Jo’s table.

“It’s too close to closing,” Izzy said. “There’s still a table in your section. Sooner *you* get this done, sooner *we* all get to leave.”

“Fuck off. My table just started their meal.”

“Language, peaches. And we’re about to fucking close. Send them the check, say, ‘Oh, we ain’t rushing you or nothing, just wanted to go ahead and give this to y’all’s table is all.’”

“I don’t talk like that.” Jo didn’t think her accent was that pronounced.

Izzy picked a bill holder off the counter, put the receipt inside, and shoved it towards Jo's chest. "Sure, sweetheart. Go. And make sure the other tables in your section look good. *My* section's completely empty."

Jo went. She walked out into the main floor of the restaurant, a smile on her face, and went over to the nice, elderly couple. They were actually almost done with their meal, and Jo had barely set the check on the bill holder down before the man was already pulling out his wallet.

"Keep the change, dear," his wife said.

The couple got up, and Jo looked at the money, eyes widening. A hundred dollars to cover a seventy-dollar meal meant that she got a nice thirty-dollar tip, which, yeah, she'd take that. Thank you very much.

She started gathering up the plates when she saw a young woman sitting alone in the corner booth in Izzy's section. Jo smiled, feeling validated. Now who still had someone in their section, asshole? The smile left, though, as she took in the woman's appearance. Her makeup was smudged around the eyes. Her hair was falling out of her carefully pinned updo. She looked sad and lonely, so Jo took a deep breath and headed over to the woman's table.

"Ma'am?" she asked. The closer she got, the worse she looked. Jo flinched. Black tears trailing down the woman's face. Clearly, she'd never heard of waterproof mascara. There was a full glass of wine on the table in front of her. "You doing alright over here?"

The woman didn't look up right away, didn't really seem to hear Jo at all. She stared out the window beside her, looking out into the night. Jo tried to follow her gaze, but there was nothing to see.

“Ma’am?” Jo asked again.

This time, the woman looked at her with her glassy eyes that didn’t seem to see Jo at all. “Hm?”

“I was just—I was checking on you. We’re about to close, and did your waitress ever give you the check?”

“No, no, darling, I’m quite all right. I’m just waiting on my fiancé. He left but should be back in only a moment. We were having a very serious conversation.”

“Well, we’re about to close. Maybe he went outside?”

“I’m fine waiting right here, thank you.”

“That’s not—We’re about to *close*. Why don’t I bring you your check?”

“I said I’m *fine*, but thank you!” The woman tugged on the table cloth, and the glass of wine toppled over, red wine spilling like blood. It soaked through the white of the cloth and started dripping to the floor.

Jo jumped away, the plates in her hand teetering, about to fall and add to the mess before she steadied them. “I’ll get something to clean this.” She said and walked away, saying “shit, fuck, shit” under her breath. She went to the kitchen and grabbed a cloth and glared at Izzy, who was chatting with a few of the other wait staff.

Izzy raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“You had the nerve to get on my ass about having customers when you’ve still got a crazy lady in your section, and now I gotta go clean your mess.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“The woman in the corner booth. She spilled her wine and won’t leave.”

The staff around Izzy looked at Jo. Izzy said, “There’s no one in the corner booth.”

“Yeah, yeah there is,” Jo said. “Woman, about my age, dressed real nice but kind of a mess. Said she came in with a fiancé or something.”

“We don’t sit anyone at the corner booth.”

“Well go out there and look, why don’t you? If she’s gone, she left a damn mess. Spilled her wine and everything.”

“We don’t sit anyone in the corner booth, Jo.” That was the first time since Jo started working there that Izzy had actually called her by her name.

The hostess for the night, shook her head. “Iz’s right. We don’t sit anyone there. It’s not even on my seating chart.”

“Well, okay, but there’s someone sitting there now,” Jo said. She went to the kitchen door and walked out. Heading towards the table.

The table was empty. The woman was gone, and so was the wine glass, the stain, as if it had never happened at all. The table cloth was pristine. Jo backed into the kitchen. “What? What?”

“Nobody sits at the corner booth,” Izzy said. She patted Jo on the shoulder. Everyone else was packing up, getting ready to close down for the night.

Jo asked, “Well, why the hell not?”

Izzy said, “Because a lady died there.”

When coming in the next day for her lunch shift, the first thing Jo got confirmed was that the lady didn’t die in the booth. There was a young woman that died in Russo’s bathroom, and the corner booth was the last place that she’d eaten. Rumor was that

people started seeing weird things, hearing weird things, and weird things were considered bad for business, so they took the table off the seating chart. Besides, that was more respectful, right? It was good to reserve tables for ghosts.

Jo wasn't really sure if she even believed in ghosts. Maybe she'd just imagined the woman sitting at the table, a combination of a lack of sleep and the fact that she wasn't settling in to life in a city hundreds of miles from where she grew up. All she did was go to work and sleep. Jo moved because she was tired of the small-town life; she wanted a change. Change, apparently, was working in an Italian restaurant and hallucinating in between smoke breaks. She was living the dream, really.

"So the woman died in the bathroom," Jo said one night, a cig in one hand.

Meredith, another waitress, one who was a lot nicer than Izzy, was with her just outside the back door. She wasn't smoking, though every time she exhaled, condensation poured out of her nose as thick as the smoke that Jo blew out of her mouth. Meredith said, "Yeah. Don't know which stall, though. Maybe they should've blocked that off, too."

"Did she choke on something? Have a heart attack?"

"Oh, my God, Jo. She killed herself. Why would anyone make such a big deal if she'd had a heart attack? She killed herself."

"What? How? Why?"

"I don't know? Why the hell does anyone kill themselves?" Meredith got up, leaving Jo with her cigarette and her thoughts. Eventually, she snuffed it out and walked back inside.

The rest of the week, Jo asked as many people on the staff all that she could why the woman killed herself, how she killed herself.

One of the busboys, said, “She was some Broadway actress that got off her meds and went full-on psycho in the bathroom.”

The hostess said, “I heard her fiancé brought another woman to dinner, and she caught them.”

The guy they seemed to pay to just take out the trash and smoke weed next to the dumpsters said, “I think that boyfriend of hers, like, drugged her up and killed her himself so he could get with his new girl.”

Izzy said, “Definitely heard that she broke a wine glass and took one of the pieces in the bathroom with her. Peaches, can you take this plate to table 34? My hands are literally fucking full...”

Finally Jo asked Benny, the older cook who had been working at Russo’s for years, what he knew. If anyone knew the truth, it would be Benny. The lunch rush had ended, and most of them were just waiting around for the shift change, or for the after-work crowd to come.

Benny said, “The owners, I worked here when their parents were still running the place, right? They were here when it happened. Back in the 50s, forever ago and then some. Woman’s fiancé broke up with her, apparently, left her at the table crying, was real sad. She stayed all night, just sitting there, and then, before closing, she just got up, went to the bathroom, didn’t come back out. An overdose on whatever she had in her purse, I think. Kinda morbid, huh?”

“I was just curious,” Jo said.

“Huh.”

“What?”

“Weird thing to be curious about. We already got a damn table for her. No need to keep bringing up ghosts.”

Jo didn't see the woman for the rest of the week, but, then again, Jo didn't have any closing shifts for the rest of the week. Every day, she went back to her tiny apartment, and every day, she was forced to face the fact that she didn't know what the hell she was doing with her life. This was supposed to be an escape, coming to a new city, starting a new life and leaving the old one behind. She felt like she was stuck, though. Maybe she needed to stop reminding herself of her old life. The pictures on her bedside table didn't help. Neither did the saved messages on her phone from a boy who hadn't even had it in him to break up with her in person.

Jo was supposed to be doing something with her life, moving on some stupid guy and breaking free from the small town mold she'd been stuck in, but what the hell was she supposed to do to break free? And now she was apparently seeing ghosts.

One ghost, she told herself. One ghost that she'd only seen once, which didn't mean anything. It was fine. She just needed to sleep, and then maybe she could look for a job, something better than a waitressing job at a “haunted” Italian restaurant. Something fun, like playing guitar in a band. Her daddy always told her she played real well. Jo sat on her bed. She needed to sleep. She had a closing shift the next day.

Jo pulled back the covers and crawled into her bed. She had a feeling her alarm, even though it was set to noon, would still go off far too soon.

The next day, the woman was sitting in the booth again during Jo's entire shift, constantly hanging out in the corner of Jo's eye. She didn't move, didn't say anything, and the only clue that Jo received of the steady progress through the night was the deterioration of the woman's appearance. She started out looking pristine and put together, animatedly talking and laughing with no one. Then her makeup started running down her face, strands of her hair came undone, and she looked absolutely miserable.

She wasn't real. That was what Jo told herself. The woman wasn't real.

Except Jo didn't know that for sure, did she

At the end of the night, as everyone was leaving, Jo pretended to walk out with Izzy. "I'm gonna smoke real quick. I'll see you tomorrow."

Izzy said, "You sure? Someone can wait for you."

"Yeah, I'll be fine. I don't live far."

"You got a nasty case of RBF, too. Doubt anyone's gonna mess with you."

"Gee, thanks."

Jo circled back in before the last person locked up and waited in the bathroom until everyone was gone. She looked around. Things were always so different in the dark.

There was no ghost in there, in the kitchen. Of course, there was no ghost in there. There was just a figment of her imagination that didn't even have a name. She probably heard about the woman that died in the restaurant before anyone ever said anything, probably just imagined everything. Plus, she needed to leave. She could get in trouble for staying around like this. Once the back door was locked, people weren't supposed to be inside.

Jo walked into the main dining room, anyway, flicking the dim lights on.

The woman was still sitting there, her shoulders hunched.

“Ma’am?” Jo asked.

The woman didn’t answer. She didn’t even look up.

“Are you real, or am I just fucking talking to myself?”

The woman said, “I’m fine, dear. I’m waiting on my fiancé to come back. He stepped outside for a moment.”

“Who are you?”

“No, thank you.”

“Who was your fiancé?”

The woman looked up at Jo, and it was almost like she could see her. “He should be right back.”

“What’s your name?”

The woman looked away. “I’m fine waiting here, thank you.”

“What is your name?”

“I said I’m fine, thank you!” The woman stood up, knocking into the table, spilling a glass of wine that Jo didn’t even notice. Then, the woman looked at Jo, tears streaming down her blotchy face. She reached a hand out, grabbing at Jo. “I’m fine! I’m fine! I’m fine!”

Jo jerked away. The woman’s fingers felt like ice. The most surprising part was that the woman didn’t go straight through her. She was solid. She was real. That didn’t matter, though, it didn’t matter. Jo stumbled over her feet in her haste to get away from the woman, the restaurant. She left the lights on in the main dining room but went out

through the front door, praying that an alarm didn't go off. It didn't, and she heard an automatic lock slip into place on her way out.

When she got back to her apartment, Jo threw her stuff down and immediately went to the shower, turning the water up as hot as it would go. The water was so hot that her skin was pink by the time that she got out.

It didn't matter. Jo went to bed shivering.

The next day, when she went into work, Jo made a beeline for where Benny was working on the grill. She said, "Hey, Benny, how's it going?"

Benny didn't look up from what he was doing. "What you want, Joey?"

"Just Jo's fine. I was wondering if you knew what that woman's name was."

"What woman?"

"The woman. The one that died."

"More morbid shit, huh?"

"Do you know her name?"

"Anne Something. Some rising Broadway star," Benny said.

That was all Jo needed. She finished up her shift like she was on autopilot, going through the motions enough to make sure she got tipped. When she went back to her apartment that night, she found what she was looking for. "Anne Brewster, 27, Dies in Russo's." Google was a damn gift. All she had to do was type it in. Anne had apparently been in a production of *Singin' in the Rain*. There were all kinds of reviews about her lovely voice. She would have been a star.

There was, briefly, suspicion of foul play by her fiancé, Daniel Overton, the member of a wealthy banking family, but that was all cast aside pretty quickly. Anne's

true murderer was a bottle of Percodan with a prescription in her name. It was sad. It was tragic. It wasn't a crime.

Daniel was still alive, still lived in the city. It didn't take Jo long to find his address. Really, if she wanted to, she'd be a damn good private investigator. Then again, so would anyone else with basic knowhow of the internet.

On her next day off, Jo took the bus out to Daniel's neighborhood, not really knowing what to expect. Daniel Overton was *old*, practically ancient at this point. And what could she say, anyway? Hey, I'm really sorry to bother you, but the ghost of the woman whose heart you broke keeps appearing around me and it's kind of wiggling me out? How would that go over?

Jo checked the address that she'd scrawled onto her hand against the townhouse that was in front of her. She was at the right place. Walking forward, Jo knocked on the door, fully expecting an old man to answer it.

Instead, a middle-aged woman answered. "Hello?"

Jo was a bit blindsided, for a moment. "Is this Daniel Overton's house?"

"Who's asking?" The woman looked at Jo, her eyes narrowed just a bit. "You another one of his kid? I mean, you're a bit young, but Dad rarely surprises me anymore."

"What? No, I just wanted to ask him a few questions."

"So who the hell are you?"

"I'm—I'm a banking student, and your family's awful important, and I just wanted to ask him a few questions," Jo said, stumbling over her words.

Still, the woman seemed to buy it. Not really hook, line, and sinker, but it was enough. She turned back into the house. “Dad! Some student’s here to talk to you about work! Come on in, kid, sit in the parlor or something. Your feet clean? Don’t track snow anywhere.”

Jo followed the woman, knocking the bits of snow on her boots off onto the steps before she headed inside. The townhouse was nice, a solid two story structure with plenty of room. Real nice, so much nicer than the closet Jo lived in. She unbuttoned her coat as the warm air hit her. Must be nice to have heating that worked all the time.

Daniel Overton came down the steps. He wasn’t a large man in the pictures that she’d found online, and age seemed to only shrink him more. He walked into the parlor, a frown on his face. He and his daughter looked similar in that regard. She headed back upstairs.

“You want to talk banking,” Daniel

Jo said, “No, not at all.”

Daniel’s eyebrows raised. He didn’t seem to be expecting that.

“I was hoping you could tell me what happened. With Anne Brewster, at Russo’s.”

“I haven’t heard that name in quite some time.”

She wanted to just jump right into this. “Sure, but you have heard it, and you can’t deny it because your name’s all over the papers about it. You were there, you know what happened. I just want to know what happened. I work there. I just want to know what happened.”

Daniel's frown got deeper, if it was possible. It was hard to tell with all the wrinkles. "I wasn't there. I didn't see it happen."

"Why? Why did she--"

"Kill herself? Little girl, she was crazy. She was crazy, and she was looking for any reason to snap."

"I don't believe that."

"And I don't care what you believe. It was the truth," Daniel said.

"What did you say to her?"

"Nothing at all."

"You upset her, didn't you? And you said something she couldn't handle, and you told her you'd be back, but you didn't go back."

"How do you know that?" Daniel moved closer, his frail hands shaking. Jo was almost scared of him. "I never— How do you know that?"

"What did you say, Mr. Overton?"

"I told her I found someone else. I found someone, and I didn't want to be with her anymore, didn't want to deal with her mood swings anymore."

"You're apparently very good at finding other people. Your daughter thought I was your kid or something."

Daniel said, "Don't act like you know anything. You don't know what it was like to live with that woman."

"I know she didn't deserve to be cheated on. I know she didn't deserve to be left alone, crying in a restaurant." Jo knew that Anne Brewster didn't deserve to *still* be crying in a restaurant, almost seventy years later.

Daniel Overton was old, too old to change his thoughts, his ways, his actions. Much the same as the ghost of Anne Brewster could not change her ways and actions. Jo got up and, with all of the good breeding that was left in her, said, “Thank you for speaking with me, Mr. Overton. Have a good day. I’ll see myself out.”

“Little girl, why are you dredging up ghosts?” Daniel said, and he wrapped his frail, boney hand around Jo’s wrist. But his grip was weak, and it was nothing compared to Anne’s.

Jo pulled away and said, “Because ghosts dredge themselves up.” She walked out of the house with Daniel Overton calling after her, and she heard him, but she didn’t care. She wondered if this was the first time in his life that someone walked away from him instead of the other way around.

The next day, when her shift came, Jo was ready. She poured a glass of wine and took it out to Anne Brewster’s table.

She got to the table and said, “Ms. Brewster? I brought you another glass. I’m a big fan.”

The ghost of Anne Brewster looked up, almost seeing Jo for the first time. “Oh, why, thank you! I really don’t need one. I’m just waiting on my fiancé. He just stepped outside for a moment.”

“Sure. Is there anything else I can get you?”

“No, thank you, darling. I’m quite all right.”

Anne was so young. Her hair was still fixed. There were no tear tracks ruining her makeup. She looked the way she usually did at the beginning of the night, all it took was

a bit of kindness. She picked up the wine glass, and it trembled, spilling a few drops of wine. “Oh, damn! I’m terribly sorry.”

Jo said, “It’s all right! It’s all right! I’ll clean it up.”

Anne seemed to relax. “Terribly sorry. I’m usually not such a klutz.”

“I’ve got it, don’t worry.” Jo started heading away before she stopped and put her hand on Anne’s freezing one. It was about as bad as touching dry ice, but Jo refused to pull away. “Anne? You deserve better.”

“Hm?”

“You deserve so much better.”

“Oh. Well, I—Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

Jo went back to the kitchen, only to be stopped by Izzy.

Izzy said, “What the hell are you doing?”

“I just brought a glass of wine to the corner table?”

“Do spirits like wine, ghost whisperer?”

“I don’t see why they wouldn’t.” Jo grabbed a wet cloth and walked back out into the main dining area.

Anne Brewster was gone. The wine glass and the stain remained on the table cloth.

Possessive Behavior

There's a ghost in my apartment. We've been watching each other for about an hour now, neither of us moving, and I'm getting a little worried. She just walked through the locked door and made herself at home, and I don't know how to get rid of her at this point.

The first time I saw her was in the coffee shop while studying for an exam. It was almost closing. She was sitting a few tables away. We were the only two people there. She stared at me, and, okay, it was really uncomfortable. You know how, when people stare at you, you've always got that subconscious desire to pick at your teeth or check your clothes to make sure you don't have anything weird going on? That's how I felt, but, like, magnified.

But I never said anything to her while we were sitting there. I just dealt with the staring and tried to focus on the pages upon pages of historical nonsense in front of me for an essay on Napoleon. I was so tired. I hadn't been able to sleep properly in weeks, and, honestly, I was to the point where I'd die for a break, for some peace and quiet.

Isaac, the barista, had called out to me, "Hey, Stevie, you want another cup of coffee before I shut down the machine for the night?" This was Isaac's really nice way of saying, "It's time for you to get out of here, girl."

"Yeah, I'll take one for the road, thanks." And I started packing up my stuff. The other person continued to sit at her table, leaned back, comfortable. She wasn't in a hurry. We made eye contact, and you know how they say people's eyes light up when they see something that's just really interesting to them? Her eyes lit up when I stared back at her, like she wasn't expecting it, like it was a treat.

She got up and walked to the door. I got up and paid for my to-go cup. I never heard her leave, but she was out the building by the time I turned around. I walked out and headed towards my apartment. I felt like I was being followed.

It should be noted that, when in situations like this, where you feel like you're being followed, and you're all alone, the smart thing to do would be to pull out your phone, dial a friend, and talk to someone the whole way to your next location. It's probably not wise to turn around and confront the source of whatever's giving you those heebie-jeebie feelings.

I turned around. "Hello?"

It was the woman from the coffee shop, not too far behind me. I stopped, she kept walking until she was in front of me. She smiled and said, "Hello?"

"Why are you following me? Why have you been staring at me? It's rude to stare, you know. I mean, clearly you know. Everyone knows that. Or, well, most people know that. Some might not. I don't want to assume that everyone knows something."

"You talk a lot, don't you?"

Mostly when I was nervous. "Why are you following me?"

She cocked her head to the side, like a dog. She looked strange, and I don't mean that in an offensive way or anything. She was kind of average looking, but it was like she wasn't quite there, physically. Her eyes were odd. She said, "You can see me."

"I think that's a given, yes, since we're having this conversation."

"Not everyone can see me."

"Okay... Are you on drugs?" That was what made the most sense, right? People didn't just believe that they couldn't be seen. That just wasn't a thing that people believed.

"I wish," she said, and she smiled at me so happily.

"Okay, yeah, I've got to go. Stop following me or I'm calling the cops, understood?" I pulled out my phone to show her that I was serious.

"Go?"

"Yeah. I've got a paper to finish. I don't have time to talk to some nut who thinks people can't see her." I turned around, and there she was, standing in front of me. I looked back to where she should have been, no one. She was somehow in front of me. "What?"

“Where are you going?”

“What?”

“I just want to talk. You can see me.”

Yes, I nodded my head. I thought this was a given fact. But by that point, I was starting to wonder. “I can see you.”

“You can see me.”

“We’ve established this, right?” Right? She seemed almost see through. Her hair didn’t move with the breeze. You know, it would make sense if she wasn’t real, it really would. I hadn’t slept in days because of my coursework. I’d been living off of coffee and willpower. It wouldn’t have surprised me if she wasn’t real.

“I’ve been dead for quite some time—”

“Dead?”

“—and I’m not used to people seeing me.”

“*Dead?*” I asked. This wasn’t real, I decided. I needed to sleep.

“You’re so alive,” she said, her voice quiet and awe-filled. “It’s been quite some time.”

“Dead,” I said. Dead. A ghost. Not real.

At least, I thought she wasn’t real until she reached out. I leaned away from her, but she kept walking forward, reaching forward, reaching into me. Her hand went through me, into my chest, wrapping around my heart. It was cold. It was so cold, and I wanted to scream but it was like jumping in ice water, and your breath kind of just gets taken from you, you know? No sound, no breathing, no thinking. Just a ghost, apparently, with her hand in my chest making my heart stutter its beating.

The ghost, because I was ready to acknowledge that it was indeed a ghost in front of me, wasn’t done with just wrapping her hand around my heart, and she walked forward, into me, becoming me, and I was nothing. I heard my own voice say, “Wow,” and she was me, *and I was nothing*.

I woke up in my bed with a pounding head and a wave of nausea that forced me to detangle myself from my covers and rush to the bathroom. I felt sick, too hot, like my body was being microwaved from the inside. Eventually, I'd burst open like an overheated Hot Pocket. But, once I emptied my stomach, I could attribute everything with the ghost as a stress induced delusion. This wouldn't be the first time I made myself sick due to anxiety. It just had the new added side effect of seeing things.

Face pressed into the cool porcelain of the toilet seat, I decided it was probably time to schedule an appointment with a therapist. Therapists were normal. Therapists were there to help you if you stopped sleeping and had to invent ghosts to meet in the middle of the street to make sure that you somehow ended up in your bed. Therapists were a valuable asset to society.

I was pretty resolved to schedule an appointment for the next day when I stumbled back to my room. I saw my phone on the bedside table, and I opened it. The date was all wrong. It looked like three days had passed since I last remembered, but that was impossible. There was no way that I slept for three days. I had classes that I couldn't sleep through, important lectures and meetings.

"No no no no no," I muttered, walking out of my bedroom and into my living room, trying to figure out where those lost days went. I had missed emails, missed phone calls. I could not figure out where the time went.

My apartment didn't look like it missed me, though. It looked lived in. There was food on the counter in the kitchen. My purse was on the couch, the contents spilled out. My laptop was open on the kitchen table. Nothing looked the way I left it.

My phone alarm went off. I had ten minutes to get to a meeting with one of my professors. I looked at the mess that was my life and said, "Fuck." Then, I scrambled to get dressed and rushed out of my apartment. I made it to my meeting only fifteen minutes late and just a little out of breath. "Dr. Miles Crane" was written on the door, and the door was half-opened.

I straightened my shirt before I knocked. “Dr. Crane?”

Dr. Crane in all his middle-aged, tweed-sweatered glory, looked up from his computer and smiled at me, looking shocked. “Stevie Davenport! So lovely to see you. I was growing a bit worried. You didn’t show up to class yesterday, and then I didn’t know if you’d show up for our meeting.”

“I’m so sorry. I’ve been really stressed, and I think I just crashed for a few days. May I come in?”

“Of course! Are you alright?”

“Better! I’m much better, now.” I still felt sick to my stomach, but that could be handled. I sat down at the desk, pulling a folder of papers out of my bag.

“You look a little under the weather. Should we reschedule?”

“No, no, I promise I’m fine. I’m just a bit overwhelmed, you know. School. Finals. Got to figure out my lease for next year and whether or not I’m even qualified to still be a student! It’s a lot.”

Dr. Crane leaned forward, hands resting on the desk in front of him. “Oh, Stevie. Of course. I understand. Just think, though. You’re almost done. Isn’t that exciting?”

No. It wasn’t. I smiled. “Absolutely! So, about my paper...”

Dr. Crane and I went over the progress that I’d been making on my work until I couldn’t see straight anymore. He eventually looked up at me, concern in his eyes. He was a good professor. He said, “Maybe we should stop for now. Your work looks good, you just need a bit more.”

“Okay, but look at that section on the third page, there. I have a few extra sources that might contribute—”

“Stevie,” he said, “I think we need to stop for now.”

“Sir, please, I just want to get this finished and—”

“And you’re ahead of schedule. None of your other classmates have been putting in this much work, I assure you. Now, go home, get something to eat, relax. Sleep, don’t just crash. Make an active effort to get some rest.”

I didn’t want to, but I rubbed my eyes, trying to chase away the black spots.

“Okay, okay.” I started to stand but stopped myself. “Hey, Dr. Crane? Can I ask you a, uh, personal question?”

“You can certainly ask,” he said.

“Have you ever been so stressed that you... saw things? People?”

Dr. Crane’s brow creased. “Do you mean hallucinations?”

“No!” I said. “Maybe. I don’t know. I haven’t been sleeping well, and then I was walking home the other night, and there was this woman, and she was just there, and then she wasn’t, and the next thing I know, I’m waking up in my bed today sick, so sick, and I don’t know what to do.”

I think it was the look in his eyes that made me realize that I’d given up far, far too much information. Dr. Crane said, “This sounds... serious, quite serious. And I, well, you know I’m not *that* kind of doctor.”

“I’m fine,” I said, deciding to backtrack. “I think I’m just tired.”

“Are you sure? You know, I know a few people in the psychology department. They might be able to schedule you a—”

“I said I’m fine!” Pay no mind to the fact that I’d already been planning to see a therapist. Pay no mind to the fact that I brought this subject up in the first place. I wrung

my hands. “I’m sorry. I’m fine. I’m going to handle it. I’m talking to someone tomorrow. It’s just stress.”

“You wouldn’t have brought it up if you didn’t think it was serious.”

“It’s the lack of sleep, sir. I’m afraid it’s made me horribly unprofessional.”

He doesn’t sigh, not like they do in stories, no big heaving effort, no audible sound, but I watched as he deflated a bit, shoulders hunching. “It’s fine, Ms. Davenport. Please, go home. Get some rest. Try to relax a bit, okay?”

“Okay.” I left his office without paying attention, walking through campus on autopilot. It wasn’t big, and it wasn’t that far to my apartment. I didn’t need to constantly remember where I was going, anymore; after living here for three years, I just knew. I should have paid more attention. I should have learned my lesson.

“I’ve been looking all over for you!” There she was, the hallucination, the ghost, standing there in sunlight. She looked even less tangible this way, her lack of shadow strange and the way beams of sunlight seemed to glare through her even stranger. But she was walking towards me and smiling.

“No,” I whispered, and I looked around, looked at all the people milling about, heading about their day. There was a girl texting on a bench near me, and I walked as quickly as I could to her. “Hey! Hey, can I sit here?”

The girl looked up, confused. “I mean, it’s a public bench. Sure.”

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Do you—Was there someone behind me? Did you see someone behind me?”

“No? It’s just you and me. Am I supposed to be seeing someone or something?”

The ghost was right there in front of us, watching the exchange. The girl looked right through her.

I said. “No, no. Sorry. It’s been a long day. I think I’m seeing things, people, a ghost, and it’s been a long day. It’s probably just stress. Sorry.”

“Sure. Uh, good luck with that, kay? I gotta go.” The girl stood, but looked at me and said, “Pop a Xanax. I think it’d do you a load of good.”

I reached out for her. “Wait! Wait, please don’t leave.”

She jumped away. “Yo, what the hell?”

“Please, please, tell me you can see her, she’s *right there*. Can’t you see her?”

“Dude, get some help!” But the girl looked around us once more just to be sure. She jogged away from me, clearly not seeing what I saw. The ghost took her place on the bench beside me. I refused to look at her. I was trembling.

The ghost said, “You weren’t in the apartment when I came back.”

“What did you do to me?”

“I was worried that you’d gone off and gotten hurt.”

“I feel sick. What’s wrong with me?”

“I’d hate for you to get hurt.”

I faced her, then. I said, “*What* did you do?”

“I haven’t been alive in so long. Years. It’s been years now. I forgot what it was like to feel hot and cold and drunk. I may have drunk a lot of the contents of your liquor cabinet. We’ll need to buy more booze.”

“What? We? What?”

“We. Us. You and I. You can see me, sister. This was meant to be. My brains, your body, we can go places. God, when I was alive, I planned to rule the world, you know? Well, not really. That’s a lot of work. But I wanted money, and I wanted security, and I wanted to really, *really* live, you know?” She looked at me, and her eyes looked glossed over with a thin, hazy sheen.

I scooted as far away as the bench would allow. “What’s happening?”

“I want to live again. And, through you, I can do that.”

“Why would I *let* you?”

“Because you’re miserable?”

“I’m not miserable,” I said.

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, you are. I lived in you for three days, and I looked through your computer, your phone, your life. You’re stressed and miserable, and you’re so tightly wound that it would have been hard for me to breathe even if I hadn’t kept forgetting how.”

“You forgot to breathe in my body?”

“We’re both still here, aren’t we? I got the hang of it eventually. You’re exhausted, Stevie Davenport. Let someone else take control for once.”

She reaches for me, then. And I ended up falling off the bench to get away from her. “No, no!”

“Stevie, wait, can’t we just talk this through?”

“I’m not letting you take over my body, you bitch!”

People were starting to look at us, at me because I was the only one they could see. I got to my feet and looked at the people watching me, wishing I was as invisible as

the ghost. “Sorry, sorry. I need—” What was I apologizing for? I starting making my retreat, and the ghost followed.

“Stevie.”

“Stop saying my name.”

“We can work something out.”

I laughed as I walked. I’ve never made such a shrill sound before. I’m sure it added to the “she’s definitely lost her mind” look that I was rocking. I said, “There’s nothing to work out! My body! Mine! You can’t have it!”

“Think about it. This could be a break. You let me take control, I make sure you get some sleep.”

“No!” I stopped and turned. “Go away!”

And she was gone. Like she’d never been there at all. But I knew she had, at this point. Or, at least, I was mostly confident. I mean, at that point, I thought that, if I was losing my mind, I might as well humor the notion until I could get myself some help. So, I rushed back to my apartment as fast as I could, and I turned on my computer.

Google is the hero of this story. You just type in “how to get rid of ghosts” into the search bar, and, eventually, you’ll get answers. I don’t have time to contact a priest, and I don’t have any sage, and, I’m too cheap to purchase a ghost help book. But I do own one singular salt shaker, which is apparently ghost deterrent. Not enough to line my doors and windows, so I just ended up sitting on the floor in my living room inside a salt circle, my knees pulled up to my chest.

She walked in through the door and ended up sitting in front of me, just outside the line of salt, and now there’s a ghost in my apartment. Neither of us are talking. The

salt shaker is in my shaky hands. There's not much left in it, but she hasn't attempted to come into my circle, so I feel safe.

I'm so tired, and I just want to sleep, but I can't. If I do, I don't know what she'll do. I can't trust her.

The ghost says, "Stevie."

I say, "No."

"I'm not a bad person, Stevie."

"You took over my body! You kind of are. You really kind of are a bad person!"

The ghost shakes her head. "I'm not a bad person. I'm just someone who really, really wants to be alive again. Can you really fault me on that?"

"If it means you're taking over my life, then, yes, I can *really fault you on that*," I say.

"Come on, Stevie," she says, and her voice is so soothing. I wonder if all dead people have such soothing voices. "Come on. I just want to live. And you? You just want to sleep. Let me live, and I'll let you sleep. It'll be so peaceful. You won't even know it's happening."

"No!"

"Please," the ghost says, and that's how a ghost should sound. Sad. Quiet. Mournful.

I match her tone and say, "I don't want to die."

"Let me live! Let me live! Let me *live!*" Gone is the sad woman, This one is rage incarnate, and she reaches forward, but the salt seems to work. She can't grab me. Like I said, Google is the hero in this story. Thanks, Google.

“I want to sleep, not to die!” I say. “There’s a difference!”

“You could let me live!”

“Not without giving up my sense of self!” I yell. I stand inside my salt circle, and she stands with me, pressing against it, just waiting for me to screw the circle up somehow. “You know, lady, this is really uncalled for! We just met! I don’t even know your name! Why the hell do you think you’ve got any right to my body?”

Ghosts, apparently, cannot be reasoned with because she just flings herself against my salt circle again and again, as if she expects some sort of drastic change to occur.

There isn’t one. She says, “Let me live, damn you.”

I say, “This sort of possessive behavior is really uncalled for.” Having a ghost scream at you is mentally and emotionally exhausting, I should just point out. I’m already tired. I can barely stand on my feet. I’ve got one last hurrah. I dump out the last of the salt in the shaker on the ghost’s head.

Banshees are ghosts, right? The screaming ones? Because I think this ghost might be a banshee with the way she wails as the salt touches her, and she starts to fade like steam. She floats through the ceiling, and I watch. And I wait. And I wait. I’m staying in my salt circle, but she doesn’t seem to be coming back.

When I feel safe enough. I step out of the circle cautiously. I scoop up the salt and put it back in the shaker. It’s my new best friend. It comes with me to my bedroom. I grab my phone and, on my to-do list, I add two things: 1) schedule a therapy session and 2) contact a priest about an exorcism. My apartment needs cleansing in case this ghost decides to be clingier than an ex-boyfriend. Finally, I decide to take Dr. Crane’s advice. It’s time to get some rest.

The Queen of Ghosts

It is a living girl who is the queen of ghosts. The town knows this. The people might not, but the town itself knows. The doors all shut themselves a little tighter when she passes, and every step she's ever trudged up squeaks, and she's never had a good night's sleep in a bed. Where the living dwell has never been a place for her. The town fears her. The town sees her and sees a thing that should not exist as it does. She should not exist as she does. The town tries to reveal her. Look at her and fear, it says. Cast her out. Send her back to the land.

The land itself is more hospitable. The animals keep a respectful distance, and all the trees stand at attention when she passes, and the wind goes quiet. Everything goes quiet. The wheels of her roller skates seem to glide about the gravel, and a leaf has never dared to crunch beneath her bare feet. The land is reverent. The land wants her. For all dead things must return to the earth, and a queen of ghosts with a heart still beating is fascinating indeed. She should be exalted.

The people of the town do not get this. They do not understand reverence, not like she deserves. They look at her with pity, or they simply look through her, not seeing her. But she is a living girl, not a ghost. It does not do to treat the living like they are dead.

The sheriff looks at her with pity. He was there when her house burned down. Her parents had been inside, poor thing. A neighbor said her father had carried her out and gone back in to retrieve the mother, but neither of them had come back, leaving the living girl all alone. She'd been shell-shocked, her little pigtails in disarray. The ashes from the

family's home covered her, dulled her, but her eyes had been bright and wide, and she'd just stared at the flames of her first home as the sheriff's nice lady deputy had taken her little hand and led her to go sit in the car.

For a while, there'd been suspicion of foul play, but it turns out to be much simpler. Lightning storms are an act of God, a force of nature. When they strike, there's little that can be done to avoid them.

Yes, the girl was alone, completely, not a living relative to her name. Her grandparents were all gone. Her parents had no siblings. She'd ended up staying with the sheriff and his wife for a time before a friend of the family took her in. They wanted to keep her in school with her friends.

Now, the girl, years older, skates by the sheriff as he gets out of his cop car, picking up trash from the side of the road. He's just doing his civic duty.

"Evening, kiddo. You headed home for supper?" The sheriff gives her a smile.

The girl slows a bit, moving closer to the sheriff, and, even though he doesn't think he presses the button, his car doors lock. She's a real good skater, the sheriff thinks. Even on uneven gravel, she never seems to stumble. She says, "I'm going to see my parents."

It was hard for him to keep smiling after that, especially since what was left of her parents was buried in the town's little cemetery. "You go see them often?"

"I always go visit the dead."

"Well, that's awful nice of you. I'm sure the dead appreciate visitors just as much as the living, huh?"

"Not really, no."

She still has those wide eyes. She has to be about fourteen, now, her limbs more gangly than they'd been all those years ago. Those eyes are the same, though, bright and wide. No real expression on her face. It's similar to how she'd been all covered in ash, like she's perpetually shocked. He wonders if that wide-eyed ability of hers to look through everything was just... who she was.

Poor thing. She never would get past her parents' death, would she? A tragedy like that takes more than just a few years to get over.

"Aw, now, I'm sure they appreciate it. Here, hold on." He reaches in his pocket and takes out a few dollars. "Go get some pretty flowers, huh? I bet they'll really like that."

She stares at his hand, at the money, like it's a particularly interesting snake. No fear, just a hint of disdain, a splash of curiosity. She'd step on it with her boot if it ever tried to strike her. Still, she takes the cash out of his hand and pockets it. "I appreciate that, sheriff."

"Oh, ain't nothing to it, kid. You just be careful out there, you hear? Don't be staying out too late."

The girl doesn't say anything, just starts to skate away. The sheriff shakes his head again, watching her go sadly. Poor thing.

The convenient store clerk doesn't watch her enter his shop. The only thing that makes him look back up is the way the door slams shut too heavily, but he takes one look at her and rolls his eyes. She's too young for him to pay any real attention to, to look at for more than a split second of time. His phone's a hell of a lot more interesting, anyway.

He pays her no mind as she skates through the store, though she's noisy. She bumps into shelves. She mutters curses under her breath. She struggles over trying to open a cooler. After a minute, she skids up to the counter, bumping into it.

"Watch it," the clerk says, though his eyes are still glued to his phone.

"I'd like to buy this." She puts a bottled soda on the counter, it's color sickly red. Nothing natural about it, from its color to its fizz to the very material it's made from.

The clerk thinks, at least, she's got good taste. He rings her up. "Anything else?"

"Just the drink." She hands over a crumpled-up bill from her pocket.

The clerk takes it. He finally looks at her. Oh, it's that girl, the one whose parents died a few years back. She's quite a bit younger than him, but he remembers seeing her little middle schooler face popping up every now and then his senior year. He remembers staying with a friend one night and his friend's mom bringing her up. The whole town always seems to be coddling her. He doesn't get it. People die all the time. "Here's your change," the clerk says after way too long.

The girl doesn't seem to notice the pause. Or, if she does, she simply doesn't care. "I appreciate that." She cracks open the bottle right there at the counter, the carbonation causing it to spew and splatter. Half the content of the bottle seems to spill over, coating her fingers with the red liquid. She licks it off them.

"Ah, hell." The clerk leans back as the drink started to dribble towards his lap.

"Couldn't have waited to do that shit outside?" He didn't care that she was some sort of sad town darling. Why'd she have to go and make a mess in his store?

"I didn't realize it would spill."

“Well, you wanna help me clean up? Go to the bathroom, get some paper towels. Jesus. And don’t take ten years to do it. I hate it when it gets all sticky.”

She skates away to the bathroom, one of the wheels on her skates sounding like it’s loose. She needs to get that fixed. The clerk stands up, sighing loudly. He didn’t care that she was some orphaned child that the whole town seems to think is some wounded bird. She’s a klutz, and she’s kind of rude. Who the hell doesn’t say thank you?

When she brings him some paper towels, one of them is soaking wet while the others are marginally dry. She says, “I thought the wet one could keep it from getting sticky.”

“Yeah, sure, thanks. Just make sure it doesn’t drip over my side of the counter.”

“Okay.”

They clean up the mess together, her not saying a word even when he looks up and sees her watching him. She’s got some stare-y eyes, all wide and unblinking like they are. She’s kind of a weird little girl. But, after a bit, he starts to feel bad for her. He’d probably be weird, too, if he lost his parents that young.

When they’re done, the clerk throws the sticky, red splattered paper towels into the wastebasket behind the counter. He looks at the girl as she clutches her half empty bottle a bit tighter. “You, uh, want to get another one? Since you split most of that one on my stuff?”

The girl looks at the counter, at the fact that none of his stuff wasn’t even remotely touched by the soft drink, and she shakes her head. “I’m just going to finish this outside.”

“Shouldn’t have been opening it in here in the first place,” he says.

“Of course.” She pushes herself off the counter and leaves, the door slamming shut behind her. The clerk flinches at the sound. Of course. Clumsy and loud. Maybe, if people didn’t try to coddle her all the time, she wouldn’t be so rude.

The teacher at the high school hasn’t known the girl for long, but she worries about her. The teacher came to this town only a few months ago, and she’s still learning everything, but this tragic little girl really pulls at her heartstrings. Oh, how alone she must feel in the world! How cruel it is to have everything taken from her at such a young age! The teacher’s heart overflows with sympathies, and she often doesn’t know how to express them. Perhaps, at times, she comes off a bit sharp when the girl doesn’t pay attention in her class, but that’s only because she wants the girl to succeed! She wants the best for this child who has lost everything. She wants to show that, to get anything in life, one must work for it diligently.

When she sees the girl coming out of the convenient store, the teacher waves at her emphatically. “Oh! Hello, dear! How are you? Have you been working on your essay?”

“No, I haven’t thought about it since class ended.” It’s incredible, the way this girl doesn’t even try to lie.

“Oh! Well, maybe you should start working on in! After all, it’s due in just a few short weeks.”

“I have time.” The girl finishes her drink. Red liquid escapes the side of her mouth, dribbles down her chin.

“It’s just a very big part of your grade, dear! And you’re falling just a bit behind in class. I just don’t want you to get distracted, especially with that big dance tomorrow night.”

“I’m not going to the dance. I don’t like dances like that. I’m very busy right now. I need to go.”

“But it’s getting so late! Shouldn’t you be heading home now that you’ve got a snack?” The teacher gave the girl one of those smiles she reserves for her students when she’s scolding them. “Isn’t it a little close to supper to be getting the munchies, dear?”

“I’m going to see my parents.”

The smile is gone, just like that, and what replaces it is a look of true sadness. Why, the teacher can practically feel the tears welling up in her eyes. This poor child! Of course she can’t be focusing on an essay. Perhaps it’s close to the time of her parents’ passing, or maybe she’s just having a bad week. Whatever the case, the girl needs sympathy, and the teacher is very good at sympathy.

“I know this must be difficult for you, dear.”

“It’s actually quite easy to go see them. They aren’t that far away.”

The muscles in the teacher’s face twitch. She’s so good at sympathies. That doesn’t mean that this girl needs to try and make it hard. “Of course, dear. I just mean that it must be hard on you emotionally. Knowing they aren’t really there.”

The girl laughs, and the tree beside the convenient store rattles. How strange, the teacher thought. There hasn’t been a breeze all day. The girl says, “The dead are always there.”

“They’re always watching you, aren’t they?”

“Not when I go inside.” She hands what’s left of her drink to the teacher.

The teacher stares at the bottle of soda in confusion. “I’m sorry?”

The girl looks to where the sun is getting close to setting. “I need to be going. Before it gets dark.” She skates off, practically gliding on air. The teacher finds it hard to believe that this is the girl that always seems to trip in class because her shoes are untied.

The teacher calls out after her, “See you in class tomorrow!”

The girl keeps skating away. She goes throughout the town, past the house where she lays her head most nights when she goes to sleep. The house does its best to keep her awake at night.

As she passes her neighborhood, one of her neighbors, a classmate, is sitting out on the steps of her front porch, chatting on the phone. She leans back, resting on her elbows as the girl passes. The classmate thinks the girl is a little strange. Which, okay, she lost her family in a fire while she was *there*. That probably warrants a bit of being screwy in the head. Still. She’s kind of weird. It’s her eyes, the classmate thinks. She’s just got the weirdest eyes.

“You’ll never believe who just passed by,” she says into the phone. She’s listening for the sound of wheels on asphalt to fade but the sound doesn’t even seem to exist in the first place. The classmate decides to just be quieter. “I’ll give you one hint: Wednesday Addams on roller skates. Huh? That was a good one, right?”

The laughter on the other end of the line goes on for longer than is polite, but, hey, the classmate knows her joke was funny, okay? She’s hilarious. “Got it in one, babe. Yeah, yeah, she lives next door but is almost *never* home. One night I caught her sleeping out in the yard. Asked her about it the next day, and you know what she said?” Even

though her friend can't see her, the classmate widens her eyes and lets her facial muscles completely relax, no expression. "She goes, 'I don't sleep well inside.' Okay, bitch, so the ground is better? It was damn near freezing."

She listens for a bit before letting out a laugh of her own. She's not the only funny one. "No way. That's true? I heard that she had to go to his office, but I didn't realize *the principal* was the one that found her. She was just hanging out on the branch beside his window? Jesus, he's on the second story."

The next words cause the classmate to gasp. "No! I had no idea she *fell*. She's completely fine? What the hell!" With a bit of worry, she looked over at the house next door. "You don't think... No, no, they're good people. They don't hurt her. She's just *weird*. My momma says trauma like that does weird things to people. It does real weird things to people."

The classmate doesn't realize that the girl stopped to listen not too far down the street, her back pressed against a tree. The bark of it feels gentle, even through her clothes. It is a comforting presence. There's a bruise forming on her knee from where she bumped against the counter in the convenient store. She never even felt it when she fell out of the tree. The land does not hurt her.

"You know, she really is nice if you talk to her for long enough. Really, it's true, she is. You've just got to understand her oddities. That's what Momma always says. So, what are you wearing to the dance tomorrow?"

The girl leaves. She still has one more stop to make.

The butcher looks up to see the girl entering his shop just before closing, and he gives her a smile. He likes her. She's a nice enough girl, always polite and courteous,

even after all that she's been through. He's got her order wrapped up on the counter beside him. "Just in time. Thought you might not be making it today."

Smiling, the girl says, "Apologies. I kept getting distracted." She tries to be careful about skating in the butcher's shop. She doesn't want to scuff up his floors. This building is the most comforting one she's ever been in, besides a funeral home. Even still, every bump in the flooring catches the wheels to her skates. She has to move slowly.

"I gave you a bit extra of the ground beef today. Thought you might appreciate it."

"I do." She searches through her pockets and pulls out her money, along with what's left of the sheriff's. "I can pay you for it."

"No need. Don't want it going to waste, and I know you use it." He didn't know what she used it for, but he knew she did.

He slides her package over to her. Inside is the ground beef, as well as a pig's heart and liver. Once a week like clockwork, it's always the same. She's been doing this for about a year now, and he knows her foster parents don't know a thing about it. They kind of just let the kid run wild. They're just scared of upsetting her, everyone says. Everyone's scared of upsetting her, even if they don't know why.

The butcher doesn't ask questions. He doesn't need to know what she does with the meat. He'd asked, once, but she'd just looked at him with those eyes until he dropped it. Kids have got weird ways of coping with things, and if buying a bunch of meat is her way of doing that, then who's he to stop her? Maybe she's got a pet out there. Whatever the case, she's polite, and her money's good. That's all that matters to him.

She picks the package up, cradling it to her chest. He hopes she doesn't trip and fall.

The butcher asks, "Same time next week?"

"I'll see you then. I appreciate the extra ground beef."

He starts wiping down the counter as she leaves, hoping that she appreciates the heart and liver, too. They're still fresh.

Every building seems to hold itself a bit tighter as she passes by, daring and fearing that she will try to open their doors next. The living girl is tainted with specters, and specters do not belong in places for the living. Therefore, she cannot belong. She passes them by, though, and stays on the edge of the road as she heads outside of town. She pauses at the gates of the town cemetery with its neat marble and granite headstones, but does not venture inside. Instead, she presses a kiss to her palm and holds it out in the direction of where her parents are buried.

She has to keep going, though. The cemetery is not where she makes her destination. She skates until she sees a dirt path, barely discernable from the brush. Getting off the blacktop, she bends down with grace and balance that none of her classmates would understand as she unties the laces and takes off her skates and her socks, tying the laces together and slinging the shoes over her shoulder. Her toes dig into the earth, and it is like a welcome home after being away for months, even though it has only been a week.

She begins walking, and the forest hushes, though it is alive, anticipatory. A queen is in their midst. Her scent is recognized, that smell of dirt and iron that clings to her, showing her that she is more home here than anywhere else. She brings gifts. She

always brings gifts. A good monarch expects her subjects to be loyal, but she also knows that such loyalty does not come without a price. The queen of the ghosts knows that the best way to keep her subjects happy and loyal is to take care of the land that they inhabit.

Land is living, but land needs death to thrive. Ghosts give their bodies back to the land, and the land, in turn, gives them a place to stay. Even fire is giving back to the land. In the wake of ashes, eventually, there will be new growth.

The queen of ghosts feels welcome here, though she is living. She has never felt discomfort from the land. It has never tried to scare her away. It recognized her sacrifice years ago, even before she realized that she'd made it, and it recognizes her sacrifice still to this day.

She leaves her skates by the stump of an old oak tree and reaches in its roots, protected from the elements, to retrieve her crown. Twigs and bones weave together with its mounted antlers on top, dead things once living, to fit snugly upon her head.

From the stump, it is a short walk to a clearing that is waiting for her, where there are dilapidated headstones scattered throughout, so old their names are lost to time. Two lightning struck trees sit in the middle. A sacrifice. Life taken by nature. Life taken to provide for the land. In one of the trees rest a trio of vultures. Next to the base of the other sits a lone coyote, resting and watching. Scavengers. They share a bond; all of them are not welcome where the living dwell, though they try to benefit from what the living sow.

The girl stops a few feet from the trees. She places her package on the ground. For the coyote and the vultures, she takes out the ground beef, laying it out close to where the coyote sits. The coyote begins his feast, and the vultures join along with him.

She pulls out the liver, smiling as she notices how fresh it is. It isn't warm by any means, but it has yet to be made lesser by waiting in a freezer for hours on end. She picks a gravestone and begins to dig at the base of it with her fingers. She buries the liver. Even dead things miss the taste of something fresh. The ghosts can savor its smell, and the land will appreciate the way it fertilizes the soil will the decomposition sets in.

The heart is last. She cradles it in her hands. She moves over to the tree once occupied by the coyote. It kept her spot warm for her, though it did not rule. A beetle crawls along the charred trunk of the tree, greeting her. She takes the coyote's place sitting at the base of the tree, and she rules over her kingdom.

If she were a fearful creature, like those who dwelled in town, she might imagine that the heart was beating against her palm. She might have felt disturbed. As it is, the weight of it is a comforting presence. She's grown used to the feel of a heart in her hand. When she leaves for the night, perhaps a fox will come and take it as an offering. Perhaps the coyote will fight to keep its claim. Maybe, just maybe, she will lean in and take a bite from it, let the taste of it fill her mouth, a sacrifice to herself. One day, she thinks she will be required to make greater sacrifices to keep her kingdom. She does not think she will mind. She knows a few people whose hearts she would not mind holding in her hands and taking a bite out of.

The queen of ghosts takes the heart in her hand and crushes it, feeling its juices between her fingers and onto her bare feet, onto the earth. She looks out over the tombstones and says, "*Rise.*"

Rising like steam when something hot and wet and sticky splashes on snow, the ghosts of the dead come out of the ground. They greet each other, filling the clearing with

their whispers, and the wind rejoices in carrying their sounds back to the queen of ghosts. They relish in these meeting, this gathering. As they mingle, they look similar to how the queen imagines her classmates do at a party, at all the social gatherings that she is invited to but never attends. This is better. This is natural. This is where she is meant to be.

Smiling, the queen clears her throat. The noise dies. She lives. Her people stand at attention. Hands covered in blood, she commands them. “*Dance.*”

And so the ghosts, ever eager to please their queen, dance.