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Samuel L. Cooley
University of New Orleans

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Pale Memories

Samuel Cooley

Ghost didn't know when the plaque had been installed. He just knew that he hadn't been able to look away since. Staring made his mind numb, made him unable to think past the static, made him forget what it was like before he was alone.

Alone. When was the last time he had seen another soul? A month? A year? A decade? No matter how hard he thought, he couldn't remember past the static. It didn't matter. At least he didn't have to listen to squalling brats or listless teachers that wandered the halls in the school above.

Sometime during his long afterlife, he found the old stairwell. Made of concrete, it was built into the corner of the school he had died in. There were three floors: the main floor that led outside, the second floor that led to classes, and the lonely unfinished room at the bottom. The concrete stairs curved on themselves, sharp corners hiding each floor from the other.

His sanctuary was at the bottom. If he remembered right, the intention was to turn it into a basement but the project had been abandoned in the early stages for some reason. No one liked to visit there. With only a few feet between the lowest stair step and the rough walls of the room, it was as cramped as a janitor's closet with none of the interesting tools. He thought he would be left alone there.

He had thought wrong.

The child crashed into his paradise like a meteor, followed by ringing shards of glass and a crooked plastic frame. Ghost winced as her flailing body passed through him, brutally bringing him out of the sweet static and back to the world of the living. More or less anyway.

Ghost turned away from the girl to look up the long stairway behind him, a few of the concrete steps boasting new stains. Two young girls stood at the top, pale-faced and trembling. One looked down at her hands before abruptly running away, quickly followed by the other. Their footsteps

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echoed through the stairwell as they turned the corner and climbed another flight, the slamming of a door revealing their exit.

Bullies then. Scared ones at that. Another item on the long list of things he didn't miss about the living. Ghost looked back at the child and winced again. He didn't imagine she would miss them either.

As antisocial as Ghost wanted to be, he made himself stand up, hands clenched by his side as he waited for the child to join his world. Part of him hoped she wouldn't, that she would stay with the rude living, but his optimism had not lasted long after death. The girl's eyes were closed, her leg didn't look right, and he wouldn't be shocked if she had hit her head on the way down. It was an honest surprise that her chest still rose and fell.

He didn't imagine it would last for long.

It was a shame. Children were always the worst ghosts. They were either sobbing and confused or silent and dead-eyed. They needed a guide more than anyone else. Ghost would never wish that more people died in schools, but, well, he just wished there was someone else. He was the last person who should be welcoming children to their little purgatory.

Yet, sadly enough, he was all she had. Ghost clicked his tongue at the thought and waited, avoiding the plaque so his mind would be clear. She should be dead soon. Maybe he could leave the barrier of the school again before it happened, see if he couldn't find a translucent adult outside campus? It wasn't the greatest plan, but it was better than—

The girl opened her eyes. Her very *alive* eyes.

Ghost leapt upwards, halfway through the ceiling before he realized he was scared of a little girl who couldn't even touch him. He was still careful as he floated back down to the impossibly living child. She must not have hit her head then; she would probably still be unconscious if she had. He wasn't sure if that was a shame or not. On one hand, she wouldn't be a ghost, but on the other, she would probably die in pain. Alone.

The girl touched her leg with a flailing arm. A scream echoed through the air, bouncing through the stairwell to land in Ghost's ears. Turns out ghosts can still feel pain from sound. Wasn't that a fun discovery? When the ringing finally went away, hiccupping sobs and sniffles were all he could hear.

For a moment, Ghost wanted to continue his ascent, maybe visit a few rooms he hadn't seen in a while. What else could he do? He had been prepared to comfort a dead child, a living one was something else entirely.

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Another sob twisted his chest and he found himself reluctantly hovering to the ground.

Becoming dead didn't make someone heartless. The afterlife would be much easier if it did.

"Hey, hey, it's alright. Don't cry. Broken bones happen to all of us! I should know, right?" Ghost laughed, rubbing the back of his head only for his hand to go straight through.

Ghost kept that position a second longer before sighing. Broken bones happen to all of us? What in the world was he saying? That's not how you comfort a child. That's not how you comfort anyone! Silently, Ghost thanked whoever was listening that the kid couldn't hear him. That would have been embarrassing.

"Is someone there?! Help me!" the girl sobbed.

Ghost took back his thanks. Was she talking to him? No. No, that would be impossible. The girl couldn't have responded to him. At best, she should only sort of feel his presence. His pain, his fear, his anger, his comfort. That's all she was answering. That was how these things *worked*.

"I'm here," Ghost continued, trying to put as much comfort into the words as he could. "It's going to be okay."

"How is it going to be okay?! It's broken!" the girl screamed.

There was no mistaking that.

"You can hear me?!" Ghost squeaked, embarrassed knowing someone could *hear* him. Was she dead after all? No, ghosts didn't feel the pain they died from. But she could hear him. And ghosts didn't carry their injuries with them. Maybe she was near death? Would that even work? She-

"Of course I can! Help me! Please!" the girl wailed. Any more requests were cut short with another scream as she tried to move.

Right. Not the time.

"Okay, um, hold still?" Ghost offered. Help her. Help her, right. How was he supposed to do that? One glance at her leg told him that he didn't have much time to think it over. He wasn't sure how people died of shock or pain or whatever, but he knew it was possible. She might not have much time left if the pain didn't go away. What did the nurses do to help pain? Ice packs?

Ghost blinked, physically floating a few more inches as the thought hit him. Ice packs, right, he could do ice packs. Or at least something similar. With a twist of his hands, Ghost played nurse. The air chilled, dropping degree by degree until the room felt like a freezer. The girl barely noticed. She

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continued her wailing until Ghost pointed towards her leg, willing all the cold into the limb.

Ghost was pretty sure it wouldn't hurt her. Pretty sure. The dead couldn't affect the living, but he wasn't sure about one like her. Luckily, all that happened was the girl's sobs slowly tapered to a halt as the leg grew translucent with frost. She stared wide-eyed at it before poking it without so much as a wince.

"It . . . it doesn't hurt anymore," the girl panted, sweat dripping down her face as the pain faded away. "I can't feel it at all. What did you do?"

"I numbed the pain," Ghost panted, leaning an inch in front of the wall as his energy slowly trickled back to him. He wished he could collapse against it and slide onto the floor, but past experiences had taught him better. Physical objects and spirits don't mix.

"How?" she asked. She hadn't looked away from her leg yet. He didn't think that was good.

"Age mostly," Ghost said. "You'd be surprised what you can pick up when you get older."

The girl nodded before freezing, as if the chill of the room had finally poured into the rest of her body. Did he make it too cold?

"People can't freeze things, no matter how old they are," she whispered, finally looking towards him. That wasn't the first thing she noticed? Maybe she did hit her head. Ghost floated closer to get a better look growing confused as her eyes suddenly widened.

Eyes. Ghost glanced at the glass shards and the plastic frame before sagging in on himself. He was an idiot. As far away as he was, she probably thought he was a normal, breathing person.

"You're a ghost!" the little girl gasped, pointing a finger at him as she tried to drag herself away. Tried. Her leg was definitely broken. Ghost tried to approach with his hands up, determined to get a closer look, but he stopped when the girl whimpered. Sighing, he stayed where he was.

He never understood why the living were so scared of the dead. Would he have trembled the same way when he was alive? Why? What was there to be scared of? They all ended up dying one way or another. He was tempted to say those very words but, for some reason, he doubted the kid would want to hear that.

"I'm a ghost?" he asked, making a grand show of looking through his translucent hand before widening his eyes. "Whoa! When did that happen?"

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That shocked her out of her shaking. Unfortunately, it was replaced with narrowed eyes and a deep frown. He wasn't that unfunny, was he?

"How did you not know you were a ghost?" she asked, glaring over his shoulder, though he assumed she was aiming for his eyes.

"I guess I wasn't paying attention," Ghost shrugged.

"Who are you?" she asked, trying to be intimidating.

"Who knows? Everyone calls me Ghost," Ghost said, utterly unintimidated by the little girl. "I guess that should have clued me in, huh?"

The girl's eyes somehow narrowed further. "Your name is Ghost?"

"That's what they call me. It's better than nothing. What about you, kid, what's your name?" Ghost asked, trying not to sound too eager.

The girl blinked, and her eyes narrowed in confusion, and Ghost felt his nonexistent heart pause. One day he would learn why his organs still worked, but that could wait until after he knew the girl remembered her name. After she was safe.

"Why do you want to know?" she eventually asked. Her hands were shaking again, trembling against the concrete floor in irregular beats.

"Just curious. I want to learn about the stranger that tumbled into my home," Ghost said, forcing a smile that made his jaw ache.

"Then tell me yours first."

"I did. It's Ghost."

"Your real name," the child said, rolling her eyes. Ghost could feel his eyebrow twitch. He hesitated a long moment, struggling to keep his composure even as the girl crossed her arms.

It wasn't her fault. She didn't know any better. It wasn't rude for the living to ask. Ghost gave himself a dozen more justifications until he didn't feel like scoffing and floating to the other side of the school.

"I don't remember my real name," he said. "None of us do. That's what makes us ghosts."

The kid tilted her head. "That's stupid. What happens to the people who have names? Or people who never knew their original names? Or people who have nicknames?"

"I guess they sort of fade away," Ghost said, thinking back to all of the deaths he had seen. There hadn't been many, being in a school and all, but there had been enough. "I've never seen a ghost who remembered a nickname. I think it goes off of what you call yourself. I don't know."

"How do you not know? You're a ghost!" the kid scoffed.

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“Being dead doesn’t make you a genius.”

“Clearly,” the kid said. Ghost rolled his eyes. This was why he avoided the halls. The two of them stayed quiet a little longer until, in the quietest voice Ghost had ever heard, the child whispered.

“What was that?” Ghost asked, inching closer to better hear her.

“Mary,” the child mumbled, as if reminding herself. “My name is Mary.”

“Right . . . well, good news then, you’re not dead!” Ghost said, giving the kid a thumbs up so she would stop looking so sad. It didn’t work. She nodded slightly, looking like she wanted to absorb into the wall. Wasn’t she just giving him back talk a little while ago?

Kids were weird.

“I remember my name,” she muttered.

“That’s right. Which is a very good thing.”

“Does that mean I’m going to heaven soon?” she asked quietly, tears building in her eyes. Ghost stopped everything. He stopped moving, he stopped floating, if he could then he would have stopped breathing. He just stared at the little girl that had asked him a very adult question.

“Maybe,” he eventually decided. “Like I said, I don’t really know how all of that works. Besides, it should be a little while before that happens. Not soon at all.”

That was what he hoped at least. The kid was near death, he wasn’t sure how else she would be able to see him, but maybe someone would find them soon. If someone didn’t . . . Well, at least she wouldn’t end up like him.

“What if I forget my name when I die?!” Mary suddenly erupted. “What if I forgot it after all and am just making one up?! What if I have always had a different one?! What if-”

“Hey, hey, calm down,” Ghost whispered, kneeling into the air to be on her level before she could talk herself into a panic. That’s what the teachers did when they had to deal with a crying child, right? “Why are you asking me all of this? You’re not going to die. It’s going to be alright.”

“But what if I do? What if it happens later and I forget my name?”

“You’ll turn into a ghost,” he said. He wasn’t going to lie to her, he was too bad at it, but he would have traded anything to be a con artist when the kid hiccupped another sob.

“I don’t want to be a ghost,” she whimpered.

“None of us do, kid. It just happens,” Ghost sighed. He remembered the day he had turned into one. The loneliness, the fear, the darkness. A ghost

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passing by had only found him because they had noticed the emotions influencing the students.

It had not been a good day.

“You won’t be alone when it happens,” Ghost said. “I know a few souls who wander looking for the lost. Sometimes they end up here. They’ll make sure you find someone. All ghosts are friends, you know?”

Mary sniffled, finally forcing her tears to slow. “They are?”

“Yeah. We always stick together. No matter what. All the petty reasons we stay away from each other in life tend to vanish when you can float through walls,” Ghost huffed. Mary didn’t respond. After a moment, he turned to see her staring off into space again. “You alright, kid?”

Mary’s entire body jerked in surprise before she curled back around herself. “Are any of you friends with the living?”

Ghost blinked. Friends with someone alive? He had never even considered it. What was the point? He stared at the crying child and sighed, itching to rub the back of his neck as he looked away.

“It’s never been done before,” he muttered, wincing as the kid huddled her shoulders. “But, hey, I’m willing to try!”

Her eyes widened and, soon after, she was wearing a grin so bright it could blind someone. “Do you mean it? You want to be friends with me?”

“Of course! Why wouldn’t I?” Ghost smiled, as if he wasn’t compiling the list of reasons in his head. She would forget about him. She would die before he noticed. She might not be able to see him forever. She—

“Everyone else thinks I’m weird. That I read too much,” she said, her smile slowly fading. “They call me a nerd.”

Suddenly, all of Ghost’s reasons seemed to disappear.

“Well, they just sound like idiots to me,” he shrugged.

Mary giggled at that before she started to fall silent again. But, this time, she didn’t seem lost in her own mind like the other times. Just quiet as she squinted at the opposite wall. Ghost turned as well and saw the plaque embedded there, watching them both.

He wasn’t sure if the silence was better or worse than the anger and questions. It was certainly better than the crying. Less urgent. Satisfied that he had done all he could, Ghost hovered back to his wall and leaned towards it as they waited for someone to rescue her. The motion was as uncomfortably familiar as always, as if he had leaned against the stone before.

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That was the problem with being dead. Or, well, one of them at least. He never lost his old habits or feelings, he just forgot why he had them. Before he could wander down that path again, he shook his head and stopped thinking. There was no use wondering about the past, all it earned was a headache. The best thing to do was to stay quiet and pretend like nothing in the world was happening.

With that in mind, Ghost focused on the only decoration in the room. The static faded in slowly but steadily, carving out his thoughts and replacing them with numbness as he stared. He had never figured out why it did that. Honestly, he had never cared.

Unfortunately, some people still had curiosity.

“What are you looking at?” Mary asked, ripping Ghost back to the present.

“Nothing. A plaque,” he muttered, the static slowly leaving his mind.

“What does it say?”

Ghost tried to remember, he really did, but it was useless. He might have known what it said once, but those days were long gone. Words tended to play with him, changing and shifting as the years went by. It had been easier to forget them than to bother relearning all the rules. Not to mention two of the words gave him a headache that felt like dying all over again. It was better he forgot.

“Well?” Mary asked. He was sure she would be tapping her foot if she could.

“I don’t know.”

“Do you know anything?” the girl asked, but she had the slightest smile when she said it.

“Hey!” Ghost yelped, smirking as the kid giggled at him. She must not be as scared. Good. “This thing is really old, alright? It’s a metal plaque, a memorial. I’m sure it’s just talking about something boring. Some kid or teacher or whatever.”

“Oh. That’s cool,” Mary said. For a moment, Ghost thought blissful silence would return, only for the child to dash his hopes once again. “So, why don’t you know?”

For a moment, all Ghost could think was admitting to a kid he couldn’t read was the most embarrassing thing on the planet. Fortunately, he was spared having to answer by the door to the stairwell opening overhead, shepherding dim light into the darkness. Mary tried to curl in on herself at the sound, wincing as she remembered she still couldn’t move her leg.

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Ghost knew it wouldn't help but he stood in front of her anyway, trying to shield her from whatever she was scared of.

"Mary! Are you down here?" someone called upstairs, wet coughs following every other word. It was a man by the sound of it. An old one. Oddly familiar as well, though Ghost couldn't put his finger on why.

"Mr. Franklin!" Mary cheered, her grin shining in the new light. Footsteps pounded against the steps immediately after she called. Ghost glanced back at her and flowed out of the way with a smile. It seemed she wouldn't be joining him just yet.

"There you are! Now, what have I told you about-" the man cut himself off with a gasp, covering his mouth with a wrinkled hand. Ghost looked the man over as he rushed to Mary, glancing at the wispy grey hair on his head and the wrinkles coating his skin. He didn't look familiar at all, so why did his voice scratch at his mind?

"Mary, child, what happened? Are you alright?" the teacher asked, kneeling next to the girl. By the way his hands trembled and his jaw quivered, he was legitimately worried about the girl. That was good. Some teachers would just be annoyed.

She nodded. "I'm fine! Ghost took care of me!"

"Ghost? Who's-" the man cut himself off for the second time as he looked at where Ghost was standing. His face paled immediately, tears forming at the edges of the man's eyes as they combed every inch of him. "What? But how? You, I-"

Great, was this man near death too, or was everyone just able to see him now? It didn't matter. What did matter was that the teacher was too busy tearing up to get Mary to safety. Ghost scowled at the man until he got his act together.

If anything, that made it worse. The man flinched, stepping back with a hand clutching his chest. Ghost stopped and rolled his eyes. Of course he was scared too. Silently, he began to float away. If his presence was such a hassle, he would just leave.

"Ben," the man whispered before Ghost could disappear. The world stopped spinning. Ghost flinched backwards as knives stabbed into his chest, spreading invisible fire across his skin. "I'm so sorry, Ben. If I had only known you were here I would have, well, it doesn't matter. I should have visited, should have come sooner. When I heard about the stairwell being haunted, I wanted to come but . . ."

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The man sighed before moving towards Ghost, stopping himself just within reach, “I was afraid. Ben, you have to understand, I was just playing around. I never meant for this to happen!”

Ghost’s breaths came quick and short as he glared at the man. What happened? What had he done to him? **What had he done to him?!**

The static was gone. All that was left were memories. Slowly, Ghost began to remember. The man’s face grew younger, a sickening smile spreading across his lips as he ascended. No, he didn’t ascend. Ghost fell. Cracks and snaps echoed in his ears as the room grew darker and darker, light dying by the handful.

“You!” Ghost snarled. “You were there! Why were you there?!”

“Ben, I-”

The face vanished. Ghost’s head wanted to explode as everything returned at once. Words without meaning or context swirled in his mind. A dare, construction tape, stairs, a push, pain, footsteps, a door slamming, pain, cries getting weaker and weaker. Then nothing. No more sounds. No more doors or steps or voices. Just feelings. He was afraid then angry then numb then . . .

Then he was Ghost.

“I’m so sorry,” the man wept, tears tracing his cheeks. As if he had an excuse to cry. As if he had the right!

The air chilled as frost gathered onto the bricks, a breeze infiltrating the room before turning into a whirlwind. The old man’s clothes flapped against his wrinkled skin, his face rapidly paling as he stepped back and covered a trembling Mary.

Mary. Ghost glanced at her to see a pale face holding a gaping mouth. Her hands shook against the floor and her leg began inching away from him. She looked afraid. More afraid than when the bullies had pushed her. More afraid than when she had found her broken leg.

And she was afraid of him.

Ghost jerked, releasing his hold on the air. The two stared at him as their bodies trembled in fear. Ghost quickly twisted his head towards the plaque, taking deep breaths as static flowed into his skull, memories fading with each gasp. Soon, he could barely remember they even existed. All he felt was numb.

“Listen, I don’t know who this Ben guy is, but the kid needs help,” Ghost said after a few moments, ignoring how the name made his skin shiver and

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images flash through his mind. When the man didn't budge, he forced himself to focus. "Now, teacher. We don't have time for anything else."

The man blinked a few times until, finally, reality seemed to return to him as he realized Ghost wasn't going to harm him. He nodded quickly and bent down to pick Mary up.

"Wait!" Mary shouted before the man could fully rise. Instantly, the only other two people in the room stopped. Had his patch job failed? Ghost quietly prepared his hands, ready to make the room freeze again to stave off any more pain.

"I want to see the plaque," Mary ordered. Ghost raised an eyebrow before lowering his hands, letting his shoulders loosen while the teacher furrowed his eyebrows. "Please! I promise Ghost won't hurt us. He saved me, didn't he?"

The teacher hesitated a few moments before sighing, a bit of life leaving him with the breath. "Of course, that would be no problem at all. It just surprised me."

Ghost vehemently disagreed that it wouldn't be a problem but still drifted out of the way as they approached. The man trudged to the wall, already sweating under the strain of carrying another body.

"Here we are, child. Do you need me to read it?" the teacher asked.

"No! I can read! I just need to get closer," Mary argued. The teacher only smiled as she turned back towards the plaque, squinting at it and trying to get as close as possible. Silently, Ghost allowed his body to glow softly, giving her some light in the darkness.

"Benjamin Richards," she whispered. The light faded immediately, replaced with a coldness that scratched at his bones. It was worse than the fire from earlier. So much worse. "Who's that?"

The man responded before Ghost could. "What do you mean? Benjamin is—"

"Not important," Ghost interrupted, feeling his spine shiver every time they so much as thought of the name. "Get the kid to a nurse or something. I don't know if my patch job will last past the door."

He hesitated. "Right, you're right. I'm just—"

"Go," Ghost snapped, narrowing his eyes as a few tears leaked from the man's eyes. He wavered and Ghost prepared to yell at the man until he finally got his act together and got the injured child to safety. Eventually, the teacher did so on his own, trudging back towards the stairs.

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He was going to yell at him anyway, old emotions sneaking past the static, but the spite and anger melted away as Mary waved goodbye, her fingers barely visible over the teacher's shoulder.

"Bye, Ghost! You were wrong! That name wasn't boring at all!" Mary shouted back, laughing as the teacher whispered something to her.

Even though she couldn't see him, he dredged a small smile onto his face and waved back. As terrible as it sounded, he hoped he would never see her again. Children had no place in a grave.

Once they were gone, Ghost turned back to the plaque and frowned as the static didn't appear. Instead, all he could think about was a girl who saw a ghost and, instead of remaining scared, decided she wanted a friend. Slowly, he raised a hand and traced the two words he had never been able to read.

"Not boring, huh?" Benjamin Richards whispered with a body that felt lighter than it ever had before. Slowly, his hand faded from view, disappearing into shards of light as the words on the plaque repeated in his mind. Perhaps he would see Mary again after all.