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## Ghosts and Other Strange Animals

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# Ghosts and Other Strange Animals

by

**Abigail C Coulter**

An Honors Capstone  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors Diploma  
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## **Abstract**

“Ghost and Other Strange Animals” is a collection of experimental and magical-realist short stories that use the mythical and the inhuman to explore themes of intimacy, fate, and discovery. This collection is divided into three sections, with each section focusing on one aspect of the concept of the inhuman/non-human entity. Section one, “Machines,” uses conventions of the science fiction genre to explore how humanity finds itself in the realm of ‘other.’ Section two, “Myths,” takes its inspiration from classical mythology, specifically the Greek pantheon, and is interested in finding echoes of humanity in the divine. These myths use both traditional linear storytelling and hybrid methods of writing. The final section, “Ghosts,” focuses on how the ways life clings on after death and how people search for relationships that extend beyond the confines of mortality. The short stories in “Ghosts” also use hybrid methods of writing and utilize elements of traditional horror to engage with the original goal of this project of exploring the inhuman/non-human.

## Introduction

The stories in this project were born of my interest in investigating the inhuman/non-human narrative because I believe the way humanity relates to these aspects of the ‘other’ in folktales and myths has the potential to say a lot about our present society. Seeing humanity clearly can be difficult when we are locked into one perspective, but when we step away and give ourselves the space to explore our relationships to that which is alien, we in turn gain a new understanding of who and what we are. This is particularly true of genre-writing such as science-fiction or mythology, which often engages with nontraditional modes of storytelling.

I incorporated these methods of nontraditional storytelling into some of the forms I utilized during the writing process. Several of the pieces in this collection make use of hybrid or non-traditional forms. Some examples include “Aphrodite’s Palace,” which is a narrative using the container form of a survey, or “Haunt Me,” which periodically braids fictional real-estate listings throughout the story. These atypical, or “hybrid,” story structures were used as a method to merge creative form and content as well as to make clear the thematic ideas at work in this collection and the ways in which they inspire the stories themselves. Both experimental and hybrid fiction poses opportunities for new approaches to storytelling but I assert these methods must be used in moderation. Using experimental forms (such as the container form I’ve used) runs the risk of becoming a gimmick rather than a tool for writing about alternate realities. In working on this project, I did my best to be aware of when I could be slipping into this trap. I recalled a piece of advice one of my professors gave me in a poetry class, when I asked how to write a good poem in a form like a sonnet. She said, “You start by writing a good poem.” To write a good experimental story, you first need to write a good story.

To strengthen my understanding of non-traditional story structures and to inspire the pieces in this collection, I spent considerable time reading both creative works and scholarly articles on literary theory (which have been listed in the “References” section). Reading was an essential component of the experience of creating this project. In addition to the works recommended by my project advisor, Dr. Samantha Moe, I independently sought out readings I felt would strengthen my connection to my work, with regards to both content and form.

In the future, I intend to engage these ideas further, both with the themes explored in these pieces and with an experimental story writing method. My project advisor has suggested I look into writing long-form work in addition to expanding upon the short-form stories represented in this collection, and I hope as I do so I can deepen my engagement with creative exploration of the inhuman/non-human narrative.

**Section One**  
**Machines**



## Junk

In a garbage dump at the edge of town, one lone android was climbing the mountains of trash with a smile on her face. Her name was Maggie, and her titanium face shone in the bright sun overhead despite the scratches and rust that marred her once-pristine construction. A man named Noris was sitting behind the wheel of his busted pickup truck in the lot beside the dump, watching her climb and debating whether or not to get out and speak to her. Noris wasn't worried that Maggie wouldn't receive him well—she always did—but he couldn't quite decide if he was ready. He had a big question to ask.

But Noris had driven all the way out here to see her, and the money for gas was no joke. When Maggie heard the *thud* of his truck door closing, her gaze snapped from the twisted radiator she had been examining to the lot. She realized it was Noris, and with delight she bounded down the hills that she had just climbed, nimble metal feet steady on the heaps of sliding junk.

Maggie loved Noris more than she had ever loved anything, which wouldn't mean much to most people, because most of what Maggie loved was trash. In fact, most people looking at Noris might be inclined to call him—well, not *trash*, necessarily, but certainly not treasure. Noris was tall and gangly, his face pocked with acne and scars and just this side of uncomfortably thin. Without a shirt, you could count the ribs poking out.

Maggie didn't hug Noris, but even from feet away he could hear the excited whir of her gears spinning.

“Noris!” she said, and when she spoke, it sounded like several voices laid over each other at once. “You are here again!”

“Yeah.” Noris tugged at his work coveralls, an ugly shade of chartreuse that washed out his skin. “I thought I’d come see if you ever finished fixing up that bicycle. You were doing great last time I was here.”

“Follow me!” Maggie ordered, and she reached out a hand to help guide him. Her fingers screeched when they bent to hold him, and wedged between the joints was a sludge of congealed oil.

Noris pulled his hand back before she could hold it for more than a second.

Maggie frowned, her every expression apparent and exaggerated on her mechanical face, but she did not complain. She did her best to clear an easy path for Noris to walk, shoveling trash out of his way as she went.

The smell of the dump was almost too much for Noris to bear, and he held the sleeve of his coveralls over his nose and mouth as he followed.

Maggie led him around a bend to the bicycle she’d been working on. The red paint was chipped, and in place of wheels, Maggie had attached the remains of an industrial fan and a large cardboard cylinder that looked like it may have been used for shipping at some point.

“It does not roll,” Maggie said, her voices tumbling over each other. “But you can sit on it. Look!”

Noris watched her pump the useless pedals and Maggie was all smiles again. Her synthetic hair had long since tugged off and the metal on one of her shoulders melted, but Noris saw in her face what she had been. He’d had a poster of her make and model on his bedroom wall as a teenager, and it seemed like her gleaming silver face and golden curls would be forever imprinted on his memory.

He came over to tighten the handlebars for her and she leaned a little closer than Noris was comfortable with.

“I wish you could stay here forever!” she told him.

Noris took a step back. “You know I can’t, Maggie.”

There was that exaggerated frown, again.

“But you could!” she said. “It would be easy. I could take care of you! I am good at that.”

Noris steeled himself, and got to the point of what he had really come here to say. “Look, I was thinking about something. Why don’t you come home with me?”

Maggie’s gears whirred loudly. “You said I could not! Before, when we met!”

Before, Noris didn’t have access to his own workstation or license to come to the work site after hours. He hadn’t had the materials to restore her.

“I know, but I’ve changed my mind. Do you think you would like that? Living with me?”

He could hear the grating squeak of metal against metal as she vibrated with joy, but she did not reach out for him again.

“I would very much like that!”

Noris breathed a sigh of relief, glad to finally be rid of the junk heap.

Maggie let him draw her back down the path she had so recently cleared for him towards his truck.

*He would fix her*, Noris thought, the poster of her model flashing in his mind’s eye. He’d start with the hair, maybe, or sand her face down until it was once more even and smooth.

As Maggie let him order her into the backseat of his truck, where a tarp was already laid out to keep away any dirt and grime, she was overwhelmed with the thought that Noris was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

## The Gate

Beth was ready for a trial run.

It was 9:30 on a Tuesday evening and the rain was pitter-pattering outside. Everyone else in the lab had already gone home. Beth should have been home, too, but she always felt better working when no one else was there.

The Gate was glowing, illuminating the room in a halo of soft blue light and reflecting off her white lab coat. It reminded Beth of the shimmer of a bioluminescent angler fish, luring prey within reach of its mouth.

She prodded through the mess of exposed wires on her desk until she found the switch to activate the opening mechanism. The Gate buzzed. All the dimensions of the universe were a door away. All that was left to do was turn the handle.

But Beth didn't get the chance to turn the handle—before she could even take a step in the direction of the door, there were some shuffling footsteps and it swung open, flooding the room with light. Of all the things that could have stepped through—from looming Cthulhu-esque monsters to the all-knowing shape of God—Beth least expected to see a human man with a patchy beard and dirty flannel, looking curiously around the room as if he'd been invited in for a tour.

“*Kenneth?*” Beth said. Her ex-boyfriend turned to look at her and held up a hand in a friendly wave.

“Betsy-bear!”

She winced at the nickname as the man she hadn't spoken to in ten years crossed the room to meet her, immediately going for a too-intimate hug. He looked as if he had been perfectly frozen the entire time they'd been apart—every hair was precisely as she remembered

it. Beth had cracked the secret to interdimensional travel, and all that the other dimensions had to offer was the guy she dated as a college sophomore, still looking like he had just wandered out of biology class.

“How did you get here?”

“Oh, you know,” he said, but she really didn’t. “The others should be through in a moment.”

She was not left curious for long. Next through the open doorway came Professor Nickolas Schmidt, her dissertation advisor in grad school. Professor Schmidt walked over, clapped Kenneth on the shoulder, and looked over his spectacles at Beth.

“Bethany, I see you finally found employment. I was never too confident in your prospects. Glad to be proven wrong, however.”

“Thank you? What—”

But then there was her mother bustling through the Gate, arms laden with reusable shopping bags and looking just as she had the day she moved Beth into her first apartment.

“Beth! I went to the store for you. They didn’t have that soda you like so I just got you some wine coolers instead.”

Beth could see a line forming behind her mother of dozens of other people hoping for access, some of whom she could name and some of whom sparked nothing but a faint sense of recognition. Person after person, from her Great Aunt Rita to her old college roommate to her favorite elementary school teacher, trailed in, most of them barely pausing to acknowledge Beth—or else, if they did, saying absolutely nothing useful.

“I don’t like your haircut,” said her cousin Lori as she passed through the door.

“You should be eating more fiber,” said her old doctor.

“When are you going to get married?” asked her Uncle Thomas.

She could hardly keep track of all of them, and by the time the last of the visitors had squished themselves into her now very cramped lab, they were packed so tightly together she had to struggle just to turn her head. Memories crowded around her, and after some shuffling and muttering they all fell silent, staring at Beth.

“Well?” said the cashier who worked at her usual grocery store.

“Well, what?” Beth asked.

“What did you want to talk to us about?” replied Kenneth.

“We don’t just come out like this for nothing,” Beth’s mother laughed, struggling with the twist-off top on one of the wine coolers.

“Um.” Beth had no idea what she was supposed to be asking, so she just said the first thing that came to mind. “Is it nice? Through there?” She pointed to the Gate.

“Eh, it’s alright,” said Mr. Cavatappi, the older man who had lived in the house next to Beth’s family when she was growing up. “Mostly boring.”

“Oh.”

“You get out what you put into it,” said the trainer from the gym where Beth had let her membership lapse.

The group went silent again.

“Was that all?” asked twelve-year-old Jeremiah Hayes, who bullied Beth in middle school.

“—I guess?”

There was some grumbling and complaining as the group reoriented themselves to go back through the door, and almost as soon as they had piled in they were streaming out again.

Beth stood by the Gate to see them out.

“You know, Kenneth is married,” said Uncle Thomas as he stepped off into oblivion.

“Call me sometime,” requested her one-time Tinder date who had wanted to show her his eight pet ferrets.

“I don’t *hate* your haircut,” said Lori, “it just frames your face weird.”

The group disappeared one-by-one. The last to go through was her mother, who handed Beth her empty wine cooler and pinched her cheeks.

“You should be better about taking care of yourself, sweetheart,” she said. “I’m worried about you.”

The door closed after them, and Beth unthinkingly went to turn off the switch.

The Gate was shut, the blue light once again soft and humming, and Beth sat at her desk for a long while, listening to the rain.

**Section Two**  
**Myths**



## Aphrodite's Palace

Hello! Welcome to Aphrodite's Palace. Love is just a day away! So that we can better match you to your ideal partner, please fill out this compatibility survey. Try to be as honest as you can. The more honest you are in your answers, the easier it will be for us to select your best possible match!

### Section 1: Multiple Choice

How would you describe your ideal partner?

- A. A creative and kind soul
- B. Someone exciting, who I can go on adventures with
- C. A confident and competent go-getter
- D. The goddess herself, the radiant Lady Aphrodite

What would be the ideal first date?

- A. An evening at an intimate coffee shop
- B. The classic dinner and a movie
- C. Something exciting, like a concert or a festival
- D. Losing control of your mortal body as the goddess bends it to her will

How would you describe yourself?

- A. Funny and charming
- B. Open-hearted and honest
- C. Passionate and driven
- D. Merely a flesh vessel for all-consuming love of the goddess

### Section 2: Short Answer

What do you think is the single most important quality in a romantic partner? Keep in mind that no matter what you answer, no mortal will ever be able to embody any trait to a degree even approaching the splendor and majesty of Lady Aphrodite's embodiment of *all* desirable traits.

How highly would you rate the importance of physical attractiveness on a scale from 1 to 10? Explain your answer. Please remember that the goddess's previous lovers include her hideous

husband Hephestus and the wickedly handsome Adonis. After all, beauty is only skin-deep, except in the case of Lady Aphrodite, whose **impossibly exquisite outward appearance** is enhanced and reflected in her **perfection** of character.

How highly would you rate the importance of being in a similar age range to your partner? Would the long and storied history of the goddess, who has **birthed beauty from her hands and shaped lust from the first wash of seafoam, be a deal breaker?** Would you see the **incredible power of millennia of life and strength**, and deny her?

What do you think is the appropriate punishment for one who refuses or challenges the love of the goddess? As you're considering your response, keep in mind that men have been dragged bloody and naked through hot coals, have watched their lovers tortured and skinned before them, have been choked with poison, have been **sacrificed** and **mauled** and **exiled** for rejecting the most beautiful and powerful Aphrodite, but also try to remember that any mortal **pain** cannot truly communicate the full extent of the wrath of the goddess.

How would you characterize your **devotion** to Lady Aphrodite? (Ex: "I burn with need for her every moment of my waking and sleeping life. I would **die for her**, **kill for her**. Every moment that I am not in her presence I am in **agony**. I forsake all other lovers but her. The very **touch of another** reviles me.")

**Why are you looking for love? Would you beg on your knees at Aphrodite's feet to get the affection you so crave? And if she offered her love to you, would you scorn her in the name of seeking another? Can any human love draw you away from the greatest, the most lovely, most wrathful goddess of beauty?**

Why would you, mortal, plead for the attention of the goddess only to scorn her in the name of seeking another? Is not Lady Aphrodite the greatest of loves you could be blessed to have?

Reader, **I can make you choke. I can make you shiver. I can make you leave your body entirely until all that is left of you is pure ecstasy. I can make the blood in your heart curdle into ambrosia. You will not deny me.**

Please allow 3-5 business days to process your results and match you with your perfect fit.

Thank you!

## Ties that Bind

*That would be nice*, Atropos thought, watching the couple across the room fawn over Clotho. The woman of the couple had a hand over her large, round stomach, and the man was teary-eyed and smiling. Both of them were looking at Clotho with a burning reverence, and Clotho, of course, was eating it all up. Atropos rolled her eyes.

She knew Clotho was putting on a show for the new parents—presenting them with various skeins of string, each of them as beautiful and colorful as the next, smiling and nodding like she was uniquely excited for this one couple. She knew how to really sell it, at times leaning in to share a quiet joke and occasionally touching their arm or hand in a way that suggested casual intimacy without being too forward. Clotho seemed to radiate light under their attention and admiration. Even Atropos had a hard time looking away.

“You shouldn’t look so jealous.”

Atropos stood up from where she’d been leaning on the counter and turned to face her other sister. Lachesis always looked perfectly put-together—her hair tied up in a pristine bun, her button-up shirt pressed, not a wrinkle out of place. Now she was watching Atropos with a discerning eye, her unflinching composure practically making Atropos wither.

“She didn’t choose her job any more than you did,” Lachesis said.

“Yeah, but she doesn’t have to look so happy about it.”

Lachesis narrowed her eyes. They’d had this conversation a thousand times, in one shape or another. They always came back to the same conclusion: all of them had their roles to fill, and none of them had any choice in the matter. It wasn’t Atropos’s fault that she’d gotten the worst one, but neither was it Clotho’s fault that she’d gotten the best. This was just the way things were. No use fighting it or wishing things were different.

“You’d rather she be unhappy?”

Atropos rolled her eyes again and didn’t answer. It wasn’t like Clotho gave a damn if *she* was happy.

She turned back to watch the couple. In a flash, she saw the lives that they might live. Maybe the child would be everything that their mother and father had ever wanted. Maybe the parents would age until they were old and gray and get to spend decades together, each new day happier than the day before. It didn’t matter. In the end, all of them would have their time. And when that moment came, when one by one it was time for the long string of their lives to be cut, Atropos would be there with the scissors.

As Clotho sent the couple off with the start of a beautiful string of shimmering purple, Atropos watched, feeling the weight of the scissors heavy in her pocket.

She didn’t hate her sister for being happy. What she really hated was that every time Clotho started to unspool a thread, she was dooming another line to be cut. It always ended the same way: the taut string falling limp, its color leaching away as the fibers disintegrated into nothing.

Atropos had tried to get rid of the scissors more than once. She’d launched them over a cliffside, smashed them with a sledgehammer, thrown them into the River Lythe, jammed them into the burning miasma of a new star, and even tried to unscrew the piece keeping the sides together with a weird glowing tool she nabbed from Hephaestus’s workshop. No matter what she did, the scissors always showed back up, looking as pristine as the day that she first held them—their shining black handle, the gold of the blades.

It didn’t have to be her, she kept thinking. Why was it her? The scissors did as they pleased anyway—it wasn’t like she could cut a line that wasn’t meant to be cut. It didn’t matter

who held them, surely, and yet, there they would be, without fail, reappearing within reach of her hands. In the cupboard, under her pillow, on the welcome mat. *Why did it have to be her?*

The family taken care of, Clotho came over to her sisters, sighing dramatically and resting her chin on her fist.

“God, that couple was *annoying*. They’re going to be terrible parents. Poor kid. You might want to put them on your list, Lach,” she said.

Lachesis stiffened. “You shouldn’t talk like that.”

Clotho frowned, but Atropos could see the amusement glittering in her crystal blue eyes. She was the prettiest of the three of them, easily, and though her mirth should have made her even more beautiful, Atropos just felt nauseous.

“Why not?” Clotho demanded. “They all end up there anyway. What do you think, Attie?”

Atropos shook her head. “Do you have today’s list?” she said instead, looking at Lachesis.

Lachesis reached into a pocket and handed her a small square of folded parchment.

Atropos had tried to cut her *own* line for the first time during the worst throes of the Black Plague. That was when bodies were piled twenty deep in mass graves as millions died miserable deaths. She cut string after string, from newborns to soldiers to priests, hardly a second of rest as she appeared everywhere painful and miserable at once.

“Death is a relief for them,” Lachesis had told her. “It ends their suffering.” So Atropos had tried to end her own suffering. But though her line would bend, twist, and shrink to accommodate the blades, as soon as Atropos released it, it would spring back into shape. The

iridescent gold of her string, which she had once looked on with pride, seemed now a taunt. *You will not escape me*, it seemed to say. *You, too, are bound*.

Clotho had caught her trying once and scolded her for it. “Grow up. You act like you’re the only one who got shoved into a job they didn’t choose. None of us wanted this life. Why can’t you just deal with it like the rest of us?”

Atropos tried. Sometimes she’d go decades without even touching her own string, just doing her job, following instructions. But Clotho didn’t know, nor did Lachesis. Neither of them had to look at it.

A 57 year-old man in Tibet having a heart attack. A 13 year-old girl in Oklahoma with pneumonia. A 33 year-old woman in Somalia bitten by a snake. *Cut, cut, cut*. Atropos went down the list with precision. A 24 year-old journalist stoned in Honduras. A 41 year-old flight stewardess breaking her neck. Retired grandparents with a carbon monoxide leak. *Cut, cut, cut*.

And then a couple in a car. The woman, pregnant, a new purple string trailing out of her stomach. Three lives—one hardly begun, only a few weeks away from its first breath. A driver in an oncoming car, *not* on the list.

*This was just the way things were*, Atropos reminded herself. *No use fighting it or wishing things were different*.

She raised the scissors.

## **Hera Contemplates Wrath**

She wants to eat his heart for breakfast. She thinks about it, watching him command the attention of the room with his booming voice and his big, expressive movements. A circle of men, all tall and confident but not quite so much so as him, are laughing with admiration sparkling in their eyes. She thinks she could reach through his chest and rip his heart out. She would take a bite of the wet, squishy muscle and lick the blood off her chin. Her husband. *Hers*. He looks across the room in her direction, and then he looks through her. His lover will soon be there to meet him, drenched in sweet oils and perfumes and softer, younger than her. He'll sit his lover on his lap like she's a child, and all his business associates will look at him with dripping envy. She could break his lover's dainty fingers one by one. She could tear his tongue out of his mouth. She can already taste the metallic tinge of blood on her teeth as she imagines it. She watches, like a snake rearing back, thinking with venom of the eternal and all-consuming mercy of the gods.

**Section Three**  
**Ghosts**



## Haunt Me

*For Sale: Charming 3 bedroom, 2 bathroom. Renovated bathrooms and kitchen. Excellent school district. Brand new roof.*

*Posted: February 11, 2023*

*Updated: May 4, 2023*

Marianne really thought this couple might be the one. With every room she'd shown them, they'd looked more and more excited, and she'd even overheard them talking in hushed tones about speaking to the bank. Everything was going smoothly. *Everything would continue to go smoothly*, she thought.

They made it to the master bedroom before it happened. The walk-throughs usually didn't make it this far, and Marianne was hopeful enough to get a little spring in her step as she led them into the ensuite. She'd never tried to sell a house in her life before (and wouldn't even be trying now if she had managed to find an agent who would take the place), but she was doing pretty well given the circumstances, if she might say so herself.

"Oh, honey, this is perfect!" the woman (Marianne thought her name was Sally) said to her husband. "And look, we could each have our own sink. I can stop cluttering up all the counterspace."

The man, Bill, gave his wife a warm smile. "You know I don't mind, sweetheart. But you're right, this is great." Bill turned to Marianne, reaching out without looking to take his wife's hand.

"How long have you lived here?" he asked.

"Oh, about fifteen years," Marianne answered. "It's been great, it's just time to move on, you know? It really doesn't make sense to have all this space just for me."

Sally opened her mouth to respond, but was stopped short when something caught her eye behind Marianne. Marianne's stomach sank. *Not now, Roger*, she thought, but it was useless.

"Is this some kind of joke? What is that?" Sally demanded, taking a step back and pulling her husband closer to her. Bill, too, was now looking with horror at the opposite wall.

Marianne rushed to calm them. "Look, I know it's a little alarming, but I can promise there's a very reasonable explanation for all of this—"

Ten seconds later, Bill and Sally ran out screaming. Marianne didn't bother going after them. Instead, she turned on her heel to face the wall behind her, which was now oozing crimson blood. Though red rivulets ran down the perfect beige paint Marianne had so carefully selected, disrupting the messy letters, the message scrawled there in blood still came through legibly enough to read: *LEAVE THIS PLACE OR DIE*.

Marianne leaned against the sink with a weary sigh.

"Really, Roger?" she said. "We've talked about this."

A sudden chill passed over the room, and Marianne was overcome with the sensation that someone—or rather *something*—was watching her. She could feel its breath on her neck.

A voice colder than the grave whispered very softly in her ear, *You don't want to sell this place to them, they've got a terrible credit score*.

Marianne spun the wedding ring on her left hand. "That's for the bank to decide, isn't it? And it's not like you've been enthusiastic for *any* potential buyers, no matter how great they are. How do you even know their score, anyways? It's not like it's embroidered on their clothes." Marianne's phone pinged with a notification from her banking app. "Oh, I see. Well, stop it. The cost of the bleach alone is going to bankrupt me."

The door to the bathroom cleaning cabinet flung open, seemingly of its own volition, and hit the wall with a *bang*. A container of bleach, tightly sealed, tumbled off the shelf and landed on the tiles.

“Yeah, yeah,” Marianne said, turning to pick up the fallen jug.

*For Sale: Beautiful 3 bedroom, 2 bathroom in an excellent school district. Marginally haunted.*

*Unique charm. Renovated bathrooms and kitchen. Brand new roof.*

*Updated: May 23, 2023*

Marianne had done everything she could think of to get Roger out of the house, barring an exorcism. She’d been hesitant to call a priest, because how exactly would she explain her problem? *‘Hello, Father, I was wondering if you’d banish my late husband’s soul from our old home? I’m trying to sell and he keeps sabotaging any potential buyers because he doesn’t want me to move out. His name is Roger and he’s not malicious, really, just annoying. Shall I get the holy water?’*

After one final sage burning, just so she could feel satisfied that she’d exhausted all other options, Marianne tried to call on the landline. Roger cut off the call three times before she gave up and went to call from her cell phone in the car.

Father Mooreland of Our Lady of Dignity agreed to meet with her at the church the next morning. She didn’t tell him the full story, just that she was worried about her husband’s spirit. It would be harder to dismiss and ignore her as an insane woman in person, she thought. When she got back inside, she found the dishwasher open in the middle of its cycle and soapy water leaking all over the floor.

A note in cruel, sharp handwriting was waiting on the counter, looking like it had been written on a piece of paper that had been sitting in a musty basement for two hundred years.

*REALLY, MARIANNE?* it read.

“I got a call from Bill, today,” she said aloud, grabbing the paper towel roll and bending to start mopping up the mess on the floor. “You remember that couple you scared off recently? He said that he and Sally are thinking about suing for ‘emotional distress.’ You know, they’ve trashed my name to anyone who will listen. Everything I’ve read online says this house should be selling like hot cakes, especially for the price, but I barely get any messages about it. It seems like no one wants to buy.”

The dishes rattled in the dishwasher.

“What would you have me do, Roger? I can’t afford this place on my own. I can’t stay forever, I just can’t. Do you want me to be alone here for the rest of my life?”

The room was silent.

After their meeting the next morning, Father Mooreland very hesitantly agreed to come take a look at the house and say some prayers. The next Monday, he showed up at the house fifteen minutes past the agreed-upon time, with his clerical collar sticking out and his bible half open in his hand.

As she walked him from room to room, showing him the places where Roger tended to be most active—his reading chair, the bedroom, the kitchen—he clumsily recited some lines. It seemed even Roger was unimpressed. No objects mysteriously fell over, no blood on the walls, nothing.

*For Sale: 3 bed, 2 bath. Vinemont school district. Now cleansed of spirits by the good Reverend John Michael Mooreland. Recently renovated. New roof.*

*Updated: June 1, 2023*

She wasn't surprised that the exorcism hadn't worked. In her opinion, Father Mooreland had really half-assed the whole thing, and she felt like he'd done it just to humor her rather than because he thought he could actually help.

When she'd woken up the next morning and seen all her drawers open with the clothes tossed out, she'd been weirdly relieved. It would have seemed somehow wrong for that soft-spoken, pitying priest to be the one to expel her Roger. Roger had hung on for a full year after his death, and she was glad that, after all that, it would take more than some mispronounced Latin to encourage him to move on. Even when he was in the hospital, days away from dying, he hadn't seemed phased. Marianne spent nearly the whole time crying, but he was cracking jokes and small-talking with everyone who came to visit, his resolve unshaken.

It felt kind of foolish to visit his grave while he was actively haunting her, but Marianne had made a promise to herself that she would never let the anniversary of his death pass without a trip to the cemetery. She bought a huge bouquet of sunflowers—his favorite—and made the trip to Mansfield Cemetery in the early morning when she thought it was most likely to be sparsely populated.

She didn't ask anyone to come with her, even though she knew there were plenty of people who would. Something about her grief felt humiliating. She couldn't bear to be seen.

Marianne brought a little thermos of coffee and sat on the ground in front of his grave, drinking it slowly, after she had carefully propped the flowers against the headstone. It was strange to miss someone she couldn't escape. She twisted the wedding ring on her finger.

*For Sale: 3 bed, 2 bath. Haunted (ghost not murderous).*

*Updated: August 10, 2023*

It had been a couple days since she had heard from Roger. She knew he was still there in the same way she'd known he was there at the very beginning, before he truly revealed himself—she could *feel* him near—but he hadn't broken anything or left any messages for nearly half a week.

She'd gotten an email from some ghost hunting group, wanting to buy the house off her and turn it into some kind of museum for ghost hunters or something. She deleted the email.

They were the only people who had expressed any real interest in a while. Part of Marianne wanted to just pack a bag and go—anywhere, everywhere—but the thought of Roger alone in that house gave her pause every time she thought about reaching for her suitcase.

On the fourth day since she'd last heard from him, she found their wedding picture on the mantle moved. She was good about dusting, but she could tell it had been moved because she knew for certain that she *always* left it in the center of the mantle. For fifteen years, that had been its spot, regardless of whatever else in the room had changed.

When she walked into the living room, intending to eat her dinner in front of the TV, she nearly dropped her plate when she realized that someone had moved it to the far left, almost out of sight from her usual spot on the couch.

Marianne set her dinner down in a hurry and went immediately to move it back to its proper place. When she tried to pick up the frame, however, she found it wouldn't budge.

She tugged and tugged and her force rattled the rest of the frames on the mantle, but it still wouldn't move.

“Roger, don't do this,” she said, her voice catching in her throat. “How can you do this? Let it up, now.”

Another tug, and it was free in her hands. Tears burned at the back of her eyes and she clutched the picture to her chest for a moment. She took a long, shaky breath.

She went to replace the frame in its proper spot, but felt a wash of cold down her body and that familiar puff of chilled air on her neck.

“Where else?” she whispered. “It stays out, you dolt. You think I’m just going to put it in a box somewhere and forget about it?”

The cold increased, and Marianne shivered. “Fine,” she said. She grabbed the picture of the two of them at Roger’s parents’ house a few years ago for Thanksgiving. There was a big crowd of cousins, aunts, and uncles gathered around the table, and Marianne was tucked under Roger’s arm in the foreground of the picture. She placed the two photos side by side so that they jointly took up the center space on the mantle.

The cold abated somewhat. A whisper of a hand traced down her arm, and Marianne almost reached up to search for his fingers. She stared at the pictures.

A moment later, her phone buzzed into her pocket. She fished it out to check, but the screen was empty.

“What is it, honey?” she said.

She watched as her phone unlocked by itself before her contacts flashed across the screen.

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.” She scrolled through the list for a second, before settling on the name of an old college friend. She pressed *call*, and the cold disappeared.

It was another two weeks before she heard from Roger again. She was missing all the little problems he caused and she had subsequently taken to leaving all the drawers and cabinets open to annoy herself.

She'd just gotten back from coffee with Lydia, her old college roommate, and although Marianne had spent nearly the whole time fantasizing about being home, she found it was at least somewhat nice to talk about something other than Roger. She listened to Lydia's work stories and actually managed to laugh a couple times. When Lydia had asked how she was doing, and Marianne had only shrugged in response, Lydia didn't press the issue. They'd agreed to meet at the same time a week from now to chat again.

As Marianne set down her purse and took off her coat, a short message in blood started to ooze out of one of the walls in the entryway. She folded her gloves while she waited for it to become clear enough to read.

*LOVE YOU*, it read.

*For Sale: 3 bed, 2 bath. Haunted (ghost friendly). New roof.*

*Updated: September 2, 2023*

The tour went well. Legitimately, truly well. Apparently, Nikki and Jane, newlyweds searching for their first house, had thought the bit about the ghost was charming. Marianne had tried to tell them it wasn't a joke, but they just laughed. They still had to talk to their bank, but if they got approval, they wanted to move in by the beginning of November.

Since his last message, Marianne hadn't heard from Roger. Zip, zilch, nothing. He'd been completely silent the entire time she was showing the house to Nikki and Jane, and if Marianne had been expecting him to freak out when approval from the bank came through, she was sorely disappointed.

It was what she wanted, Marianne kept reminding herself. Holding on like this wasn't helping either of them. But as the weeks without hearing from him turned into a month, she



found herself again missing his little annoyances. She hadn't had to buy bleach in weeks, and she stopped wearing an extra cardigan around the house to stave off the random chills.

Then, one morning, she felt it.

He was gone.

She was folding a fresh load of laundry, and for a moment, all she could think was that *something* was off, something vague and nebulous. Marianne couldn't put her finger on it. She reached out for the feeling of him—and instead found nothing.

Her grief crested over her like a wave, knocking the wind out of her. She thought of Roger in his reading chair, his warmth in bed beside her, of messages in blood on the walls.

She twisted her wedding ring and held her hand over her heart.

*Listing Resolved: October 30, 2023*

## Dead Girl Walking

Krista broke three nails trying to climb out of her coffin. As it happened, she realized it wasn't true what they tell you about hair and nails still growing after death—her hair still reached just past her chin, and her nails were as brittle and short as ever. How many days had it been since she was buried? How many weeks?

She'd been thinking about climbing up for a long time. Every time she started to consider it, the doubt at the back of her head grew louder than ever: *They don't want you back, Krista. Everybody says nice things about the dead person at a funeral; that doesn't mean they're true.* And they'd all been *very* nice. Mom and Dad had stood together in front of the casket, giving a joint eulogy. Mom had been too choked up to speak, so Dad had ended up reading the whole thing by himself on crumpled printer paper. There were long paragraphs about how talented Krista had been, how sweet she was, how tragic it was that the life of their baby girl was cut off before she really got to live. Jeanie, Krista's older sister, had sat in the front row stoic but sad, tears streaming down her face silently as she held her composure. Baby Nicholas had been too little to understand what was happening, but Krista could hear him wailing in the other room during the wake. They'd miss her forever, they'd said.

She decided to climb out in a moment of instinct. In a frenzy, before she could overthink the decision, she started tearing at the flimsy satin of the coffin's lid and scratching at the wood. She didn't slow down, not even for a second. If she let herself slow long enough to think about it, she might stop.

*It was strange to be injured and not bleed,* Krista thought, spitting the dirt out of her mouth the best she could once she reached the surface. She sagged against her gravestone, worn out from the laborious climb up and wishing she had a change of clothes and a toothbrush. She

looked at her broken nails. They hurt in a vague sense, but there was no blood, even though the soft vulnerable skin under her nails was now exposed. They wouldn't grow back.

It was night when Krista climbed out, and she was glad for it when she found even the artificial brightness of the street lamps was difficult to bear. It was like someone pulling open the curtains on the bedroom windows to jolt you awake, but a thousand times worse. She could get home before dawn, easily, but what would she do when she got there? Walk in? Wait on the front stoop until someone was leaving for the day—Mom for work or Dad to drive Jeanie to school and Baby Nicholas to daycare?

She settled on knocking. Krista was half-expecting that no one would answer, given it wasn't even light outside yet, but after a couple sluggish minutes she heard feet scuffling behind the door. As easily as when she lived at home and could tell who was walking past her bedroom door, she recognized her mother's footsteps approaching.

Mom looked good. Even just woken up, she was clean and composed, with a pink silk bathrobe open over a gray t-shirt and her honey-brown hair in a neat braid slung over one shoulder. She looked at Krista for a moment, shuffling in her novelty *Peanuts* pajama pants.

"Krista," Mom said. "You're back." Mom didn't smile. Her cheeks flushed pink.

"Can I come in?" Krista asked.

Mom looked at Krista's dirt-soaked shoes and a crease appeared between her eyebrows.

"Let me get you some slippers. Go ahead and take those off. I'll be right back."

Krista struggled out of her nice black church shoes, trying not to cover the welcome mat in wet powdery dirt. Mom appeared after a moment with purple slippers in hand—the ones Krista had saved up her allowance to buy—and she looked again worriedly at Krista's feet, gaze resting on her stained socks.

“Those too, please, sweetie. We just had the carpets cleaned.”

Krista peeled off the socks and left them in a pile with the shoes.

“I’ll get a shower started for you, honey. Does that sound okay? I’ll leave a change of clothes and towels for you on the counter, so you can just hop right on in and not worry about anything. A nice hot shower—I’m sure you’re cold.”

She wasn’t, but Krista nodded anyway. Mom winced with every delicate step Krista took across the pristine white carpets, as bits of dirt couldn’t help but shake off with the jostle of movement. She seemed relieved to finally get Krista in the bathroom, where she went to the shower immediately and started the water running. She held a hand under the spray to test out the temperature, and Krista got the first good look at herself in the mirror. Her face was smudged—the makeup the coroner had applied had been muddled in Krista’s climb to the surface. Her bangs and hair were stringy and limp, and the skin not tinged by makeup was gray.

When the temperature was just right, Mom stepped back, finally smiling at Krista. “Go ahead and climb in. I’ll get some clothes, okay? Don’t worry about a thing. Your father should be up by now, so I’ll go ahead and tell him, too. Try not to wake the baby, if you can. He’s been sick recently.”

As Krista scrubbed at her clammy skin under the spray of water, she chastised herself. What had she been anticipating, a welcome-home banner? It wasn’t as if they’d been expecting her.

She heard the door click open some minutes later, then close again after a few wordless seconds. Somewhere deeper in the house, she could just make out the muffled voices of her parents talking. Then there was the sound of a vacuum, no doubt being used to clean off any traces Krista left behind on her trek to the bathroom.

With a jolt, Krista realized she'd been scrubbing her left arm so hard that some of the skin started to peel. She only noticed when her soapy fingers came into contact with something that was decidedly not the strange rubbery texture she'd come to understand as her flesh. Her skin ripped as easily as wet paper, a swath in the center of her forearm.

Krista stared at the flesh through the steam, then brushed it back into place. Did she have glue in her bedroom?

She couldn't imagine she would ever be completely clean again, but once she had washed herself as much as possible, Krista dressed. Mom left her a pair of pajama pants that smelled like mothballs and one of Dad's old t-shirts. Krista slid into the purple slippers again.

When she stepped into the hallway, she heard the gurgle of Baby Nicholas from somewhere around the corner. When she reached the kitchen, there he was, strapped into his high chair while Mom spoon-fed him sugar-free applesauce. Dad was standing at the stove.

He turned at Krista's footfalls and smiled at her.

"Kris," Dad said, as warm and familiar as ever. He held an arm out to her.

Krista quickly crossed the kitchen and tucked herself under Dad's arm, hugging him around the waist. She was close enough to feel his shudder at contact with her clammy, tepid body. She pulled back, but he held her resolutely to his chest for another couple seconds before letting her step away.

"You just missed Jeanie," Dad said. "She joined track and field at school and has to go in for early morning practice nowadays."

Krista nodded.

"I was thinking," Dad continued, "you and I could do something together today while Nick is at daycare. Your choice."

Mom glanced over at them, cleaning up the now-empty applesauce container and paper towels she'd used to mop up Baby Nicholas's spills. She gave Dad a look. He ignored it.

Dad took Krista to the garden supply shop once Baby Nicholas had been safely deposited at St. Mary's Children's Center. Mom had long since left for work, and on the ride to drop off Baby Nicholas, Krista had sat in the backseat to be next to him. She couldn't tell if he recognized her. She spent the whole ride trying to make him laugh.

Dad got one of the giant shopping carts made to carry bags of soil amendments and bulky planters and steered it around the shop, never more than a couple feet away. He watched Krista examine the plants with a tired smile.

"Get whatever you think is best," he told her. "We haven't really been keeping up the garden without you, so you have a bit of a fresh slate. So long as you stick around to take care of it."

Krista reached out to touch a nearby marigold bush, lightly stroking a silky green leaf between two fingers.

"Don't worry about Mom," Dad said. "She's just worried."

They got the marigolds, as well as some daylilies and monardas. Dad insisted on buying new gardening gloves for Krista, too. She picked out ones with little embroidered ladybugs crawling over the thick gray fabric.

He left her to garden alone when they returned home. He had to eat lunch and do some chores, and Krista still wasn't hungry. He brought out all her old tools before disappearing back into the house with a promise that she could come in and say hi whenever she felt like it. He plopped his old gardening hat on her head to shield her from the sun.

Krista missed the feeling of sweat as she carefully and deliberately began to prepare the garden plots. The day was hot and the sun was high and overwhelming, but she may as well have been in her shady bedroom for all her body was reacting. Even though the glaring sunlight was enough to make her cower and grimace, hands shaking, her skin remained cool and dry. She kept having to stop to flatten the seam of the broken skin on her forearm back into place.

Krista didn't finish it all in one afternoon. By the time the sun was starting to set and Dad stepped out to go retrieve Baby Nicholas, she decided to give up for the day. It was easier in the dark, but neighbors had started to arrive home, and Krista couldn't escape the feeling of eyes on her back.

She stayed in her bedroom during family dinner. Jeanie gave her an awkward smile on her way in, and Mom had complimented her work in the yard, but she still didn't feel quite right returning to the table. She listened to them speak and laugh over Dad's slow-cooked roast while she sat on her bed, digging through her old art supplies to look for superglue.

Days passed. Then, weeks.

Jeanie couldn't seem to stand being in the room with her, always finding some reason to leave as soon as Krista appeared, and Mom treated Krista like a friendly house guest. The skin on the rest of her body started peeling, increasing in fragility and decay. Baby Nicholas started crying at the sight of her face every time Krista came near, so she did her best to stay away.

Krista spoke mostly to Dad. Sometimes she would lay on the cold laminate floor of the home office while Dad worked during the day, hiding from the sun and listening to Dad's fingers tapping on the keyboard while she smoothed her skin back. She couldn't keep herself from touching it, wishing that somehow, with enough effort and delicacy, she could urge it back into place.

She struggled to take care of the garden. Dad hadn't said a word about it, but Krista convinced herself that she could feel his disappointment every time she couldn't force herself to sit in the sun long enough to prune and weed. Still, Krista managed to keep the garden alive.

She spent her nights and evenings in her bedroom alone.

The decision came slowly. Inevitably.

Krista cleaned the dirt of her nice church shoes, which had been sitting on the stoop, just out of sight, since the day she returned home. She picked out a different dress. This one was a soft red, chosen to match the ladybugs on her gloves.

The next night, Krista painstakingly brushed her hair to perfection. With great effort and an inexperienced hand, she applied fresh makeup. She put on the shoes and dress, tucking the gardening gloves into a pocket in the skirt.

Krista left her bedroom to find Dad sitting on the couch. He had his reading glasses on and a book perched open in his lap. He looked up when Krista entered, immediately spotting her nice dress and freshly polished shoes.

He closed his book.

"Are you. . . ?" he started, unable to finish the question.

She nodded.

Krista was surprised when he began to cry. Even at the funeral, he hadn't cried, but now he had his face buried in his hands, shoulders heaving and breaths coming in quick, choking gasps.

For the first time since her return home, she dared to sit on the couch next to him. She placed a rotting hand on his shoulder. She felt the absence of her missing fingernails as she gripped as tightly as she could without getting too close.



“There’s nothing I can do?” Dad said eventually, his voice hoarse.

Krista thought of Baby Nicholas crying and the way Mom had looked that first morning she returned home. She thought of perfect white carpets. Of tearing skin.

She shook her head.

Dad hugged her through a shudder of revulsion, holding her for a long minute, before letting her walk to the door.

In the dark, Kirsta started for the cemetery.

That spring, the garden was a riot of color. Heaps of golden marigolds and burning orange daylilies grew strong and fearsome, spilling out of their plots and spreading like wildfire.

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