

## A Ghost in the Attic

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The frost ferns creep imperceptibly across the window panes. From my bed, dressed in all the clothes I own, I shiver beneath the wool army blanket my father left me. It is full of holes. The cold air of the attic makes my breath steam. I watch the moon rise behind the silvery vegetation. It is nearly full—two more nights. A dog howls from miles away.

My bed is an old mattress I dragged to the chimney wall. It is slightly warmer there, the bricks absorbing the last of the heat before it rises into the cloudless night sky. The attic is not a room I rent, but one I appropriated. After climbing up a trellis and onto the gable next door, I lifted myself to the sill and lowered myself through the attic window.

I've learned everyone's habits in the neighborhood so I won't be surprised or give a shock to anyone else, resulting in the police being called. I don't like snooping on people, but I am bored. It's like watching television is for some people: a way to while away long hours.

Despite my care to be quiet, removing my boots at the windowsill, the boy in the tiny bedroom on the floor beneath me reported ghosts. No one believed him, of course. I make sure the attic trapdoor remains secured with a board across it from the inside. Children are as clever as you expect them not to be. I have not forgotten how to be a child.

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Tonight, the boy has been sent to bed early. I heard his father yelling at him and something shattered. I roll to the edge of the mattress and remove the floorboard just above the ceiling fixture of his room where a chunk of plaster is missing. I feel the warmth stream through the hole, the moisture condensing into a cloud around my head.

The boy lights an old railroad lantern with a match and sets it on the table beside his bed. Next to the lantern, in a small wooden box, are his collection of quarters, which he lays out and counts in piles of four. Nearly ten bucks. Then he takes out a braided leather bracelet and, with the aid of his right hand and teeth, winds it around his left wrist and knots it. He climbs beneath the covers in his longjohns and flannel shirt. I know it is not polite to spy on others, but the boy reminds me of someone. He dims the lantern way down, but does not extinguish the flame.

I watch him bury his face in his pillow and sob, his head emerging now and then to gulp in air. He's in the vicinity of twelve years old, not too old for a boy to cry his heart out. In time he settles down and turns onto his back. The olive-drab army blanket on his bed is intact and tightly tucked in.

I replace the floorboard and roll over to the chimney. Pulling the blanket over my head, I breathe through one of its ragged holes. Trying to remember of whom the boy makes me think, I

return to scenes of sixth grade that still haunt me. Before tumbling off to sleep, I recall part of a poem from that time, I don't remember by whom.

A keening  
not the wind,  
reaching shadows  
not the trees,  
a shiver  
not from cold.

Running  
does not avail,  
nor screaming  
summon help.

So I bow  
to accept my fate.

\* \* \*

When my nocturnal rounds among restaurant garbage cans do not provide me enough to eat, I steal to the kitchen pantry downstairs. I do not attempt this unless famished, and only when I have seen or heard every member of the household leave for the day. I abscond with the crust of bread or wedge of cheese that might not be missed. My stomach flutters from the moment I remove the plank of wood securing the attic trapdoor until I have returned upstairs and replaced it.

The family dog, a wiry-haired mutt named Argus, pays me no mind, though our first encounter saw us running from each other as fast as six legs could carry us. Watchdog is not one of his talents. Now, the bribery of a treat from the pantry ensures his silence. And if he is left in the yard when I descend from the neighbor's trellis at night, he keeps it zipped even without a dog biscuit. As a boy, I'd always longed for a loyal pal like Argus.

I save half my bread for later so that my rumbling stomach doesn't keep me awake. I stash it beneath the loose floorboard so I don't have to think about it. Instead I contemplate making my presence known to the boy. I could be the ghost he heard in the attic, a congenial spirit in whom he can confide, pouring out his heart to someone who only listens, who offers advice only when asked, a grown-up—albeit deceased—he could trust.

Each morning the boy's father or, sometimes, his mother calls him downstairs. The boy's name is Tony. It will help knowing his name. I watch from the attic window on the street side as he leaves for school and comes home again. I wait for him to go up to his room after supper.

Tony turns in immediately and reads for a while, cowered beneath his blanket. From my vantage I cannot read the title, but the pages look like poetry. *Poor kid.*

When he has gone through his evening ritual of counting quarters and putting on the leather bracelet, I call down to him through the opening.

“Fear not,” I say, lowering my voice in an attempt to sound spooky but not frightening. “I am a friendly spirit.”

He bolts upright in bed and turns up the kerosene lantern. He dashes for the doorway.

Before he screams, or calls downstairs, I rush to add, “I can tell you things, Tony.”

“You mean, like secrets?” the boy asks, pausing, but inching toward the stairs.

“Maybe,” I reply in a cloud of breath. I think of the affair his father is having with Adele down the street, Tuesdays and Thursdays during the lunch hour. But he would not understand.

“Name one,” Tony insists.

I have to think of the right one, a small one, but one he can verify.

“It is Thomas next door who took your flashlight. He hid it beneath his back step.”

“I knew it,” he says, rather loudly.

His father hollers for him to pipe down and go to sleep. If Tony wants heat from downstairs, he must keep his door open. If he wants privacy and closes it, he must shiver.

“That’s all for tonight,” I tell Tony.

He dims his railway lantern, though much less than usual. I return to my bed, now cold, and watch Orion rise beyond the window frame. I doze off trying to remember at what age I stopped believing in ghosts.

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Life grows easier with the arrival of spring, but the attic turns hot during the day. I open the windows at either end of the peak just a crack from the top. I can’t imagine how I will endure summer.

There are two leaks when it rains. The noise on the tin roof is deafening. Lightning strikes terrifyingly close, rumbling the rafters. I collect rainwater when the gutter overflows and store it in milk jugs. I have to lean far out the window. When there’s enough water, I use it to

wash myself. If I need to pee, I go into an empty water jug, taking it to the downstairs toilet when it's full. The other business I do in an empty lot overgrown with sagebrush and chamisa. I don't eat much, so I don't go much.

I hear Tony opening and shutting the drawers of a small chest, frantically searching for something from the sound of it. He switches on his desk lamp and mutters to himself about being stupid. I decide he may want to talk.

"I don't think you're especially stupid, Tony. No more than anyone else."

"Thanks."

"Should I not tell you the truth?"

"No, you're right," he admits. "I can't find my leather bracelet. I can't lose it. A boy at school gave it to me. We're friends."

I realize it's a long shot, but I tell him to check under the bed. I can't afford to be wrong.

He turns the lamp up and crawls beneath the bed, emerging with his leather wrist band.

"You're a genius!" he declares.

"No, just a genie."

Tony's father hollers upstairs for him to get his "ass in bed" or he can expect another whipping. The boy switches off the desk lamp.

"Another?" I ask the boy in a whisper.

"Later," he says, crawling into bed and turning down the lantern on his bed table.

I go back to my mattress, now sitting beneath the open window not visible from the street. I have trouble falling asleep. My memory smarts from the whippings I received from my father with his leather belt. A streetcar conductor, he hung his heavy coin changer from it. At other times, if he bypassed the tavern on his way home, I might merit a quarter. I was never sure which one of him was going to walk through the door. Neither was my mother.

Nearly asleep, I am jolted awake by the memory of a piece of braided leather I carried with me for years. It was at the bottom of the knapsack someone stole from me at the train depot in Mewoo, Kansas. At last I fall asleep to the rhythmic swaying of the train and the clacking of the tracks beneath me. I wonder where I will awaken.

\* \* \*

Tony comes home from school in the company of another lanky boy. They jostle at the front gate and push each other onto the lawn, wrestling in the wet grass. I want to warn Tony that he'll be punished for getting his clothes wet and dirty, but I keep quiet. Ghosts appear only under cover of dark.

Tony and his buddy race up the walkway. The front door slams and a herd of feet rushes up the steps to his room. I remove the floorboard.

The boys are both dressed in worn Levi's, T-shirt, and gym shoes. They sit at the edge of the bed, speaking softly. I dare not lean down closer.

Tony takes his braided leather bracelet from the wooden box and hands it to his friend.

"You put it on me, Lance," he says. "I'll never take it off."

The boy ties it around Tony's wrist. The boys poke each other and laugh. Lance pushes his buddy backwards onto the bed. Each struggles half-heartedly for the upper hand. They collapse, giggling, into each other's arms. They entwine their blue-jeaned legs and kiss each other frantically on the lips. I replace the floorboard.

*Poor child, I think. You'll have a hard life. But everyone has a hard life. A much harder life, then.*

I feel the cool streak of an unexpected tear roll down my cheek. Or maybe it is just a drop of sweat. I hope it will rain and cool down soon. It is too hot to sleep.

\* \* \*

Tony slams his door and calls up to me. Needing a proper ghostly name, I told him I used to be called Sixtus van Thorson III in life. He calls me Mr. Six. It is his last day of grade school. He is thirteen. I expect him to be in good spirits. I like to think he looks forward to our talks.

"Help me," he wails. "I'm going to die."

He falls onto his bed, looking up at the hole in the ceiling. I pull back so the flickering lantern light does not glint off my face.

"We're all going to die, Tony, though at your age it's still a theoretical concept."

"Lance's dad forbids him to see me—ever again. He caught us under the stairs, just kissing, for Pete's sake."

He pounds the bed with his fists. Then he whimpers.

“Be cool, Tony. The first broken heart seems like it will never heal. But it does.”

“I don’t want to hear this,” he says defiantly, getting to his feet and standing right beneath the hole.

“You want comfortable lies?”

“No, but why is the truth always so depressing?”

“Not always,” I tell him, “just mostly. You will have other loves and other heartaches. But you’re a brave kid. I know you’re tough. You’ll survive.”

“I don’t want to survive. I want to die.”

“Too easy, Tony. Besides, there’ll be times so stellar that no shadow can dim them, even in memory.”

He rips the leather bracelet from his wrist and flings it into a corner.

“There will never be anyone else,” he squalls.

I want to tell him the two shortest spans of time are *always* and *never*.

“But there will be others, my boy. Would you like to know their names?”

I envision several faces and know who they are, but whether they are in my past or Tony’s future, I can’t say.

Tony goes to his chest of drawers and takes out his flashlight. He aims it up at the hole.

“I bet I know who you are. You’re like the ghost from Dickens’ story—the ghost of the future, my future. Do you remember me, Mr. Six?”

“You do remind me of someone, Tony.”

“Will you stay with me, Mr. Six? I mean be nearby, wherever I go? I have no one else to talk to except my Mom. Sometimes we read to each other. But I can’t talk to my Dad. I feel so lonely sometimes. And I’m afraid.”

“It’s a brave man who admits his fear and carries on.”

“Well, if you’re my personal ghost, Mr. Six, then I should be able to take you along no matter where I move, right? Even if I wind up living in a basement flat, you’d still be my ghost in the attic.”

“I’ll do my best, my boy,” I assure him, “but I’m not sure how it works. Rules are meant to be broken, though, right?”

He turns down the lantern and strips to his boxers. He lies on his back on the scratchy blanket. The recollection gives me a shiver.

“OK, Tony,” I tell him.. “I promise I’ll be there, even if you can only hear me in your head.”

“Good night, Mr. Six.”

Whether I’m the ghost of the boy’s future or he the ghost of my past, it’s impossible to say.

I close the book and dim the old railroad lantern hanging from a bent nail in the rafter beside my bed. Lightning flashes in the distance, but I sleep through it all.

\* \* \*

### Epilogue

“There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.”

— Albert Einstein

The poem quoted herein is “Nightmare” by the Italian poet Bapellio who spent the summer of 1816 in the company of Lord Byron, Polidori, and the Shelleys on Lake Geneva, Switzerland, where Mary Shelley wrote “Frankenstein.”