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# Mirrors of Ourselves: The Spector and Its Reflections

Sara Porcaro  
*sararaztresen@gmail.com*

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MIRRORS OF OURSELVES: THE SPECTER  
AND ITS REFLECTIONS

By Sara Porcaro

An Honors Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for Honors

In

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Faculty of Arts and Sciences

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>THE GRAY MILE .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>THE CORNER EXORCIST .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>THE POST-LIFE REHABILITATION CENTER.....</b>	<b>41</b>

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## The Gray Mile

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At the GPS's demand, the green hatchback turned onto the highway. The early Saturday morning was quiet; not a single car occupied the road, and the previous night's rain had left the air shrouded in a pale, drowsy fog. That morning, the young couple in the car were traveling to their favorite New Hampshire camping grounds for the weekend. It was supposed to clear up and be nice and sunny, but even if it didn't, the cooler of liquor in the trunk would make the heavy mist feel just fine.

Jana had refused to drive so early in the morning—"I can't read GPS directions when I'm fully awake!"—so her boyfriend, Alex, took the wheel first. There were bags under his eyes too, but even tired, he was better at matching the GPS map to the real road than she was. However, they had only been in the car for five minutes, and Jana was already struggling to find a comfortable position on the old leather passenger seat. She hated being stuck in the car.

It was 5:03 AM by the time they hit the highway, and their projected arrival time was 8:07 AM. For the first part of their trip, the GPS told them they'd be on this highway for seventy miles. That was about an hour right there—an hour of foggy, abandoned concrete. They passed the first of a thousand exit signs, Exit 8 going to Route 2, and Jana's fingers, wrapped around her phone, began pressing buttons and clicking around for an application she'd been obsessively checking since the beginning of her final spring semester.

Alex glanced over and saw her tap the LinkedIn icon, and he sighed. "Jana," he said, "come on. Just relax with that."

Jana sighed and laid her head against the seat. "I can't just 'relax with that.' I need to get more applications out."

“We just graduated, babe.” He glanced at her and flashed a small smile, then tossed his disheveled hair out of his eyes. “There’s no rush. Besides, there’s not going to be much signal up in the mountains anyway. We’re on a trip to celebrate, remember? Not to worry about the future.”

The app never opened, her data non-existent already in this little dead spot on the highway. With a huff, she closed the app and put her phone in her hoodie pocket.

“Yeah, but I have a reason to worry. You’re so lucky your dad put in a good word for you at his company.”

Alex shrugged. “I guess. It’s not my end-goal, though, it’s more like a pit-stop job. I’ve still got some looking to do if I want to really get into computer tech.”

“But it’s better than nothing.” Jana slumped in her seat.

“True. But really, there’s nothing you can do about it this weekend, so just try and relax. Take a nap; I know you’re tired.”

As the car rumbled through the fog, a yawn escaped her. There was no use fighting the heaviness of her eyelids, or the sleepy haze in her head. Jana shifted and curled up into as comfortable a position as she could manage, then tugged her hoodie tighter around her and closed her eyes.

Despite her twitching fingers itching to keep hunting through job applications, she slept for what felt like a full night, with long and twisting dreams about nothing in particular. Normally, she would have been woken up every minute or so by the movements of the car, but this was one of the best snoozes she’d had on a road trip.

When she finally woke up, she rubbed her eyes and peered out at the road. The fog seemed like it had gotten a little heavier, and the road was still free of any other drivers. Maybe everyone decided to stay home in all this gray, cloudy nothingness.

Jana checked her phone. It said 5:03 A.M. The GPS still projected seventy miles to go. Disoriented, Jana blinked at her phone and rubbed her eyes again, harder this time.

“That was a quick nap,” Alex said with a smile.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

But already, her lower body was feeling the discomfort of sitting for a long time. She twisted in her seat, with her legs rammed up against the door, and she could just see out the passenger window. She stared out into the endless, sleepy fog, and while she wanted to feel giddy as the car rumbled along—she’d graduated! she was going on her first vacation as a free lady!—she couldn’t. She caught her reflection in the glass, her big eyes with bruise-purple circles underneath.

It had taken her six years to get her bachelor’s in English, which had been her favorite subject in high school. In college, she had eaten up class after class on different types of literature, participated every chance she got in her seminar on women, crime, and representation, dived wholeheartedly into the theories of Derrida, Butler, and Gubar. But around her third year, the sudden death of her sister in a car accident had made it all but impossible to focus on more than one class at a time. Her transcript was smirched with withdrawals.

If she could’ve just kept it together—

Another flash of green passed by, another exit sign. Jana craned her neck to read it so that she might distract herself from those ugly memories, hoping to squash them back out of sight. The sign was for Exit 8, going on Route 2.

“Didn’t we already,” Jana sat up again, quickly checking to see if she could recognize any of the empty surroundings in all that fog, “didn’t we already pass exit 8?”

“No, we just got on the highway.” Alex chuckled and shook his head. “Go back to sleep.”

She stared at him, and he glanced back, still smiling. Jana blinked, and her eye drifted to the fuel gauge. It wasn’t full, but that morning, it had said it was full. Though, maybe she had really been half asleep when she got in the car and misread the gauge. With a huff, she settled into her seat again and tried to sleep, but she wasn’t tired anymore. No matter how long she sat there with her eyes closed, she couldn’t drift off again.

Instead, the cool surface of the phone screen crept its way under her fingertips once more, and Jana found herself opening LinkedIn again and checking to see if it would load. For a brief moment, it did, and a list of job titles came up on the screen, the 4G icon a welcome sight at the top of her phone.

She was desperate to get into the workforce and do something with her passion for reading and writing. All over Google, people crowed about the infinite possibilities for English majors, how their skills in writing made them an invaluable asset to the workplace, but any industry she perused—publishing, advertising, public relations, social media marketing—wanted *years* of experience, even at entry-level. And since she didn’t live in some fancy state like New York, she was limited in the types of places she could apply for now.

Her finger nearly burned from how fast she was scrolling through names, positions, places. The words whirred through the phone screen, almost too fast to process. But maybe, if she looked a little harder, she’d find something—

“Jana,” Alex said with a sigh, “come on. Just relax with that.”



The app froze, and the 4G dropped to a G, then an E. The pink-cased phone became a pale brick in her hands as LinkedIn went dead. Her teeth ground together as she stared at him.

Whatever dead zone they were still in, though, it refused to let LinkedIn load on her phone no matter how many times she reopened it. She closed it and stared out the window, already fidgety, wishing they could simply teleport to the campground rather than have to drive all this way. And if there hadn't been any fog, she could at least watch the trees whirl past.

But outside, it was all the same gray canvas. A blur of wispy, soft coils rushed over the car's mirrors and cushioned its metal frame. Jana rolled the window down and stuck her hand outside, watching her arm disappear as the soft fog took hold of her. The smell of fresh, dewy air, the cool kiss of mist, it made her eyelids feel heavy, and made her slump a little in her seat. Jana pulled her arm back in, closed the window, and stared out into the blank haze until she was dozing again. She slept, haunted by swirls of images both foreign and familiar, and by one repeating line:

“Thank you for your application, but we've chosen another candidate at this time. We'll keep your application on file in case new opportunities arise.”

Jana woke with a gasp, as though she'd been held underwater for a minute. She dragged air into her lungs and heaved it back out, her heart knocking wildly in her chest as she clutched the armrest.

“Whoa, Jana, you okay?” Alex glanced over, his brows furrowed in his concern.

“Oh my God, I had an awful dream,” she croaked.

“Must've been one of those falling dreams, huh?” His lips pulled back in a small smile. “I hate those. You just start falling asleep, then bam! You wake up in a panic.”

Jana shook her head. “No, no, this was a regular dream, but it was awful, it just—”

“Really? A full dream? You only just closed your eyes.”

Whatever Jana was going to say about her dream died in her throat. Her whole body ached from sleeping in such a tightly curled position, and she cracked her back. With how loud her spine popped, she figured they must have been traveling nearly an hour. She pawed the seat for her phone. When she checked it, the numbers practically laughed at her.

5:03 AM. Seventy miles to go.

“I think the GPS is frozen,” she muttered. “It says we still have seventy miles to go.”

“What? Jana, we just got on the highway.”

Jana whipped around to look at him. “Are you kidding me? We’ve been driving for over half an hour, at least!”

“You’re so dramatic,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Just be patient; we’ll get there before you even know it.”

Her eyes drifted again to the gas gauge. It was half empty. She pointed to it and barked, “Look!”

“What?”

“Your gas! Look at it!”

“What about it?”

“It was full when we got into the car this morning, and now it’s half empty!”

“What? No way.” He chuckled and shook his head. “It must have just been less than we thought; we can’t have burned through a half a tank of gas this quickly.”

“Well, clearly we did!”

“Jana, come on. You’re being silly.”

She scowled at him and stared out the window instead, trying to see anything in that awful fog. A flash of green came from the gray fog, and Jana squinted, eager to read it. When she did, her spine went alight with prickles, and her fingernails dug into her palms.

“Pull over,” she whispered as bile rose in her throat. “Alex, pull over. I’m gonna be sick.”

“What? Really?”

“Yes! Pull over!”

Even though there were no cars on the road, Alex turned on his blinker and looked over his shoulder anyway. The car scraped over the rumble strips and sat in the breakdown lane, and Jana burst out of the car. Her tight and aching legs cracked at the knees, and she wrapped her arms around herself as she hunched over, waiting for the fluids to exit. They never did. She dry heaved instead.

Alex’s broad palm ran up and down her back, and he asked, “You okay?”

“No.” Her voice barely left her tight throat, and she dragged herself up to look at him, her eyes wild. “Why aren’t we moving?”

He blinked at her, and she shook the phone that was still tightly clutched in one hand.

“It says we’re not moving!” Her finger smashed against the screen. “We’re still at the same time, same mileage! Why aren’t we moving? Why?”

Tears stung her eyes, and she took quick, shallow breaths. Her constant tapping had exited the GPS, opening her e-mail instead. But the app didn’t open, thanks to the dead zone; it just loaded the messages she’d already seen a billion times before.

Most of them were rejection messages for the applications she’d sent over the week.

“Hey,” Alex whispered. He took hold of her shoulders. “You’re okay. We’re definitely moving, all right? Maybe your GPS just isn’t updating. Do you have any 4G right now?”

“No.”

“Okay, see? We’ll use my phone; it gets better internet.”

The fog brushed by them, leaving the air almost too thick with moisture to breathe. No matter which direction Jana looked, she couldn’t see farther than a few feet down the road.

“Jana,” Alex whispered, “do you wanna get back in the car?”

His hand gently touched her shoulder, and she sucked in a breath of mist that felt like lead in her lungs. From some long ways off, they heard a crow caw—a raspy, grating sound. Jana didn’t want to get back on the road, but what other option did she have? It wasn’t like she could turn around and walk home on the highway. There was nothing she could do but keep going, even though a sinking feeling in her stomach told her it was pointless.

“Yeah, let’s just go,” she said, her voice brittle, her shoulders slumping.

They both got back into the car. Alex punched in the address on his phone’s GPS, then handed it to Jana. She didn’t look at it; she simply stared ahead, into the blanketing void.

“See?” Alex craned over her. “It’s working now. We got a connection.”

She still didn’t look at the phone. She didn’t have to. Every now and then, she’d get a flash of green out of the corner of her eye, but she didn’t need to look at that, either. She stared straight ahead, looking endlessly onward at the never-changing gray. But the more she looked, the more she knew.

There was nothing in the fog.

## The Corner Exorcist

She'd had a lot of firsts with this job—first client, first tip, first cleansing, first poltergeist, first *demon*, that was a good one—but she never stopped being surprised at the “firsts” she'd dig up in the field, one way or another. Such was the nature of the job.

Each work day ended in something cleansed—whether scrubbed off and wrung out or soaped and soothed. Ghosts, poltergeists, demons, fairies, she could get rid of them all, for a price. “The Corner Exorcist,” her first clients called her, and it was a neat name that she stuck to all her social media marketing.

But as she slipped into her apartment, the door closing slowly behind her, the lock clicking in place, and her back leaning against the splintering wood, the darkness seemed to ask the question for her: Did she really just kidnap her client's haunt?

Kidnapping a haunt.

Talk about a first.

From her purse came a gurgle of inquiry. Her tote bag pushed against her side, and her collection of tools clanked as her refugee shifted within. Matty turned the light on and opened her tote, watching a smooth, perfectly round orb poke out of the bag, then stare up with two little eyes, bright like the pinprick stars in the sky.

“ ?”

She blinked, still not adjusted to the little spirit's language. Pictures of things flooded her instead of words, giving her a message so clear and precise that language couldn't hope to translate it perfectly. Whatever this thing was, it was clearly never human, and had never been around humans—the only way a spirit would communicate in primitive pre-words like this. But it wasn't some simple animal spirit, either. She didn't know what to make of it.

“Yeah,” Matty whispered, “go ahead. Look around.”

It stared up at her a second longer before floating, with some difficulty, out of her purse. The spirit was a perfect circle, no bigger than a junior soccer ball, and in the light, its smooth body reflected murky swirls of color, as though it were made of the oil that leaks from cars. The longer it drifted along, the more its round body began to droop, as though the oil were about to drip from it.

This little thing wasn't bad—just scared. The way this poor spirit had curled up and hid behind her client's potted plant, shivering and squeaking in terror, made her heart heavy. She couldn't have washed him away and gone home with a clean conscious.

As it looked around, she couldn't help feeling a little embarrassed about her studio's grungy state. With the light on, the dim, bare bulb cast a harsh, yellowish light on the already off-white walls of the studio. Her couch, a ratty black futon she'd gotten for a serious discount at a second-hand furniture store, was covered in pillows and two childhood blankets. A tiny T.V. on a flimsy Walmart stand sat in the corner, hiding a water stain on the wall and housing her PlayStation 4—a Christmas present from her grandparents. The brown carpet was smirched with stains, and Matty forgot which ones were there before she moved in and which ones she'd put there herself. The kitchen had an island, but she hardly ate there, let alone cooked, as seen by the empty Chinese takeout bucket beside the futon. As a result, the kitchen was the only nice part of the studio to look at.

Matty shrugged the feeling off. This was a goopy spirit, probably from the sewers, to boot—what would it care? And grunginess aside, it was home. She wouldn't trade it for the pretty suburbs of Great Barrington that she grew up in—not if she had to stay with her parents.

“☠! ☠!”

Matty snapped out of her thoughts and turned to the squeaking, helpless spirit, who'd gotten its face stuck in the Chinese carton. She moved to help, but as she watched it twist and turn in a desperate effort to get free, she couldn't help laughing. Finally, it got the carton off itself, its bubble form losing shape for just a moment, like a wiggling bead of water.

“☹️”

“I'm sorry, buddy,” she said as she sat down next to it, “I don't mean to laugh.”

Matty opened her arms to the spirit, who came bouncing into her lap. It felt strange to touch, like a smooth, cold marble, but she didn't mind. As she looked at it, she still couldn't believe she'd let it come home with her, but a budding giddiness swept the thought away. Her first companion! She couldn't quite call it a pet, but it was close enough to the kitten she never had, the birthday present promised but never delivered.

“I think,” she cocked her head side to side, pondering what she would call the little orb, “I think you're a Jimmy. How's that? Can I call you Jimmy?”

“♪♪~”

“Cool. I'm Matty.”

“❤️”



How does one explain ghosts to a family that doesn't have the time to listen—or to understand? It took a while for young Matty to learn that she shouldn't try, that her words fell on deaf ears.

“Your imaginary friends want cake?” Her mother's words droned at the cutting board, the *thunk-thunk-thunk* of her slicing a bell pepper almost drowning her out.

“They're not imaginary, Mom—!”

“Tell them I said that cake is for dessert, not lunch.”

She told her young friend—a boy who died of tuberculosis in 1886. He pouted and sank into the foundation of the house for a couple hours until he got over it.

But she got other things to him sometimes. His favorite had been Boston cream pies, and as a result, she asked for two slime-filled pastries whenever her parents would be going to Dunkin’ Donuts. Sometimes they gave her a bag of pastries, but most times she got a string of half-apologies and excuses. It didn’t matter all too much to her; she hated their gooey filling and only wanted them for her friend.

Only he couldn’t eat them. They went stale and crusty by her bedside as she watched him try, over and over, to pick them up and take a bite, only for his hands to pass through them like a hologram. He never learned how to pick things up or move things around like the other ghosts did—the spirit of a wrinkled grandmother was a pro at moving things around on her—and he probably never would’ve been able to eat them, even if he had. He burst into tears one day, sick of having what he wanted most dangled right in front of him, yet being unable to reach out and just grab it. Matty never asked for Boston cream donuts again.

As she got older, she hardly asked for much of anything—hardly had the chance to. The house, her parents said, was very expensive, and Mommy and Daddy had to work so very late. Around middle school, they started working so early that they were both often gone before Matty even woke up in the morning, and she only found out because of the sticky-note they’d leave on the bathroom mirror. Then, at night, as she was tucked in her room, her parents would slip in separately after a long day’s work, sometimes with a hello that Matty couldn’t hear through her headphones. When they spoke to her, it was to commend her for her independence, and the bruise-purple circles under their eyes made Matty simply smile and shrug—no big deal. Family,



in her mind, became synonymous with yellow squares of scribbles, soft green bills, and grease-stained take-out boxes. It was a wonder that she managed to stay so thin and shapeless.

Maybe if she'd had siblings, it would've been easier. Flesh-and-blood friends, someone to call or go places with, would've helped, too. But she was an only child, quiet at home, quieter at school, lost in music and T.V. and the internet, filling her room with sketchpads and video games and books. By high school, she was used to being alone—save for the misty, transparent wisps of the dead that stopped by the empty nest she called home.



An angry alarm went off in Matty's ear and pulled her out of a dream that she instantly forgot. She pawed around the futon for her phone and shut the alarm off, then rolled over and stared up at the ceiling. Good thing she had one window in here to let the sunlight in—else she wouldn't be able to see the huge water stain on the white plaster above her.

Her foggy thoughts drifted to the day's clients: two college girls. That seemed to be her main clientele, with how often they went screwing with the supernatural as a fun frat party game. She'd seen clusters of students all jittery and panicked after using an Ouija board—and three-quarters of the time, their "haunting" was a false alarm, a supernatural guilt trip gone wild.

But every time, Matty had taken a good, long look at their dorms—her eyes constantly drifting to what textbooks she'd find laying around—and she'd feel tempted to reach out and grab one. Especially when she saw the easels, the paints and tablets, the sketchpads, of the art majors—if she could just have that tablet, if she could just hold it once, she'd be in heaven.

Matty had wanted to go to MassArt, to major in graphic design, but she hadn't had any money to go to school with. She couldn't save for it, either, as she had no job, nor any way to get to a job in the first place. Matty still didn't even have her license. She figured, with how much

her parents had worked all her life, that they'd have put money towards her school, or a car, before their four-bedroom house in the suburbs. Bitterness bubbled up in her, a light froth.

After a while, the sleepy haze lifted and took the dark thoughts with it. She reached out a hand to where the spirit had stayed that night, only to find it empty. Matty sat up and looked around, twisting this way and that to the point that her spine cracked in a few places.

“Jimmy?” Matty called as she rubbed her back. “Jimmy, where'd you go, buddy?”

“💧😊”

Because there was no sound with these mental pictures, Matty couldn't determine where he was by listening. She only had his little clue, but when she didn't see him in the sink, she jumped off the futon to check the bathroom. Even then, he was nowhere to be seen—not in the sink, not in the tub.

“Jimmy? Come out.”

A moment passed before the toilet lid lifted a little, and those two pearly eyes shone in the dark porcelain basin. Jimmy made a cheery *brrp*, the toilet water plapping as he bounced against the lid.

“Jimmy!” Matty ripped the lid up and pointed to the bath mat. “Get outta there!”

“😞💧...”

Matty stared in horror at the toilet, now covered in oily slime that shone with dingy purples and greens in the bathroom light. Jimmy shrank further back into the toilet, chittering to himself. But once Matty shoved the mat in front of the toilet, he reluctantly crawled out, trailing his gooey slime with him. Matty grit her teeth as she took her rattiest towel and used it to dry him off—which he didn't like one bit.

“Jeez. That’s gross, buddy—don’t hang out in there. You really must be some kind of sewer haunt, huh?” Matty grumbled, all while collecting Lysol spray, a bucket, and a sponge from under the sink.

“X! ☹️”

Matty looked back at Jimmy, who had tossed his towel off and flattened into a sad little puddle. She sighed and turned back to the mucky toilet.

Thanks to Jimmy’s mess, Matty didn’t have nearly as much time to eat and get ready for the exorcism, and so there she was, running for the bus with the last bite of a granola bar crammed in her cheek pockets and a plastic bag of oddities jingling with her every step.

Granted, she might not have needed even half of these things. Most exorcisms weren’t what the movies made them out to be—some dangerous and exhausting battle for souls—but just a case of a ghost needing someone to talk to, or some issue to figure out. At worst, it was a case of a ghost or some other spirit overstaying its welcome and needing to be peeled off the place, washed away and dissolved from the very floorboards with her homemade solutions.

But getting rid of an angry person’s soul was the worst, if for no other reason than because it reminded her of the first time she had to do that in her own home. The spirit had been a flapper. Lola, always scowling, always bitter over her untimely demise in a car accident, had grown meaner and meaner, until even the other spirits were upset. The spirit of an old gardener, Westley, taught Matty a thing or two about herbs when Lola was dormant: which ones would drive a ghost away, which ones she already had right in her kitchen, and she used them just the way he showed her on one of the many long days her parents were out of the house.

And after the scariest tantrum of her (after)life, Lola fled.

The bus rumbled up to her stop after a while, and she hopped off, mystery bag of items in hand, towards the Emerson dorms. She stared down the whole street and wondered what it would be like to live in a dorm, to make friends with roommates.

Matty was met at the dorm entrance by a squirrely, frizzy-haired girl with thick-rimmed glasses. Her and her pale, pouty-lipped roommate had been dealing with some disconcerting writings on their bathroom mirror, things that didn't make sense and felt almost menacing as a result, but as soon as they greeted Matty and told her the updates, she heard the problem loud and clear. In fact, she saw it.

"I'm not trying to scare you!" It was an older man wearing a rumpled business suit, his tie and first buttons undone and revealing a bit of rope burn around his neck. "I just—I did it too soon! I shouldn't have, but I did! I'm sorry!"

When this older man saw Matty looking square at him, saw her listening and not even paying attention to the girls, he nearly dissolved with relief right there. Matty dropped her tools down on the squirrely girl's bed and invited the frazzled spirit aside to talk.

Old Jones let her see the twinkle of the other side's light not long after.

Matty saged the place down just in case, rang her special bell a few times, and sprayed some of her homemade Ghost-Be-Gone on the especially yucky-feeling areas. Ghosts tended to leave behind a bit of a weird paranormal thumbprint wherever they went—nothing a quick wipe-down couldn't fix. She looked like a hired housekeeper at one point, with yellow rubber gloves and a mask on as she spritzed her concoction and rubbed it into the surfaces. But within half an hour, it was like Jones had never even been there.

And once the girls, relieved at having their house clean and fresh, slipped a pretty green Franklin into Matty's hand, she, too, left without a trace.



It was another three hours before she kicked her door open, one bag of groceries on each arm. She'd been looking at recipes from various food blogs for some time, hoping to cut back on take-out, and this was the first day she'd had the patience to try buying food that wasn't pre-made and frozen. She was hoping that Jimmy would sit with her while she cooked and make it a little less boring—maybe even talk to her about himself.

What she noticed, after she put down the rustling plastic bags, was the sound of water running. When Matty looked up towards the kitchen sink, she saw it running—saw the oil coating the basin and the counter, the murky water threatening to lap over the side—and yelped.

She nearly slipped rushing to turn the water off, and when she looked down, she saw the very tiny eyes of Jimmy peering up at her. It seemed as though he had taken up the whole sink, with how oily the water was, but when she fished around in the sink to unblock the drain, she couldn't feel her smooth new friend—just the slime. Panic gripped her as she watched the oil slick disappear, Jimmy's eyes lost amidst the shine of the water, and she swished her hand through the rapidly draining liquid until she felt the tiniest little marble at the bottom.

“Jimmy,” she breathed, fishing him out of the sink, “are you okay?”

He was so small. A literal marble, gleaming dull blue, green, and yellow, too small to even make a sound. But little tendril-like arms sprouted from him, and he looked at himself, at the colors. In the little puddle in Matty's palm, he let his tendrils drop, and he stared at the muck. He began to balloon in her palm until she had to hold him with two hands.

“Jesus, buddy,” Matty sighed as her heart hammered, “you nearly washed yourself away. What were you thinking? Look at the mess you made!”

“... 🐙☹️”

His body quivered as though he were hiccupping, getting ready to cry, and he still didn't look up, instead deflating a little in her hands. Matty went rigid.

“Do you,” she almost couldn't bear to ask, “do you want to wash yourself away?”

He shook his head. “!”

“What? Water, what about it? What?” Matty shook him, and he jiggled like gelatin.

“Come on, what? Do you just like to be in it?”

Jimmy's eyes swirled around him as he peeped his complaints about the motion, his body rocking with wobbly aftershocks. Once he was stable, he nodded, bouncing in her hands.

Matty sighed and tossed him up in the air. He sank low to the ground, hovering just above the floor before floating back up to her eye level, where he watched her go through her crowded cupboards. She was looking for something big to fill with water—a pot, a bucket, anything. Eventually, after moving to her supply closet, she found a clear mop bucket, not too deep, but deep enough to submerge him completely, and filled it with water.

“”

Once she set it on the far counter, she shook a finger at Jimmy and said, “Now don't go melting and disappearing on me. Okay? You won't disappear on me, will you?”

Jimmy shook his head, and Matty let him settle into the bucket. The water mucked up soon enough, as though he'd dropped ink into the bucket, and soon all the water had gone oily. But Jimmy hung his little arms over the side of the bucket and made his cheery *brrp* noise, bouncing slightly. The water made a *plap-plap-plap* sound as it slapped against him.

“Be careful, bud, don't make a mess on my counter.” Matty said as she cleaned up the sink. She glanced up at him. “You must be more like a fairy, right? Some wild spirit?”

“”

“That’s cool.”

Matty out the groceries she needed for her first attempt at cooking—cod, some vegetables for slaw, tortillas. She got her laptop, too, setting it on the kitchen island, and she noticed Jimmy’s happy plapping stopped. When she came back, she saw him staring at the cod.

“We’re having fish tacos,” she said. “Or, I am, anyway.”

Jimmy’s tendrils came together as he stared at the fish. Eventually he looked back up at her, and a big, silvery hole opened in him. His tendril pointed into it, then patted under it, as though patting a belly. Matty’s brow creased in confusion.

“What?”

He pointed to the fish, then to that silvery hole again.

Matty blinked, then leaned against the island and smiled, unable to believe it. This spirit was insisting on eating something—how interesting! She wondered if that were even possible for something to go in him without falling out. Jimmy sank into the water and watched her, gurgling from under the muck as though he was nervous.

“You want some?” Matty asked, chuckling.

Jimmy rose up a little and nodded.

“Um,” she shrugged, “are heads and tails okay?”

“♥”

And so Matty watched, with complete fascination, as the chum she chopped off her cod went down that silver hole and did not just splat to the bottom of the bucket (she stuck her hand in there to check). Whatever this spirit was, he was something entirely different from everything else she’d encountered. And the way his sides frilled in delight, as though he were growing gills, Matty wasn’t sure how to even begin trying to figure it out.

But with him satisfied, and her laptop playing some upbeat playlist on Pandora, Matty could finally start trying to make her first real meal in a long time. Again, as she studied her fish taco recipe, she heard the *plap-plap-plap*, and she turned to see Jimmy bouncing with his tendrils up, his sides still frilled. He squealed, wiggling his tendrils as though dancing, and as Matty watched him, her chest erupted into flutters.

What a good boy.



The bucket had two rules: no getting slime outside the bucket, and no leaving the bucket without drying off. Luckily for Matty, Jimmy was very good about those rules—save for when they had a bit too much fun in the kitchen. Even then, Jimmy didn't get too much gunk on the counters, and his quirky little chirrup made up for what mess he did make.

It was an alien feeling for Matty, being able to come home and be comfortable in that ratty old studio. No longer did she simply huddle up on her futon in the dark, her laptop the only light. No longer did she spend hours staring at her T.V. and wishing that she could be the person on the screen—be it the woman trying on a wedding dress, or some heroine in a new comedy that had a hundred friends to call on at a moment's notice. (Perhaps she did have that last bit, but what good was a friend that couldn't grow up with her? That she could literally walk through?)

No longer did she eat only once or twice a day, picking at the graveyard that was her refrigerator and wasting money on greasy takeout that made her sick. And where she was once eager to leave her apartment, she now found herself regretting having to go while Jimmy still slept, curled up under blankets and pillows.

It had been too long since she had a spirit friend like this. By the time she left her parents some couple years ago, all her friends had gone—either moved on or simply wandered



somewhere else in their long journey towards the light. They never stayed in one place too long anyway. She had hoped, when she packed up all her worldly belongings and gone to Boston, that she would make some new friends, but there were none that were much interested in spending time with a young girl, even if she could see them.

Apparently, the night afterlife of Boston was much more exciting than that in the suburbs, the dark hours of the city ringing with the laughter and whispers of ghouls having a good time together. After a series of rebuffs from the first ghosts she'd passed, she told herself that she had no time for supernatural friends as she did before. Matty needed to find a way to make money; she had come to the city for a fresh start, hoping to find some close-by work, and with luck, qualify for good financial aid to go to MassArt with. Though, despite years of being stuck in a room essentially by herself, without any ghostly visitors, the darkness of her studio—the sheer silence—made her feel truly closed off to the world.

Despite her low expectations of the work she'd find in the city, it was a poster on a streetlamp near Chinatown that caught her eye—a desperate plea for help with a chaotic and disruptive force that was spooking an apartment full of recent Boston University graduates. It was Matty's eighth night in the city alone, funded only by pawning all of the useless jewelry her mother bought her over the years, and she'd called the number and gotten the details she needed. She knew by what she heard that the spirit in question wasn't in need of an exorcism, but just someone to listen. And these people were offering money for her to come down—something she was going to run out of very quickly on her own in Boston.

She'd tucked the flyer away that night, buoyed by the luck she'd finally stumbled upon.



“Jimmy!”

Matty had burst inside with another armful of groceries. It had been a long week of work, beating her all time high weekly record of twelve exorcisms, and her wallet was bursting with money that she could spend on herself and her companion. She was excited to show Jimmy something new that she'd bought for them both. But there was no warm greeting for her—no bouncing ball of oil to welcome her home. She looked around and saw the little spirit at the window, his tendrils pressed against the glass as he stared outside.

“Hey, Jimmy, I’m home!”

After another second, Jimmy finally turned away from the window and chirruped, then floated over.

“👋😊”

“What’cha doing over there, huh? Not much to see outside.” It was just an old street.

“👁️👁️🚲”

“Huh? You saw a bike?”

Jimmy shook his head, squeaking a bit in annoyance. “🚌! 🏠! 🌊!”

“Oh,” Matty blinked, pretending to understand, “okay. Well, anyway, I got us both something good for dinner! Come look!”

Jimmy perked up. “🍱?”

“Yeah, look, look! It’s gonna be good.” She took the bags to the kitchen island. “You can probably just eat it raw, though—”

It was then that Matty noticed the clear bucket of water on the counter. She cocked her head and looked back to Jimmy, who had bumped into her when she stopped moving.

“Why didn’t you hang out in your bucket today? I thought you liked doing that?”

The oily orb sank in the air a little, rubbing his tendrils together like a nervous child. He floated over to the bucket and gently sank into it, but he didn't erupt into happy chirrups or flap his gills. The water quickly went murky with him in it, and he stared at her, waiting for her to reveal her surprise.

But Matty had her hands on her hips. "What's wrong with your bucket? Why don't you want to be in there?"

Jimmy glanced around, his tendrils twisting faster around each other. He tentatively pressed up against the wall of the narrow bucket, then gently swished between the walls, bouncing off them. When Matty came closer, he sank into the water, his pearly eyes barely above the gunky film.

"It's too small? Is that it?"

"✓"

"Well, shit, Jimmy, I don't have a swimming pool for you." She shook her head and sighed. "What do you want me to do? That's the best we got right now."

An apprehensive gurgle floated from under the water as Jimmy pressed against the back of the bucket.

"Is that what you were saying earlier?" Matty couldn't explain the tightness in her chest. "That you want to go out to somewhere bigger?"

Jimmy nodded. He stared at the dirty water and tapped his tendrils on the surface, one at a time. *Plap. Plap. Plap. Plap.*

The tightness in her became a hard squeeze. Matty felt like she had a hand at her throat, cutting off her air and dragging her down. She didn't have anywhere bigger. She didn't have anything more. What was she supposed to do? How could she make him stay?

She ran a hand through her hair and sighed. “Jeez, Jimmy, I mean—I’d love to take you somewhere, but you couldn’t go into any public waters making the mess you do.”

Those tiny black tendrils poked out of the water, and as Jimmy stared at his own nubby hands, he deflated. His mouth opened a bit, the silver inside flashing as a low, gurgling whine came out, and he began to shake again, the whine well on its way to becoming a wail.

“Whoa, whoa, hey, buddy! No need to cry! Look, look,” Matty spun around, desperate to soothe him as she dug in the shopping bags, “I got this for you! Look!”

The wailing quieted as Jimmy watched Matty pull a whole salmon out of the bag. Granted it was a smaller one, but it was still expensive for Matty, and it didn’t have a head. She showed him the fish, grateful when he stopped whining entirely and leaned forward to smell it. A gentle *brrp* floated from him as he stared at it, and he lifted himself out of the bucket, wrapping himself in the towel Matty left for him on the counter.

She chopped off quite a bit of the fish to make up for the lack of a head, and she put it on a plate for Jimmy—just to watch him push it around. He poked it, prodded it, flicked the fin a bit, circled the plate and pretended to pounce. If anything, he looked almost like a cat, and when Matty snuck her hand over to push the plate, he flinched, his gills frilling. But soon enough, he settled down—very much so, as he deflated and tapped the lifeless tail.

Matty, somewhat disheartened, moved on to her own dinner. She checked over her shoulder every so often, and by time her salmon was in the oven, Jimmy’s plate had been cleared. She cleaned out his bucket, as it was clear that he didn’t want to be in it anymore, and she was yet again surprised at how easily the gunk came off the plastic. But when she looked over at her little bubble, her heart sank further. He was simply sitting there, deflated, staring at the floor.



Her clients a couple days later were the usual students, and she couldn't help but wonder where these people found the time to get themselves mixed up with spirits like that. These were students of MassArt, and she could've taken the appointment for that reason alone—just for the joy of wandering through the dwellings she might've lived in, had things been different.

The three boys she met with, all tall and decently well-built animation majors living in an off-campus apartment, stood there hunched over and white-faced as they described the recent oddities. Ever since one of them bought another an antique porcelain doll as a joke birthday gift, things had been flying off shelves, there were footsteps in the hall at night, the doll would move around, the usual. They'd tried getting rid of the doll, but the creepy things kept happening. Matty could see why quite clearly; whatever was in that doll had left behind burgeoning nests of ugliness, psychic rot in the darkest corners that lashed out when she got too close.

All the apartment needed was a good, honest scrub and rinse. But she went slower, lingered a bit, traveling through rooms to hunt textbooks and sketchpads and projects left on computer screens rather than the rot itself. They weren't bad, those animation students.

Each boy pitched in thirty-five dollars, which she accepted with a professional smile and traded for a business card, should they buy any more odd antiques. They thanked her profusely, stumbling over themselves to let her out, and she saw clearly the bags under their eyes as they crowded around.

It was an easy day, that being her only appointment—a Friday gift to herself so she could kick off the weekend a little earlier. She went home and called for Jimmy, who came floating away from the window again. It had been his favorite spot to spend his time alone over the past couple days.

“Hi Jimmy,” she said as the little orb floated into her arms. “How was the window?”

“👉”

Matty laughed and gave the spirit a gentle pat before letting him go. She snatched some leftovers out of the fridge, as well as a fish head and tail from the freezer for Jimmy. With all the fish she’d eaten over the past week, she was able to stockpile a little bit. She was lucky she liked fish, though she was glad to pull some chicken and mashed potatoes out that night instead of her typical seafood.

Once again, the bucket water was clear. Jimmy hadn’t gone in since a couple nights ago, and Matty was starting to worry, as he’d only been picking at his food since then, too. She figured that he might decide to leave—go somewhere that had more water.

Matty shook the thought off and put the food in the microwave for Jimmy. He wouldn’t eat anything frozen. But once it was thawed, and she put it down, she looked over to see him at the window again.

“Jimmy,” she said, her voice hardly a whisper, “your food’s ready.”

Jimmy deflated a little. Matty, plagued again by a growing, agitating tightness in her chest, ignored him and went about heating up her own food. She turned on her laptop, and when her food was done, she brought it over to the futon to eat while she worked on her Facebook and Twitter pages, which were loaded with graphics she’d made to promote her exorcism style.

Somehow, she ended up surfing Google, and the moving graphic on MassArt’s website appeared on her laptop screen. Matty clicked aimlessly, reading little bits and pieces here and there, until she ended up on the page for the undergraduate graphic design program. Her fingers swiped over her mousepad, dragging her through the list of courses—typography, web design,

digital photography, animation—and she felt that hole open in her again, a black hole, yawning wide and sucking in all the light around it.

Jimmy eventually floated over and settled in her lap. She pressed a kiss to his little marble head, and he purred.

“See this? This is the school I wanted to go to before I skipped town.

The light of the laptop screen reflected off his shiny face, but Matty wasn’t looking at him. She was stuck in Great Barrington again, turning over the few real conversations she’d managed to have with her parents. When she finally looked at Jimmy, she began to ramble.

“I didn’t want to go to college with no money. I didn’t want all that debt. But my parents had nothing saved. And when I graduated high school, they couldn’t even be bothered to show up to that, did you know? Can you believe that?” Her eyes stung as she remembered that conversation about how many commencement tickets she should order. “They said they had to make up some work that weekend. I think I’m the only one who didn’t have parents at my graduation. My grandparents took me.”

Jimmy cuddled up against her ribs.

“(☹)”

Matty sighed. “They totally screwed me,” she said as she clicked on the undergraduate admission standards. “I had a 3.4 GPA. I could’ve gotten in, maybe.”

“✍️✉️!”

She chuckled. “I’m too busy being an exorcist now, bud. I’d love to apply, though.”

Jimmy deflated a little, a tiny whine peeping from him. Matty closed her laptop for the night, feeling something similar to how Jimmy looked, and she got up to use the bathroom. As she passed the kitchen, she noticed Jimmy’s plate of fish was completely untouched.



It wasn't her intention to spend her Saturday morning at PetSmart, but there she was, mulling around with Jimmy sitting in her shopping cart. He was bouncing and *brrping*, his gills frilling as he took in the sights, the smells. As Matty suspected, no one could see him, as no one so much as glanced towards her cart. But the occasional dog in the store barked at him, causing Jimmy to puff up like an overinflated balloon and spit at them.

"Jimmy," Matty hissed, "don't spit at the dogs."

"☠!"

"You're fine, stop it."

Matty wheeled him toward the back of the store, where a colorful selection of fish swam to and fro in their tanks. Just as Matty hoped, Jimmy was entranced the moment he saw them, and he even began swaying a bit with the fish.

But what made Matty jump was when two shapes suddenly popped up on the top of Jimmy's head—two fish fins. They came up like sails, thin and almost transparent, flapping as he shook them out.

"Whoa, bud!" Matty bent down to look at them. "Check you out!"

Jimmy bounced and flapped his tendrils, his fins rustling. He floated out of his seat and towards the fish tanks, where he chased the fish that fled from his oily form.

"Miss? Do you need any help?"

Matty whipped around to see a PetSmart employee, a young girl with short pink hair and big glasses, watching her with a smile. She looked back to Jimmy, who was very seriously watching a few opaline gourami, and she made her choice.



The whole way home, Jimmy was gurgling in excitement, and once inside the apartment, he floated around her like a satellite. For once, Matty's chest wasn't so tight—in fact, it felt like she could breathe easier than usual, and she smiled at Jimmy's chirrups as she went to fill the bathtub. Jimmy rustled his fins rapidly, his gills frilling as Matty poured the gourami into the tub.

“Wait until the water's high enough,” she said when Jimmy tried to jump in.

“”

“I know, I know. Just hold on.”

Once the bath was half full, and the gourami were sufficiently confused, Matty let Jimmy do what he wanted. The little spirit chittered as he dove into the bath, splashing Matty a little as he hit the water. He zoomed around, his fins cutting the surface, and he caught four of the seven gourami before the water went completely oily.

Jimmy poked his head up and looked at her, then dipped back under the water. A moment later, he came up again, and across the bath, three of the gourami floated up, dead. Jimmy snapped them up quick enough, but he spit them back out when he tasted the oil on them.

“Jeez,” Matty said, “you're a really dirty boy, huh?”

As soon as she said it, she realized she'd made a mistake. Jimmy's face snapped towards her, those typically tiny eyes wide like floodlights. He stared down at the bath water, his fins flattening against his head, and he pushed the dead gourami away. Matty's scalp prickled as he stared around with those huge, disturbing eyes, and she held her breath when he began to shake, then buck his face back as though he were about to throw up. She expected him to spit up a fish, but what came out was not small and scaled.

“Dirty!”

Jimmy's word was low, warped, tinny. If not for what he'd said, Matty might have been star struck, hearing that alien voice for the first time. But he began to wail, not the soft beginnings of a cry, but a full-on scream, and it knocked the thought out of her head.

“Dirty! Dirty!”

Matty scrambled up and stood in the doorway, her ears pounding as the spirit screamed. It cut her in two to hear him sound so pained, but she didn't know what to do besides empty the tub. She grit her teeth and leapt forward, digging her hand around in the muck to pull the bathtub plug, and she dug around in the closet for towels.

“Jimmy, come on, buddy!” Matty was desperate to get him to quiet down. “You're okay, you're with me! You're not dirty! I'm sorry! Quiet down, you're okay!”

As the water drained, Jimmy continued to cry and scream. He sat in the bottom of the tub as the last of the water drained, his eyes still wide, and Matty wrapped him tightly in the towels, her eardrums threatening to burst as she held him to her.

“Shh, Jimmy, come on, no more. No more. I'm here. We're together. We're okay.”

After another few agonizing moments of repeating herself, Jimmy finally started to quiet down, hiccupping feeble cries instead of outright screaming. Matty patted his slimy, damp head and hushed him.

“You're okay, buddy. I'm here. As long as we have each other, we're okay, right? Right? We just need to stick together, you and me. Right?”

Jimmy looked up at her, his eyes shrinking down to their normal size. His tendrils wrapped around her arm, and for a moment, he looked like a tired, downtrodden child.

“I love you, buddy,” Matty said. “You're my boy. Right?”

“...♥”



A display like that was enough to wrack Matty's nerves so thoroughly that she spent the next few days fussing over Jimmy. She booked the minimum amount of appointments that she could, and then ended up rescheduling most of those to a different week, just so she could stay at home and try to figure out how to make Jimmy feel better. Matty was afraid now, with how often he stared out the window. Would he leave while she was sleeping? Would he slip through the door when she was on her way out? Would he just sit there and deflate until he was nothing more than a puddle, and then refuse to ever float again? She had no idea.

Day in and day out, Matty tried everything—tried to get him to play with toys, tried to get him to eat, tried to get him back in the bucket—but nothing made Jimmy stop staring out the window, and nothing made him do more than the occasional puff of sound that acknowledged that she was even beside him. His fins were gone, his gills were gone, and all he did was sit.

Matty couldn't stand it.

"I've given you a home here, you ungrateful little shit!" Matty shouted on the fourth day. "Who are you to act like this? Am I not good enough for you?"

There was something about those words. Something about them that struck just the right rhythm, the right timbre, the right weight to each word, that made her see not Jimmy when he turned around, but herself. She saw her teenage self staring in a mirror, blank-faced, silent, washing her hands in the bathroom, while something like those words rang against the walls.

When she blinked, her own face was gone, replaced with Jimmy—nothing but a tiny, frightened jelly in that moment.

The image came clearly to Matty: "🐡"

“I’m sorry, buddy,” she whispered, horrified by how he trembled, by what she’d said.  
“Jesus, I’m sorry. It’s just been a while by myself here. I didn’t mean it. Forgive me?”

Jimmy stopped trembling, but didn’t move otherwise. He didn’t say anything, either. It was enough to make her face crumple with the weight of the tears that came.

“Come here, Jimmy,” she croaked. “Please?”


He turned back to the window, his bubble-shaped body flattening, his little tendrils pressing against the glass. It felt like she’d been slapped.

“What do you want from me?” Matty’s voice had become a childish whine. “What do you want me to do? Huh? What do I need to do to make you happy?”

She felt like she was going crazy, staring at that oily pancake. She could’ve strangled him, she was so frustrated, but she just stood there, rooted to the spot, waiting for him to say any of the very few new words he’d learned. And eventually, after he peeled his tendrils off the window, he did.

“Dirty.”

“What?”

“Dirty.” He tilted his head towards her. “Dirty. Want ! Want,” he seemed to choke on the next word, forcing it out like a hairball, “clean!”

Matty blinked, then recoiled. “No, buddy, I can’t do that. I can’t.”

“Clean! Want clean!”

“I can’t! Don’t make me do that!” She clasped her hands together. “Come on, Jimmy, don’t make me do that! Do you know what’ll happen to you? Don’t!”

But it seemed he did. He turned around, eyes wide, and screamed, “Clean! Clean!”

They sat there, begging each other to give in, pleading with each other to forget it, to do it, to not do it, to consider it. But the more Matty begged, and the harder she cried, the more Jimmy seemed determined to drown her out—to crawl up to her, to cling to her leg and wail. Matty fell to the floor and scooped him into her arms, crying, begging, reasoning, until both of them had gone more or less silent, save for the hiccups that came with her last tears.

“Jimmy,” she finally said after a while, “don’t you like me?”

“♥”

“So why—?”

“Clean. Want clean. Want 🌊. Want 🏠.”

She laid there, her face pressed against the cold, damp linoleum as she stared into his moon-like eyes. Her chest collapsed on itself, and she dragged him as close to her as she could, her damp cheeks catching some of his oil. He made a soft *brrp* in her ear. His tendril gently touched her face.



Angelica root. Blackberry. Elderberry. Nettle leaf. All in one big makeshift teabag. That’s what she used to make her exorcism washes. Sometimes, she’d mix in a bit of orange clove wash in there, too, just for some extra kick.

She used it in the tub that day.

When the big tub of tea and soap had been brewed and mixed together, and the sage had been wafted around the bathroom, Matty knelt before the bath and sighed. She looked back at Jimmy, who was sitting on the toilet cover, wheezing from the smoke. She tried one last time.

“We don’t need to do this, Jimmy. You don’t need to do this.”

It was like he hadn't heard her at all. With eyes still wide, he floated off the toilet and drifted over the water. Matty clutched her washcloth tight enough to make her knuckles white, and her eyes stung again as she watched her little marble lower himself into the water. His body steamed and hissed on contact, but he didn't make a sound. Her eyes blurred with tears. It took everything to not snatch him out of the water.

“Jimmy—”

“Clean.”

He dunked himself under, one twitching tendril breaking the surface to beckon her over. She couldn't, though. She couldn't wipe her friend away. The tears spilled over, clearing her vision just in time to see him break the surface and stare. Just in time to see him begin to melt.

“♥”

Matty sucked in a breath as he continued to wave her over. She looked at the tinted water, waiting for it to go mucky and dark, but it never did. Her brew seemed to dissolve the oil, melting it off him and banishing it forever. Jimmy bounced in the tub as he, too, looked at the water, the *plap-plap-plap* forcing her to smile a little. As he dunked under the water again, and came up with a hopeful yet shaky chirrup, she made her choice.

She came forward and started scrubbing. She started scrubbing, and she baby-talked her little marble, cooing and cleansing as the tears kept coming. They mingled with the bath water, and she watched Jimmy shrink and dissolve, until there was nothing left. With a final swish of her hands through the bath, she knew that she wouldn't find him again.

*Why'd he make me do that?* She felt like a murderer, and she sat back against the sink cabinet, clutching her damp, oil-less cloth so hard she wrung water out of it. *Why?*

Maybe he'd been lying. Maybe he really couldn't stand her, and he'd rather be exorcised than deal with her for one more minute. Maybe that was the real reason she never made a friend in Boston—or a real friend, ever—because she wasn't good enough. They were stupid thoughts, and she knew they were, but all she could do was sit there and beat herself up for anything and everything.

Because if she didn't, she'd hear the silence. It would blow out her eardrums, that silence. The dingy white wall, the dirty tile, the buzz of nothingness, it would be a spike in her head.

*And I never had a boyfriend because I was a fucking freak and my parents never even gave a shit and I never bothered trying hard enough because I'm a fucking loser and I can't do anything and all I can do is make excuses because I'm pathetic and—*

She probably looked crazy, sitting on the floor and gripping a washcloth, with eyes wide open and shoulders tense, with twin rivers streaming down her face. But no one was there to see her. It was only her and her thoughts—the only thing separating her from that buzzing, aching silence. And she was running out of things to say.

It took her a second to realize that something besides herself had made a sound.

Matty whipped her head around. Her eyes didn't settle on anything immediately, but something rose up out of the water, something invisible, and the weak bathroom light reflected off what seemed to be glass, creating the most brilliant rainbow of colors. It was then that she saw it—the bubble spirit with big, elegant fins that flashed with reds and blues as the light reflected off them. Its eyes were beady black, and its skinny arms drifted like ribbons in the wind. It looked like it belonged out in the forests and fields, with its pretty colors and glossy form, and as it looked at her, it chirruped.

“♥”

It took her a second to recognize the sound. “Wait, Jimmy? Is that you, bud?”

“✓😊”

With a cry of pure joy, Matty opened her arms to the spirit. He bounded out of the tub and curled into her, chittering in delight. She was shocked out of all those bad thoughts immediately, overtaken and near purified by a sudden clarity that seared into her brain with every glimmer of light and color that reflected off the little spirit. She knew what she’d done.

After a moment, he pulled away and bucked his head again, like he did when he was about to scream. Matty braced herself on impulse.

“Thank you,” came the surprisingly wind-chime-like sound, “thank you.”

Matty hugged the little ball just a little bit tighter, afraid to crush him.

“You’re welcome, buddy,” she sniffed, “you’re welcome. Oh my God.” When she pulled him away to look at him, she sighed, “Wow. You’re a pretty boy.”

“♪”

Her mouth twisted as the lump in her throat hardened. She wanted to rejoice, to keep her little buddy and start again, but the more colors glittered off him, the more he gurgled in glee, the more her heart broke all over again, and the more she knew what she had to do.

“Get out of here, Jimmy. You don’t belong in some nasty old apartment. Do you?”

Jimmy slowly shook his head, then floated out of her hands to bump his face against her chin. After, with Matty following, he drifted out of the bathroom, out of the window Matty opened for him, and onto the street. She watched as the glass balloon floated into the sky, catching every ray of sunlight and glittering a rainbow palette of colors. She teared up all over again, watching him go—watching him drift away, glittering and gleaming through the world.

As she stared into those infinite blue skies, she whispered, “Me, neither.”



## The Post-Life Rehabilitation Center

the world smears and twists like cheap paints - like looking through watery eyes - there is a flash every so often - a bright flash that makes more smears - the wind is water - the water is nothing - it pushes and pulls - but where is he? - where is my boy? - i cannot find him - no matter where i look i cannot find him

but that? - what is that? - out there—the blue light? - it sparkles like the sky - like the sea - it sparkles like the stars like heaven - and it glows on something white like a cloud - something white and bright like up above and i want to touch it

how pretty

what is this thing? - what is—

```
S:/Program/WitchBottle.exe>capture
```

```
capturing... ██████████] 99%
```

```
S:/Program/WitchBottle.exe>save
```

```
ERROR: capture incomplete.
```

```
repairing file... ██████████] 99%
```

```
Saved: D008.exe, D008.txt
```



“Mrs. Doogan?”

A searing bright light washed over her, so white that she couldn’t make sense of it. At first, young Mrs. Doogan wondered if she’d gone to heaven. She had to have, because she didn’t feel the slightest pain in her belly. In fact, she didn’t feel anything.

“Mrs. Doogan, can you hear me?”

She looked up at the source of the voice—God? an angel?—and saw something equally bright behind a screen of glass with little holes in it. Her sight focused on a shape on the other

side: the face of a woman, fair and luminous as her blindingly white coat, which reflected the light as though it were made of feathers. Her hair gleamed like strands of gold, tucked carefully behind her head in a neat bun, and her eyes crinkled at the corners as she briefly smiled down at Mrs. Doogan. An angel, surely.

The woman stepped closer, the honey-amber of her eyes gleaming as though made of sunlight. She said, “Mrs. Doogan, are you okay?”

“I,” she wandered closer to the glass. “Where am I? Am I in—?”

“Heaven?” The woman smiled, studying Mrs. Doogan’s face. “No.”

saving...

“I’m Dr. Reiter,” the woman said, still smiling, “and you’re in the—.”

ERROR: data incompatible.

*There are doctors in Heaven?*

“—It’s for people who haven’t moved on to the next life just yet; we’re here to help you do that. Now,” Dr. Reiter pulled a notepad and pen from her coat, “could you tell me a little more about yourself, Mrs. Doogan? Anything helps.”



The Maine winters were never easy, and they did not get easier in 1884. In fact, they were plain horrible—especially in the town of Addison, on the coast. With the weather bitter, stormy, and miserable, it was the responsibility of her brothers to rush out into the cold and chop the wood for the stove before their mother grew upset. Luckily, due to their father’s modest farm, they were a little further inland, but the sea still swept a nasty chill over the whole area. But what softened the harsh bite of winter for young Emily Addison that year was the entirely coincidental meeting of her husband, a ship hand, James Doogan.

One awfully early morning, Emily's mother had bustled into her room, rolled her out of bed, and herded her into her winter skirts, squawking something about bringing her father his pocket watch. He had forgotten it in the nightstand table once again. However, her mother, who had dug through his nightstand after he'd left, insisted that he'd hidden it. Every day, it seemed, she accused him of doing something that would keep him in the shop and late for dinner, just so he could get a few extra sales by the end of the night.

"He works too much as it is," her mother muttered as she fussed with Emily's clothes, "and I won't have him making excuses for coming home late in this cold!"

Emily, being the oldest of her three sisters, was hassled into taking it. The boys were out of the question; they were out feeding the cows. Emily knew the route better than Annie and was better in the cold than Mary. Laura was simply too young to be trusted on her own. Thus, her mother all but threw her out into the ankle-deep snow, with hardly more than her old wool coat and worn blue hat. At least her shiny leather boots were warm, if perhaps a bit stiff, and the soles weren't falling apart and letting snow inside, as her old ones had.

Her father ran a shop to sell dry goods from his summer and autumn harvests—the best flour, fruits, and potatoes, he said, in the whole of Maine. Emily could attest to the apples being especially crisp and sweet. Recently, he'd added eggs and milk to the shop inventory with the new animals he'd been able to afford, and it brought enough money to buy the boots Emily rushed in on.

A frizz of mousy-brown hair poked from under her hat, her birdlike black eyes wild as she burst into the store, panting and clutching the pocket watch as the gentle, earthy smell of the shop embraced her. Her father, a robust man hiding behind small spectacles and a graying mustache, chuckled to see her stomp her exhausted self over to the counter.

“You left your,” she wheezed as she thumped the watch down, “you left this.”

“Did I? Did your mother send you?”

Emily let her head fall on the counter beside the watch, her shrill voice muffled by the wood, “Get it to him, right now, right now! Quick, before it’s busy!”

His chuckle was as robust as he, his footsteps heavy and sure as he busied himself behind the counter. “Well, consider it a job well done.”

“Papa, I think I’m dying.”

The store bell rang, and Emily dragged her head off the counter. Just before she turned, her father passed her a cold cup of milk, her reward for her hurried trip through the snow. In her excitement, she sucked the icy, rich liquid down, coming dangerously close to getting a freezing ache in her head. But it soothed her raw throat, ripped apart by the cold air she’d been huffing.

“Good milk, isn’t it?”

Emily nodded and passed the glass back. “I’ll see you tonight, Papa—don’t be late, or Mama’s gonna chatter herself crazy.”

Her father’s hearty chuckle mingled with the tinkle of the bell at the door. Emily waved goodbye, then turned and ran nearly straight into a heavy-coated man, the faded black of a sailor’s uniform peering through an undone button.

“Whoa, easy, there,” said a voice somehow deeper than her father’s.

Emily looked up to a square jaw, two grassy green eyes, and a broad grin tacked up at the corners with deep dimples. A cut of messy, dark brown hair was flattened to his head after hours under the sailor’s cap, which he held in his hand. It took a moment for her to stop staring and step away. She squeaked her apology, which made her aware of the crust of milk at her lip—

and made her rub her lip raw as her face burned. She ran off in a worse hurry than when she ran in.

And the next day, her father brought home flowers—to Emily, from Mr. Doogan.



“And did you marry him right away?”

Dr. Reiter had conjured a chair from somewhere, an oddly plush and round thing that was just as white as the rest of this little sliver of Heaven. Emily stared at her hands, which, like the rest of her, were queer: gray and transparent, their shape flickering out of focus every now and again. She shook her head.

“No. Papa thought I was too young. We fought about it for a long time.”

“How old were you?”

“Fifteen.” Emily wrung her hands, though she couldn’t feel a thing. “We would meet every week by the docks. James kept asking, and I kept pressing, and eventually Papa let us spend a little more time together. We got married in 1887. In August.”

“So,” Dr. Reiter paused, setting her pencil down on her notepad, “if you don’t mind my asking, how did you leave him?”

Emily’s hands went straight to her deflated stomach. She looked at her dress, expecting to see the dark, damp mess at the bottom, but the skirt was clean and simple, nothing but a pale gray against her ghastly skin. The emptiness of her stomach, the cool of her arms, made her clutch at herself, if only to remember what it felt like to hold what she’d lost.

“I only held him for a little while, my Henry,” she said. Emily looked up. “What happened to my Henry? Can you tell me?”

Dr. Reiter paused, then scribbled the name down on her notepad.



A gentle breeze floated through the lace curtains, the morning light shining off the bright yellow walls. Dr. Reiter padded across the carpet as she zipped up her pants, then put on her other sock once she got to the crib. Within the mess of blankets and stuffed animals, a bubble of drool popped on a little baby's lip, and Dr. Reiter smiled down at the peachy bundle of limbs and squeals. Sparkly black eyes peered up at her, reflecting the butterfly shapes of the mobile, and the baby gurgled.

"I'll be back before you even know it," she said as she buttoned up her white coat.

"Who's going to see the light today, Kayla?"

Her husband snuck up behind her, his hands landing on her shoulders. She jumped before turning around to see the slim, catlike Austrian man, his golden-brown hair a disheveled mop on his head, brown eyes warm with mischief. Dr. Reiter smiled, despite swatting at his shoulder.

"A lady from the 1880's. We caught her floating around some marsh down by the beach."

"Wow," her husband blinked and rubbed his stubble-coated chin, the scratchy sound of hair against skin mixing with his voice. "That's something, huh?"

"Yeah. Her problem was easy enough to find." Dr. Reiter picked up a folder full of pictures and records off the green rocking chair. "She just wants to see her baby boy."

He pursed his lips, nodding slightly, then went to see the baby.

"*Guten morgen*, Hailey," he cooed.

"I need to run, Leo," she said before pecking his cheek. "Don't forget to take your lunch."

"I won't. Have a good day."

The drive to the Post-Life Rehabilitation Center, a great white dome of a campus towards the outskirts of Portland, took her forty-five minutes each morning, and Dr. Reiter used that time to think about her strategy for her patient. Not every ghost was as simple as Mrs. Doogan, with a clear tether to the world of the living; some had to be walked through their trauma, revisiting possible reasons for their presence, and it had to be done carefully.

These ghosts no longer had a physical brain and the plasticity, the defense mechanisms, that come with basic human psychology. They were essentially frozen in time, bundles of lost energy that were then processed by a trapper's capture machine, a simple piece of technology that lured a spirit's wayward energy with light and frequency pitches before collecting it in the magnetic chamber. Afterwards, the machine converted these ghosts into incomplete data, and a program was made to access it. It was her job to find that missing link—to introduce the last bit of data they needed to be "at peace." From there, it was as simple as uploading the new file and releasing the spirit, where it would splinter into the afterlife on its own.

Once in the lab, with Henry Doogan's folder pressed tightly against her side, Dr. Reiter unlocked the door to Mrs. Doogan's hologram chamber and marched in. The lights greeted her with their unnecessarily bright beams, which reflected off the shiny white walls and tile floor. Dr. Reiter squinted a bit before starting up the computer, essentially just a screen in the wall and a shelf with a keyboard. These hologram chambers were simple to the extreme, with nothing but a white chair on one side of the glass partition, and a white bench on the other. Completely sterile, completely controllable. There was no telling how a spirit might react to any decoration, or what it would signify to them—even if it were something as simple as a potted plant.

Upon signing in and starting Mrs. Doogan's program, she looked back at the glass, expecting to see her projector fire up. The little white space looked absent on its own, nothing but a small bench there for someone to sit on, but Mrs. Doogan didn't appear. Dr. Reiter looked back at the computer.

loading... ██████████ |] 93%

Dr. Reiter frowned. She waited another few seconds before moving to restart the program, wondering if it had frozen, but just as she reached for the touchscreen, the program loading bar snapped to 100%.

Mrs. Doogan beamed from the projector, a staticky gray and white shape that solidified into her little frame. She blinked her large, bird-like eyes, her round face scrunched in her confusion, and she squinted at the doctor, who approached the glass with the folder.

"Heaven's awfully small, isn't it?" Emily asked, her voice crackling through the holes.

"Heaven?" Dr. Reiter smiled. "We're not in heaven, Mrs. Doogan, remember? Can you tell me where we are?"

Mrs. Doogan only blinked at her, the hologram fuzzing out for a moment. She seemed stuck in her thoughts—literally. Even after a few moments, she didn't respond, and Dr. Reiter decided to move on. It was hard for the spirits to say the center's name, especially for old ones like Mrs. Doogan.

"Well, why don't we look at what I have for you today?" Dr. Reiter pressed her palm up against one area of the glass, and it lit up to read her palm before opening two glass panes. "I think you'll like it quite a bit."

"What more could Heaven give me?" Mrs. Doogan straightened and cocked her head. "I'm dead. Aren't I?"



Dr. Reiter pursed her lips at the spirit's insistence on calling the center Heaven, but she decided not to keep pressing it. Sometimes, it helped a spirit more to think of it that way—that this was some waiting room of the afterlife.

“We don't like to use that word here, Mrs. Doogan—”

“Emily, call me Emily.”

“Okay, Emily.” Dr. Reiter came inside with the folder and sat on the bench, then beckoned the ghost to sit beside her. “We don't like the word, ‘dead.’ Seems a bit too heavy for someone with so much energy, doesn't it?”

Emily sat down and shrugged. “I guess.”

“Alright. Now, yesterday you asked me if I knew what happened to Henry. Turns out, there's quite a bit about him out there.”

She opened the folder, revealing copies of old sepia-tone pictures of a chubby-cheeked boy and a dark-haired man. When the boy was an infant and a toddler, it was only him and his father, but over time, another woman began appearing in the pictures—and more children.

But Emily's eyes, after flicking all over the place and lingering on Henry's death date for a moment, finally focused only on the pictures of Henry Doogan as a baby. Her holographic form wavered so harshly, crackling and fizzing like a snowy T.V., that Dr. Reiter thought something was wrong, but it was soon back to normal.

“It seems I've been gone a while,” she said, her voice quivering, “a long, long while. He's grown up big and tall. Lived a long life.”

“Yeah. He died of old age, easy and peaceful.”

Emily paused, blinking, then forced a response through tight lips. “Oh, isn't that nice?”

Dr. Reiter caught the way she wilted, how her hand shook as she touched the picture of chubby baby Henry, and she asked, “Are you okay, Emily? Would you like to wait to—?”

“No! No, I want to see him right now.” She grabbed at the pictures, but her fingers simply swished through the paper. “Let me hold these, will you? Let me!”

Dr. Reiter stood and stepped away from the ghost. “I’m sorry, Emily, but I can’t—”

The ghost’s face crumpled, and Dr. Reiter went silent as Emily’s shoulders began to shake, her fingers twisting and tangling together. She inhaled sharply and forced her shoulders back, but she was unable to smooth the crease in her brow.

“It’s been so long,” Emily said with a sniff, “so long since I held my boy. I know he must be up here somewhere, but he’s all grown, isn’t he? Oh, before I see him, I want to hold him as a baby again, just once. Just one more time, I want to hold him. Please? Can you do that?”

The doctor faltered for a moment. She stared at the pictures, at the records relating to the boy, who had grown up, married, and had children of his own, and as Henry’s whole story died on the tip of her tongue, Dr. Reiter tucked the pictures away.



Heat. Unbearable heat. After such numbing pain, that was all Emily felt a few moments after her son was born. She held him against her, the wailing little lump, and refused to let go, even as the midwife and physician moved frantically about her. James hadn’t yet come in to see their baby, but she had no doubt he would be there soon, because she’d done it. She’d gotten through the hardest part of the last nine months

The midwife moved to take little Henry from her, but she clutched him, wrapping her fingers as tightly as she could around the baby’s pudgy arms. However, it took very little for the midwife to steal him anyway; her grip had faded, and she felt like she might drift off.

“Don’t fall asleep, Mrs. Doogan,” the midwife warned. “We’ll get a blanket for you right away, but you stay awake.”

“Blanket?” The word rumbled past her lips. “I’m too hot for a blanket.”

The midwife glanced at the physician, who was pulling away red-drenched cloth that Emily was too dizzy to lift her head and see. Sleep never pulled so hard at her, and she barely caught the physician’s words.

“You’re not hot, Mrs. Doogan—you’re like ice.”

“Strange,” she murmured, “it’s so hot.”

Little Henry shrieked.



“Almost done,” said the IT assistant. “Just need to drop a few more codes in there, and we should be able to recreate this baby no problem.”

“Thanks, Pat.” Dr. Reiter paced behind him. “Will she be able to feel it?”

“You want her to? I can do that.”

The IT assistant, a slightly pudgy man in his mid-twenties with a tangled pile of sandy blond curls falling in his eyes, tapped quick fingers on the keyboard. As he was, he squinted, then paused his typing. Dr. Reiter watched him carefully.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s giving me a bit of trouble with the code.” He scratched his head. “How’s her program been? Usually, the codes don’t take much to format correctly.”

Dr. Reiter crossed her arms. “It’s been okay. Her hologram’s been a bit glitchy.”

The IT assistant glanced her way, then shrugged. “It’s probably fine. Oh, there we go. It’s in there. Okay. You’re all set to go whenever.”

“Great, thanks again.”

“No problem. Let me know if you need something else.”

“I shouldn’t.”

She gave him a smile, and he shuffled out of the room. Once he was gone, she went straight back to her work, opening Emily’s file back up with her program and waiting for the woman to materialize. A strange popping noise, an unwelcome *bzzrt*, cracked through the cell speakers, loud enough to make the doctor jump. But Emily appeared just as she should have, and the doctor, while spooked and frosted in goosebumps at the disturbance, focused on her patient.

“Hi, Emily,” she said after collecting herself. “I have something else for you.”

Emily cocked her head, her face brightening in curiosity, and Dr. Reiter clicked on the new option in Emily’s program. By Emily’s gasp, the doctor knew it was working, and she turned just in time to see the baby materializing into Emily’s hologram. It even began to babble and cuddle up to its gray “mother.” Emily sat on the bench, her mouth hanging open for a moment before twisting into an unbelieving grin.

“I can feel it. I can feel him!”

She rocked the baby as Dr. Reiter took her folder and opened the cell, and when the doctor sat down, Emily looked up at her with especially shiny eyes—what would have been tearful eyes, no doubt.

“It looks just like him, too.”

“Good, I’m glad.” She opened the folder. “Do you want to know about him? About what his life was like?”

The hologram, both Emily and baby, shifted and broke apart for a moment, the speakers squeaking an odd dial-tone sound, but they were fine a moment later. Dr. Reiter wondered if it was something with the projection software, and she made a note to have the IT assistant look at it later. Emily kept staring at the baby with no response, and Dr. Reiter asked again.

“I have all his information. Would you like to know what became of Henry?”

“Yes, of course! I suppose I should know, before I get to see him and James.” She looked up from the baby with a wide grin. “I bet he’ll tell me plenty more himself, though! I can’t wait!”

Emily’s left eye flickered black, her other eye staring blankly for a moment, but it soon stopped. Dr. Reiter’s scalp prickled, and an uncomfortable thought took root in the back of her mind. She took a breath, opened the file, and read.



Henry Doogan’s mother was a mischievous, adventurous thing, according to his father, and the young boy had inherited all of it. Climbing pine trees and swinging from the tops, sneaking dried fruit from his grandfather’s shop, jumping off carriages with chickens in hopes that he’d fly, he was a wild boy that was no stranger to a scraped knee or two.

His stepmother, and his step-siblings, were all the complete opposite. They worried themselves sick every time he left the house, and his stepmother would howl up and down when he came back with a fresh bruise or a new bloody stripe somewhere on him. His father, however, would laugh and listen to all his stories of the day’s wild adventures in exchange for a forecast of the seas, which Henry would listen to with an interest that budded and bloomed throughout his childhood. A hardy baby, a sunbaked boy, and eventually, a sea-faring man himself—that was

Henry Doogan. He was the only one to follow his father out to sea, his brother and two sisters taking up other, more gentle work, or none at all.

Like his father before him, Henry also met a woman in Addison, one as clever and mischievous as he'd hope to find. She was an Irish woman, her father working for a small shoe factory, and with rust in her hair and a seafoam-green sparkle in her eye, she followed Henry just about everywhere after their first meeting in the town square. They spent many an evening walking the beach, gathering shells and swishing their bare feet through the surf.

But every now and then, while Henry was at the docks after hours, or strolling on the shore alone, he thought he could feel the weight of eyes on his back. Big, watery, desperate eyes.



The miracles of Heaven humbled Emily, in how the angel could hear her wishes and deliver them not a moment later. This angel would be sitting right before her, and then, in a blink, be back outside the glass, tapping at some glowing square on the wall with promises of good news and gifts. What was incomprehensible to her, however, was how this white-clothed woman spoke as though they'd been apart for some time.

“Hi, Emily,” said the angel, “how are you?”

Emily's brow creased. She had just been speaking with the angel, who watched her closely as Emily held her sweet Henry—a memory so fresh that the baby's warmth still lingered on her arms. She straightened herself and answered.

“I'm just fine, thank you.”

“Great. Now, I know you've been here a very short while, but do you think you've seen everything that you wanted to see?”

“Of Henry? I’d say so. Do I get to see him now? Where is he? Where’s James?”

The angel smiled that bright smile again, and she said, “Everyone is waiting for you just outside here. Give me a bit, and I’ll get you right over to them, okay?”

Emily didn’t respond, as she was already lost in thought after the angel’s first sentence. What a promise it was: everyone she’d ever known waiting for her. She guessed, with how long it seemed she’d been dead, that she’d even have some unknown faces waiting, as well. Her grandchildren, maybe even a great-grandchild or two. The fantasies that filled her mind made her giddy; with so many people waiting for her, she imagined not just a welcome home, but a full celebration, with cakes and pies and roasts and whatever else Heaven could conjure for them. And she imagined swinging into James’ arms, holding him tightly again—until the dark skirts of the woman in the pictures flashed in her mind.

Before her excitement wilted completely, Emily’s mind shifted to Henry. He, and later his own children, were the only living evidence that Emily had ever been alive—the only evidence that could walk out into the world and change it. Her old things, which she was sure either her family or her husband had kept somewhere, were no doubt either lost or reclaimed by another hand, but no one could reclaim her blood. With some defiant satisfaction, Emily included the other wife in her idea—that she may have raised Henry, but she was not his mother.

But, of course, Henry had known no other mother besides this woman, despite the occasional story James might have told him about Emily.

The uncertainty grew quickly in her, threatening to overcome her stomach with prickly thorns and reach up to her throat. It was an awful sensation—sharp and hot and dizzying, enough to bring her to tears, though the water never spilled over her lashes. Briefly, she clasped her hands together, praying to soothe these sharp jabs in her heart.

Emily drummed her fingers against her legs as she watched the angel tap at some bright box, then swipe at it, then press it, and Emily—

Exiting program...

Program exited successfully.



No matter how many times it happened, releasing a spirit was something special to Dr. Reiter and the others at the Post-Life Rehabilitation Center. The philosophy of the center posited that spirits, who were once people, deserved just as much psychological assistance as those still living. Luckily for them, the state-sponsored research they conducted on these spirits more than paid for the continuous display of altruism. And luckily for Dr. Reiter, Emily was an easy spirit, with a simple problem that took no longer than a day to solve—not as uncommon as she would've thought before starting this job. Too many spirits just didn't even know that they were dead, or wouldn't rest until they knew one simple thing, like the anxiety one gets from wondering if they left the water running when out of town.

Emily's data went back into the trap that caught it, which made quick work of spinning it back into its original form. There was no way for it to dissolve otherwise. But after a moment, the screen of the tiny ghost-box displayed a message.

Incomplete file. Repairing...

The message, however, disappeared before anyone could lean in and read it. The white ball of a lure on top glowed blue, and out poured a static crackle—the only sign that anything was happening at all. Dr. Reiter, the two other psychologists on shift, most of the people in IT, and the young intern who caught Emily gathered around. Pat shut the light off, and they waited, watching the darkness, until their short-term patient materialized.



But instead of a glowing, gentle woman, they were met with a violently twitching figure, one missing a small chunk of its head. Dr. Reiter flinched, her heart leaping into her throat as the figure became a tangled mass of shapes before finally settling back into Emily. However, that unsettled the doctor the most, with how still and quiet Emily was. After her focus flicked from face to face, Emily looked straight at Dr. Reiter with those impossibly huge black eyes, and it chilled her straight through.

And then Emily was gone.

The lights came back on with a flash, and to everyone's surprise, the IT director, an older man, was the first to speak.

"Adam," he said to the pale, shaking twig of an intern, "did the capture go the way it was supposed to?"

"I-yeah-I mean—"

"No error messages? No glitches?"

"No! No, I hit save and it saved!" The intern pushed his glasses higher on his narrow nose, his eyes nearly as wide as Emily's. "It said it captured, I swear!"

Dr. Reiter covered her mouth with her hand. In this white-walled room, with everyone now shifting on their feet and looking around with equally huge, terrified eyes, the once plain and familiar release station felt like an icebox, cold and insidious.

*Emily, where did you go?*



w[?]ere am i - w[?]ere is james [?]entry

it is dark [?]ere - dark and it not good

wait? - w[?]at is t[?]at?

gold

it gold!

angel! - it angel! - s[?]e still [?]ere!

closer - i need get closer - just a little and—

yes! - i [?]ave angel! - [?]er feat[?]ers! - i [?]ave t[?]em! - please angel see

me! - [?]ello? - [?]ello? - [?]ELP? - [?]ELP ME?

it [?]urts

w[?]ere is god? - w[?]ere is god?

w[?]ere are you going?



“You didn’t know, Kayla,” Leo said as he rubbed his wife’s shoulder. “You were told those glitches were just projection. You did everything right.”

“I should’ve known something was wrong, though. I should’ve pressed further, or done something myself, I don’t know. God, I should’ve just deleted—”

The thought made Kayla drop her head into her hands, her elbows landing hard on the old kitchen table and rattling the empty blue vase she used as a centerpiece. As she closed her eyes, she was assaulted by flashes of training sessions, of instruction manuals and company policies.

To delete, according to her training, was to essentially euthanize a person in need. Even if it would be better for the person to just be forcibly erased from existence, she was not permitted to do so under any circumstances—not when the government had laws against what it called “digital homicide.” The thought gave her an urge to kick the little capture machine she’d been ordered to take home.

Everyone that witnessed Emily's failed release had to take one, along with a few EMF meters, just in case they came in contact with the rogue spirit again. Kayla hadn't operated one in years, and just the thought of having to use it in her own home—with Leo, with Hailey there—made her sick.

Kayla got up to make tea. Chamomile, for her nerves. Leo followed her, drifting behind her, the warmth of his chest brushing her shoulder blade as she turned the kettle on. His arm reached up to get the chamomile bags, naturally the one tea she couldn't easily reach, but when he took the box, it fell hard from his hands—as though slapped out of his grip.

"Oops," he said. "Sorry."

Kayla stared at the tea. She jerked back, pushing Leo out of the way, and stared around the empty, dimly lit kitchen.

"Emily?"

One of her four EMF readers was sitting on the counter, undisturbed. The Saturday morning light revealed the dust from the curtains as it filtered peacefully through the window. Her breadbox, her table centerpiece, her microwave, her collection of pill bottles on the toaster oven—it all sat in perfect order. She could see all from the stove, her kitchen being modest enough, and she could see that it was peaceful.

Then Hailey wailed from her room.

Between them both, Kayla was faster to fly from the stove. She barreled past Leo and nearly fell as the kitchen rug slipped beneath her feet. Leo was there to catch her and push her forward, propelling her further down the hallway as he thundered along with her. Kayla shot past the room entrance and grabbed onto the door frame, swinging into the room as though her arm

were a bungee cord, and she leapt for her baby, her bare feet thumping loud against the soft carpet. Only when Hailey was safely in her arms did she pause to look around the room.

The EMF meter on Hailey's nightstand didn't register anything more than it did before. The curtains swayed with the breeze that came through the window, and the rows of colorful books on the bookshelf reflected the light off their glossy bindings. Kayla clutched little Hailey to her, too frayed in her thoughts to feel the pain of the baby crying right in her ear. But the more she looked around, the more she watched Leo poke around, the more she relaxed.

Despite the initial disruption, Kayla and her family were soon enjoying the fine May sunshine again, and Kayla's thoughts settled back into their typical rhythm. It became just a tiny thought in the back of her head to keep an eye out for the patient they'd let loose, and the only thing out of the ordinary was that she sent Leo shopping, simply because he didn't know how to use the capture machine.

"Don't you get me anything for Mother's Day," she warned Leo on his first trip to the store. "We agreed on just dinner and a movie and a night to ourselves. Right?"

Leo gave a boyish smile, the type he gave when he was up to no good. "Right, right. The Carltons said they could watch Hailey."

"Cool. I mean it, though. No gifts. *Kein Geschenk.*"

As she butchered the German words, her lips quirked into a smile, and Leo laughed, promising to be home soon with only what was on the list. Still, she knew him better. It was their first Mother's and Father's day, after all.

Both Hailey and the machine didn't stay far from Kayla that weekend, as she worked at her kitchen table. Often she'd glance over from her laptop at the bald cherub in the playpen, looking into Hailey's still very dark eyes. Maybe one day they'd lighten,

but until then, they were two dark pools—empty and innocent. They made her feel a little better as she was typing up Emily’s incident report.

On that Sunday afternoon, Kayla was typing with such concentration that she didn’t notice the sound at first, the sound of her cupboard swinging open. Its hinges creaked almost in time with the clacks of her keyboard, and it wasn’t until she looked up to stretch that she noticed it moving slowly. Kayla’s arms paused in the air, her two hands tightening into fists as she watched it open, inch by inch—until it finally smashed against the other cupboard door.

A flickering crackle sounded from the EMF meter, but it soon stopped, and something tumbled from the cupboard. Kayla’s skin went alight with prickles, and she dove from her chair to the capture machine, starting it up and frantically punching in the commands until the little ball popped out on top. After a few moments, the ball began to glow a bright blue. Again, Hailey started to cry, and Kayla pushed herself up and reached into the playpen, holding the baby’s chubby hand as tightly as she dared.

After a moment, the lure on the capture machine stopped glowing and nestled back into the white pod. A message appeared on the screen, and Kayla leaned down to read it.

No entity detected.

“What the fuck?” Kayla whispered. She stood up straight and looked around, her head jerking sharply, like a bird’s. “Emily? Emily, are you here? Come out, I can help you.”

Nothing moved. Hailey kept wailing, but the house was so still that it nearly felt dead. When she went to close the cupboard, she saw that the thing that had tumbled from it was the box of chamomile tea.



w[?]y angel not [?]ear me? - w[?]y angel ignore me? - w[?]o is t[?]is man? - [?]e  
looks like james sort of - w[?]o is [?]e?

james? james?

angel w[?]y you [?]ave my [?]usband?

i [?]ear baby cry - is t[?]at [?]enry? - [?]enry? - my baby? - it  
mine? - [?]eaven? - god? - angel?

next to baby is t[?]ing - it beep w[?]en i come close - w[?]at can it be? - i not able to  
move t[?]e t[?]ing - it like a box wit[?] lig[?]ts - it crack so loud - i not like it - but t[?]e baby  
is t[?]ere

black eye baby - black eye like mine

my baby? - my baby? - [?]enry? - [?]enry?

is t[?]at you?



It was with a sinking feeling that Kayla discovered everyone else's lack of paranormal activity when she went back to work that week—though everyone told her that the weekend happenings were just coincidental, just her nerves getting the best of her. And the EMF meter going off more? Probably just from the phones, the microwave, the something-or-others that might get too close to one. No big deal. No problem. All was well. And with her new patient, an old man named Lyle that died dozing in his armchair, she almost started to believe that. Things were easy, quiet—Lyle there wasn't exactly surprised that he was dead and didn't require much more than a bit of work on his self-esteem, as he insisted he wasn't worth crossing over.

Of course, that bit of work consumed all of Monday, and then most of Tuesday. As of Tuesday night, he was ready to go, and the same crowd gathered around to watch Lyle's spirit rise from the capture machine, with the most serene smile on his old face. He looked up at something no one else could see, and without a word, his form broke apart into golden, glittering shards, until all of him was gone. Even with the lights off, that little shimmer spread a warmth through the room that put the boldest fireworks to shame. With the last sparkle came a whispering voice.

“Thank you.”

It gave Dr. Reiter goosebumps, hearing a spirit's raw voice. It sounded like the wind, whistling low and quick, and it was thrilling to hear it without the computer's filtering. It seemed everyone else thought so, too, with how their lips spread into wide grins. What a perfect end to a work night—what a job well done.

Emily should've had that, too.

*I'm so stupid.*



By Wednesday, with only a crackle here and a flash there from her EMF meters at home, and with her baby safe in daycare during working hours anyway, Dr. Reiter began to relax a little. It was perfectly possible that Emily hadn't followed anyone; she could've even drifted back towards the beach they found her on. Some trapper would catch her eventually and haul her back, and then the center would take care of it. Dr. Reiter would've liked to believe that they would find the rest of her, but a piece of a ghost wouldn't have stayed stable and catchable for that long. It would've splintered apart like Lyle, except there would've been no gold, no peace. Just death—dark and definite.

That Wednesday night, Dr. Reiter unlocked her door with high hopes that Leo was able to start dinner, even if it was just spaghetti and a heated jar of sauce. But when she opened the door, there was no smell of homemade food to greet her, and when she made it to the kitchen and flicked on the light, she didn't see a single dish on the stove, or any Tupperware of leftovers lying around. The lights weren't on in the rest of the house, either.

“Leo?”

No response. Her throat tightened. She hadn't bothered to teach him how to use the capture machine because she didn't usually come home much later than he did after he left the high school he worked at and picked Hailey up—fifteen minutes at most. She dropped her bag on the counter and took a few steps down the hall, looking into the darkness.

“Leo?”

Behind her, a door creaked open and slammed against the wall, and she turned to see the cupboard open again. But then the next cupboard door crashed open, too, and then the next, each smash of the wood making her flinch—all while the EMF meter was crackling away. She backed up further down the hall as the kitchen drawers opened, as well as the cabinets on the kitchen island. As she backed up, reaching the next rooms of the house, a hand closed on her ankle.

The doctor nearly jumped out of her skin, but a hissing noise made her look down and see Leo on the bathroom floor, with Hailey curled up tight against his chest. He was sitting against the bathroom sink cabinet, and he pulled his hand away to press a finger to his lips. The pop of the microwave door opening made her snap her head back up, only to see every door and drawer close back up at once. Gently.

“Leo,” she whispered, “the machine.”



A blast of cold air hit her face as though she'd opened the door to the brunt of winter, and she nearly stumbled back, her hand shooting out to clutch the bathroom door frame. Leo quickly patted her leg and produced the machine from the other side of him, but he couldn't get a good enough grip on it to pick it up and hand it to her—not with its round, wide, slippery plastic shape. Dr. Reiter sidled into the bathroom and slowly leaned down to pick it up.

But when she stood back up and caught her reflection in the mirror, she nearly dropped it.

Emily stood there, her head twitching and stretching every now and then like a bad glitch on a screen. Her eyes and mouth were nothing but two wide, dark holes, gaping endlessly. And her frame had gotten much skinnier since Dr. Reiter had last seen her, threads of her gray ghostly glow fraying at the edges and uncurling like a broken tapestry.

“Emily—”

“why you leave me angel?” The words cut in and out as though over a shoddy radio signal. “where you go all this time? why you keep my family from me?”

Dr. Reiter slowly put the capture machine down on the bathroom counter and said, “I didn't do anything like that, Emily. This isn't your family. This is my family.”

Emily's twitching head slowly tilted down towards where Leo and Hailey were hiding.

“That's my husband, Leo,” Dr. Reiter said as she pressed the machine's power button, “and my daughter, Hailey. Not James or Henry.”

Emily didn't say anything as Dr. Reiter punched codes into the machine—she simply twitched there, in the mirror.

“I'm not an angel. I'm your doctor. It was my job to help you. I can still help you, if you let me.”

The ghost in the mirror went completely still, focused on nothing but Leo and Hailey—until the lure popped out of the machine and began to glow.

Then, it was quick, the way her head snapped back towards Dr. Reiter. She twitched as she stared at the little lure, and her mouth stretched open so wide that it took up half her face.

“you can’t help me! you took family! why angel? why?”

The mirror began to crack bit by bit as the doctor desperately willed the lure to charge. But it was taking too long, and Emily was fraying very badly. The glass was cracking, squeaking as though the ghost were stepping on it, pushing out more and more. Dr. Reiter found herself unable to look away from the ghost’s spindly body.

*This is our fault.*

“i won’t go,” Emily wailed. “not until you give family back.”

Leo’s hand latched onto hers and roughly pulled her to the floor just a moment before the mirror burst, and both Dr. Reiter and Leo had their backs shielding their baby from the silver splinters that came raining down. She prayed to nothing in particular—to anything or anyone that would listen—that the lure had charged already. Hailey had begun to shriek.

A very cold, creeping hand scratched up her back, desperate to hook onto any part of her lab coat. Dr. Reiter couldn’t help her tiny gasp as sharp nails scraped against her back.

“give me my baby.”

The voice was right in her ear.

A furious crackling filled the bathroom, the blue light dancing and flickering across the pale bathroom walls and glittering off the mirror shards. Those nails in Dr. Reiter’s back dragged down her coat, hard enough to hurt Dr. Reiter’s skin, before slipping away. Then, there was darkness.



“There we go. Now she should be safe.”

Pat handed Dr. Reiter a small white orb with the center’s logo stamped over its top. In its side was a tiny port for the center’s upload cables, but other than that, it was completely smooth all around. Dr. Reiter turned it around in her hands, her chest heavy with a sigh.

“Did that intern get tossed out?” She couldn’t help the edge in her voice.

“Oh, yeah. Instantly.”

“Good.”

She held the ball in her hands a little longer, running her thumb over the top.

“Come on,” Pat said, “let’s put her away.”

He led the doctor into the double-doored storage unit, and the bright lights poured down into the room, glinting off immaculate, identical shelves of the same orbs, all catching the light off their sleek white curves as though relishing the chance to shine. Each spot was numbered, and one empty spot awaited its new pearl. Dr. Reiter glanced around, running her thumb over Emily’s smooth plastic as the light glinted off of dozens of orbs just like hers. The silence oppressed her as she took in just how many ghosts the center had locked away in this one room.

Deleting them was murder, according to the state. So instead, they demanded that the center hold onto them forever—every single malfunctioning, unsalvageable case, every case that could possibly spell trouble for those still living. They were all here, incomplete, silent, separate from the world, with no chance of coming out, no matter if the malfunction was the spirit’s fault or the center’s. Quarantined. That’s what they were.

Dr. Reiter looked down at Emily’s orb. She could still remember how the ghost’s face lit up when she held the simulated baby, and how eager she was to see her family. One hundred and

thirty years had passed since she had Henry, one hundred and thirty years she'd been drifting on that beach, and in that moment, Dr. Reiter just couldn't see what for.

Pat reached out and laid a hand on her shoulder. "Put her away," he whispered. "There's nothing we can do now."

Dr. Reiter wiped the thoughts away and took a breath. She settled the orb as gently as she could in its new nesting place, and she turned on her heel, leaving without a word. Pat turned off the lights and closed the door behind them, enveloping the storage unit in darkness once again.