

Lessons From a Ghost

Lizzie Keefe

I STOPPED KILLING BUGS the day after my aunt died, in fear that they might be a reincarnation of her. She had always been a thin woman, barely fitting into her light blue Levi jeans, white Reebok sneakers as spotless as a hospital floor, a cross hanging from her neck like a child gripping its mother's skirt. She was petite in physical form, but she never let that compromise the thing inside her, the fight. Anyone who truly knew her understood that it was never dormant; it was in a deep slumber but could be awoken at any moment. All anyone had to do was butcher a recipe of words. In fact, all the women in my family possessed this fantastic rage, myself included.

It wasn't until years later when the first haunting manifested itself in my bedroom, my habitat of peace disturbed. She was everywhere in that room, so her presence wasn't entirely uninvited. Pieces of her lighthouse collection scattered on my shelves, their miniature frames coated in assorted colors and patterns, mixed with a melancholy realization that bodies will never inhabit them. Her quilt was my bedspread, tattered and worn in all the right places, smelling partly of stale perfume and days past. Sometimes if I thought about it too hard, I imagined the quilt was her, hugging my body as I slept, absorbing the snot and salt water on my face from a night gone bad, spread across my bed as she watched me inhale things into my lungs and nostrils.

Each year that passes takes with it a piece of the night she left Earth. I can barely remember who was there at the time. I was only conscious that I would always be rewatching her as she took a final inhale then marooned

all of us on this floating slab of possibility. Sometimes I'm convinced that she was under the weight of the quilt when she died, but then memory tells me otherwise. As a child, I grew up welcoming the dead. I knew they weren't here to cause harm, but rather to give a little shock now and then to see if we still cared.

One of the lighthouses from her collection is a ceramic lamp, coated in cerulean and gold paint, with a detachable top so I could change the tiny bulb that serves as my night light in a dark room. I turned the small black switch of its base to "ON" and it lit up for a moment, slowly flickering in and out of consciousness. I thought that might've been her way of saying "hi" to me, but the older I got, the more I convinced myself it was a short circuit in an old lamp. That non-believing mindset prevailed until the cigarette pack taped to my bedroom wall fell off in the dead of night.

I started hanging things on my bedroom walls when I was eleven years old. It began with an orange bandana from sixth grade. At the time, my friends and I went to school with a boy who'd been diagnosed with leukemia. Everyone who knew him loved him because he was one of those people who emanated light rather than absorbed it. He was also one of those rare middle school boys that didn't go out of his way to make girls feel like shit, especially the tall, awkward ones with braces. So when the news about the cancer spread fast, like news tends to in middle school hallways, my friends and I got the idea to make bandanas that bore his name. We chose orange because that was his favorite color. I wonder if it still is. We wore them to school on the days he wasn't there because he was undergoing

treatment. He beat the cancer and I'm fairly sure he's in the military now. Perhaps he thinks time is on his side.

Maybe I'm meant to live in the past forever, the way I'm able to be at any age within a moment's notice. The dead flowers in the dusty beer bottles I keep on my dresser support that notion. I have so many selves inside of me, and they show their teeth whenever they want. In a year with an early spring, I am fourteen, high on the warm wind, convinced that I've been cured of my depression. In the middle of a long winter, I am twelve years old, skipping ballet class without my parents knowing. The list goes on, much like life does.

At twenty-two years old it was safe to say that I'd had my fair share of substance abuse, more than your average teenager today. I spent most of my teenage years sitting in clouds of smoke, occasionally getting into heavier things when someone's friend of a friend brought a baggie full of white powder, pills, or purple liquid in a plastic prescription bottle, the name of the patient not-so-cleverly scratched off. When a person is asked about their substance abuse, they are expected to answer, "I was a sad person looking for a way out," or "Addiction runs in my family's blood." Very rarely does the person unapologetically admit, "I love being high." A good high replaces anger with forgiveness, thoughtlessness with appreciation, and hatred with love. It's an orgasmic thunderstorm in the middle of the summer during a drought; it's standing in the mirror and loving what you see; it's heaven on Earth—until it isn't. Like a storm, a high will leave debris in the mind. You realize the warmth and beauty left a third-degree burn and that medical attention is needed, except you're

the only one that can tend to the wound. I've learned that it's hard to feel sympathy for a well-off drug addict.

So there I was, high on some kind of painkiller and a decent amount of it, stretched across my bed on my aunt's quilt, when all of a sudden something hit the floor. Imagine the sound of glass breaking at your feet, standing on a hardwood floor in the middle of an empty warehouse. That is the level with which the almost-weightless, empty cigarette pack fell off my wall and onto the ground, unprovoked. I didn't realize how loud the silence in my room had been until something broke it, shattering any illusion that I was alone in my bedroom. Strung out, I sat up slowly and peered over the end of my bed to find that an empty pack of Marlboro Light cigarettes had detached itself from its designated place on my wall and ended up face down below.

My wall decor ranged from photos to movie and music posters, dead Bic lighters, string lights, Time and Life magazine cut-outs, birthday cards, vinyl album covers, letters and drawings from loved ones I no longer spoke to, and used license plates splattered with dead bugs. Weird shit I could never seem to get rid of ended up on those walls, and for years I called that room home. There's something to be said about a person who refuses to let go or forget, sticking their fingers in a memory as deep as they could, all the way down to the knuckle if necessary, just so they could remember. I had to remember.

The cigarette pack appeared a few weeks after my aunt passed, when my parents were moving a bookcase out of the downstairs living room. It fell out of a shelf onto the ground, and when my parents' backs were turned, I

snatched up the pack and placed it in the back pocket of my jeans. They didn't notice the pack or my theft of it. I studied the pack in my room and realized they were the type of cigarettes my aunt used to smoke, length and all. What some would consider a case of apophenia, I considered to be a greeting from beyond. One of the things I said to her before she left was, "Please come visit me." Ever since then, I have seen messages where others would say there are none. To some, I've given the word "charlatan" a whole new meaning in spiritual terms. To my grief-stricken mind, I now had physical proof of the message I had so earnestly pleaded for. When I opened the pack, it had something like eleven cigarettes in it, and I made a promise to myself that I would smoke each one as sparingly as I could, either for special occasions only or for moments when I was genuinely happy. At that time, I considered both to be the same thing. Sometimes I still do.

My aunt had been a heroin addict for some of her adult life, though I'm truly not sure how long it went on. I could ask my mom about all the gory details, but it's a Wednesday afternoon and I simply can't bring myself to do that. When I picture her as an addict, she doesn't look much different than at other times. It sounds strange but I imagine her to be as neat and clean while preparing to shoot up as she was when she made Christmas Eve dinner for us. Her shoes aren't dirty, and her black hair is pulled back in a tight bun or ponytail, leaving her face entirely exposed, cheekbones and all. She was an extremely private person, which makes imagining her high and strung-out that much harder. I can't picture her on a dirty mattress in an abandoned building with junkies in every corner, dried vomit and

urine coating mixed with used needles scattered like leaves on the ground. It sounds like something out of a movie about hard drugs written by someone who knows nothing of the topic. I can only see her, not the backdrop. I imagine her as a lost child trying to find her way back to reality, eventually finding it and realizing it doesn't fit her as well as she'd hoped. I see her filling up a bottle with water so she remembers to hydrate before she starts the ritual of spoons and lighters. I see her gracefully laying down as if for an afternoon nap when she's just injected the poison. I see her as a healthy junkie, if there ever was such a thing. It's vain to think someone I love would at least have the decency to not look like an addict, I know, but it's something I've pictured forever.

When I peered over the edge of my bed and saw the cigarette pack on the floor, sharp fear grabbed my spine. I couldn't move. Fear rose like hairs on the back of a neck, like a disembodied hand reaching up from behind your headboard or like feet dangling off a dock above still, black water. This was not just my aunt saying "hi." From the second I heard it drop, the air changed and the temperature dropped. She was upset, and God help me if she was angry with me, which she had every right to be in that moment. Her anger mirrored my mother's: ruthless and god-fearing. In my daze from the downers I had taken, I slowly sat up and stared at the ground, suddenly conscious that I had been holding my breath. I felt like a child being scolded by some authority figure standing in a dark corner of my room, waving their finger at my face, and shaking their head in disappointment at my carelessness. It was the first time I had ever been truly afraid of a dead loved one, which

was a devastating blow to my spiritual belief system of benevolence. The dead were supposed to visit your dreams, send messages through their favorite song on the radio, or make angel numbers appear constantly to reassure you they had your back. What hurt the most about the whole ordeal was that the second it happened, I knew that the cigarette pack falling off the wall was her way of saying, “You’re breaking my heart.”

In the following days I found myself growing angrier, for reasons I couldn’t exactly identify. But I knew that damn cigarette pack scaring the life out of me had something to do with it. I find fear to be sobering and necessary, but when someone you love and trust is behind it, the entire world seems to be empty and full of betrayal. I ended up taking the empty pack and throwing it in the trash with a particular hatred that I now often regret. There are worse things I could have done in retaliation, but to discard something I once held so close to my heart as if it were an annoyance seemed detrimental to my soul. When I finally let myself think about what happened in my room that night, I became overwhelmed with grief, not just because I felt guilty about throwing something special away but because I had to admit to myself that I had a problem. Addiction isn’t always the sad-eyed boy in an alley with poison or waking up among empty bottles on the ground from nights before. Most of the time it’s a slow burning candle that refuses to be blown out, a stubborn dog that won’t stop bringing rabbits to the doorstep as gifts.

If I have learned anything from that night in my bedroom, it is that there is always someone waiting for you to hear them, calling out to whatever depths you’ve sunk into this time, hoping you see their hand reaching

out from the grave. If I have learned anything from that night in my bedroom, it is that the dead speak to us all the time in ways we rarely see or comprehend because we're so consumed by whatever life is throwing at us in the moment. We forget that people leave pieces of themselves behind every time they speak or touch something, every time they laugh or cry. It's an occupational hazard of the living.