

Ghost

Ghost has been floating over my shoulder like some ill-willed phantom for over ten years. He haunts the little things I do, like checking if the front and back doors are shut tight, locking the car doors exactly three times every time, or making sure my phone is off whenever I'm in a theater because someone will inevitably call. Ghost sits by my ear and sings, typically to the tune of a children's lullaby or an obscure pop song, that doctor you most certainly saw will call with your nonexistent cancer results in the middle of Miles Morales trying to impress Gwen Stacy. A man will break into your car while you're at work and hide in there until the sun sets and you leave, only to rob you at gunpoint for all the money in your wallet, and you're a college student, so it's not much. If you don't lock the door 20 times, your dog will break out and get hit by a semi-truck going 50 on a 25.

Ghost is harmless for the most part, though. He sits on my shoulder and plays with my hair while laughing at my inability to ignore his mutterings. He floats around my temples and questions my decisions with the lackluster of a teenage boy who doesn't want to talk about his parent's divorce, but they're forcing him into therapy regardless. He's all white and slightly see-through, like the stereotypical depiction of a ghost in the movies, except he looks like a normal kid, not nearly as scary in his physicality as his mentality. He has a tail that he can mold into legs if he wants, and it appears to be wispy water vapor that tapers towards the end like the Genie's in Aladdin. At some point, I grew older than him. He no longer appears to be an authority figure and is instead a child looking to get his way. His existence no longer threatens me.

Ghost liked to tell me secrets. He'd tell me things of minor importance, like how the towel in the bathroom had to be folded correctly; otherwise, something terrible would happen. I don't know what a small piece of fuzzy fabric would have done to me, but Ghost had a way of making

illogical instances seem logical. You'll flood the house if the sink's handle isn't centered precisely. Is the toilet paper rolled so that none is hanging over the edge? Are you not sure? Well, you better check for the fourteenth time. Who knows what might happen if it isn't flawless?

Ghost would only tell me tales attached to unimportant, inanimate objects for a while. He didn't care about life and death, but he eventually turned vengeful, forcing me to play out his diluted nightmares in my reality. I think he's unsettled that he died young, and I miraculously outlived him, so he forces me to act out every potential scene that led to his demise. He didn't bother with how specific actions could affect me, only that I did them exactly how he said to, exactly when he said at a moment's notice.

When I was a naive child, I would cut paper snowflakes out of construction paper, usually around the winter holidays. Something about the individuality of each one helped me convince myself that I was unparalleled but still somehow part of a broader picture. I would craft large red ones with intricate cut-outs, medium white ones with minimal detail, tiny green ones that would litter the house like glitter, and blob-esque blue ones that would usually end up at the bottom of the recycling bag. It was a thankless task, but Ghost enjoyed perfect parallels and straight lines. He would laugh sarcastically and tell me he liked my designs to lift my spirits. Ghost made me feel extraordinary like I was the only one who could do this when, in reality, I was only distinctive because he was always there, sitting on my head, banging his heels into the bridge of my nose. He doted on me and gave me fantastic new ideas for bigger and better snowflakes. He was a friend that never left and a nuisance all in the same, but I didn't know that he wasn't supposed to be there. I guess I loved him in some defiling way.

Then Ghost told me to stab my right eye out with the scissors. It wouldn't hurt; only make it so I couldn't see the obnoxious trash I created. In hushed tones, he told me what would happen. I'd pick up the scissors with my left hand clenched around the blades, wrap my right fist around the grip, turn them towards myself, and thrust the cutting edge into my socket. He'd say it won't do anything; perhaps it'll mess up your depth perception and ability to see things after a certain distance, but really, what good does that do you anyway? I had to listen to him. What other choice did I have? No matter how often I swatted or shoved him away, my hand would faze right through him without any indication of pain on his smirking, devilish face. This instance is right about when I would start crying. My mother found me sitting at the four-person dinner table, tear-streaked face buried in heavy hands as I tried to explain what had happened. Ghost disappeared when she was there but never failed to resurface. I wasn't allowed to be near sharp objects for years afterward, yet this mysterious aberration was still a friend to me.

Eventually, like all kids, I would have to put an end to craft time to complete my homework. I appreciated the monotony of math homework and the difficulty of studying spelling. Occasionally, when I got tired of achieving question after question, I would doodle on the edges of my paper. I'd draw intricate mandalas or simple cubes. I would follow wherever my inspiration took me, much like I followed Ghost. I'd inevitably have to continue to work on my homework, and Ghost would finally rear his nasty head to tell me I was doing it wrong. No, don't you see? The world will end if you leave any pencil marks on your paper. What a silly girl! You know nothing.

I would try to ignore Ghost. Of course, what else was I to do? But it was a boxing ring. In one corner, heavily weighed down by mental illness and self-depreciation, Johanna! And in the other, our heavyweight champion of the millennia, light on his feet, weighing zero pounds

physically but over a ton mentally, Ghost! We'd move forward, tap fists, and the fight would begin. Except you can't punch something that isn't there, so I'd only wear myself out fighting him. He'd win by default.

Ghost would tell me to erase my marks and start again. And I would. And again. Okay. I'd erase so much I'd tear holes in my paper, but it still wasn't enough. He'd tilt his head and look at me, telling me to start again; I wonder what would happen if you forced the pencil through the middle of your hand? I'd stare at him, confused. It would ruin my hand and bleed everywhere, Ghost, you know this. You should do it. I did my best to ignore him, but he always followed me to my head's darkest, most secret recesses. I'd have to stop working and leave the pencil on the table before I decided to test his theory for good.

I loved car rides growing up, as I think most children do. I used to imagine Shadow, the golden retriever from *Homeward Bound*, was racing alongside the car, trying to keep up. Whenever we arrived at our destination, Ghost would talk to me in the voice of Don Ameche, revealing to me how much the dog enjoyed himself. It was sweet and ironically poetic. Inevitably, as I always expected he would, Ghost got tired of narrating my imaginary friend's adventures. Running over mountain tops and jumping rivers was not enough for Ghost. He wanted me to participate. Ghost told me that he would be happy with his job recounting Shadow's escapades if I were to join him. Open the door, he whispered. Just because we're on a highway doesn't mean you'll die when you hit the pavement, maybe get bumped and bruised, but what's it to you?

Again, I could shake Ghost off my shoulder long enough to tell my driving mother to lock the car doors. As the locks clicked into place, I pulled the handle in an attempt to open the door. Later, she would learn that it wasn't me trying to exit the moving car, that it was Ghost trying to

get me killed, but at that moment, she was more concerned about the crying emanating from her back seat. Ghost giggled, called me names, and said I was too weak to kill myself. He'd pat my hair and call me good like I was a dog whose sole purpose was to entertain him. It seemed as if Shadow and I had switched places. And yet, even after all this, I loved Ghost more than I could comprehend. He made me who I was. He was my best friend.

A friend who wanted to see me dead because I outlasted him, and he was sickly fascinated with haunting me. Being a child was supposed to be fun, but it is less so when the stench of death permeates everything you do. He liked to point at my veins and whisper directly into my ear this one would make me bleed out the quickest or that if I took all the pills in the bottle, I would only sleep for a while. I guess to him, a while was merely a lifetime. I could somehow disregard his taunting, as tricky as it was. Mostly, my mother helped me chase Ghost away for moments at a time. She would sit with her arms around my shoulders, my head buried in the crook of her arm, and her presence would force Ghost to wait out the hug in a distant corner of my mind. I don't know if I was crying because I couldn't find him or because I finally understood he wasn't supposed to be there in the first place.

I first met Ghost due to childhood shock. Something happened that traumatized me enough to develop the illness that rode my shoulders everywhere I went. People liked to say I imagined him, that someone my age couldn't be so affected, and that he must've suddenly materialized for only a short period. He would disappear shortly, they promised. I guess people want to downplay others' lives. For some reason, they like to think that, in all actuality, they have it worse than everyone else. And I'd never say I had it bad. I had Ghost, a friend turned monster turned friend again. He wasn't immoral, only misunderstood, much like I was.

I tend to get defensive when people talk about how they know what I'm going through, but there's no diagnosis, and their Ghost only seems to show up during spring cleaning. I'd scoff: you don't know Ghost then; you must clean after a winter of dust infected your space; I have to shut things so tightly they can't be opened again by anyone but me. He doesn't occasionally exist in the grime under your fingernails or the grit at the bottom of your book bag; he lives in every moment when you have to count the number of times you open and close your bedroom door or in the space between the egg carton, milk jug, and bruised apples. He doesn't help you finish work or ensure you're clean enough. Ghost incessantly makes you work harder for less - clean regardless of when you last washed; he's an abnormality that inserts himself into situations he's not needed to meddle with the outcome. Nevertheless, I grew to love him. It was either that or hate myself.

Ghost was a part of me in every way that matters. I couldn't blame him for my decisions more than I could prove his existence. He haunted me until I became numb to the realities around me. I couldn't force him to leave, and I wouldn't even if I could. He was as important to me as the ocean in my eyes, the timbre of my voice, and the strength in my hands. Hands that simultaneously tried to shove him away and pull him closer. I admit it was a toxic relationship, but his poison was absorbed through my skin, pooled in my blood, and embedded in my DNA. Every part of Ghost was me.

Inevitably, I had to say goodbye to my long-time friend. I went to the doctor, and he finally had a name. Obsessive-compulsive disorder sounded like a disease that would forever haunt me as Ghost did. Suddenly, he was a thing I could learn about, and medication would hopefully quell his existence entirely. How do you say goodbye to something that made you who you are?

I did say goodbye, that is, at least for a while. Ghost was gone, no longer whispering into my ear or kicking at my jaw until I paid attention to him. He cut a hole out of my heart, but something else simultaneously filled another. I no longer had Ghost, the old friend, but I was no longer troubled by conflicts of death. I had lost him but gained the ability to feel more than numbness. I could handle happiness again, at least until I did something stupid. I stopped taking my medication and weaned off it because I felt controlled by drugs, just like I did Ghost. While Ghost liked to use his influence to tell me what to do, the drugs induced a chemical reaction that told me how to feel. It was technically better than constantly hearing Ghost, but it didn't feel better.

This simple reason is why I feel fortunate; I taught myself to smile, laugh, and enjoy moments of happiness. Not everyone can do this, and I wouldn't recommend it, but stopping my medication was empowering. Learning to be a cheerful human without drug altercations or Ghost's persuasion was a freedom I had never felt before. I was suddenly fully myself.

People learn to live with things like this through medication, meditation, or mediation. Some methods of coping are better than others. I would never suggest cutting your meds as I did, but I also refuse to denounce a technique that worked for me. It might not ultimately make your Ghost go away, and in the back of your mind, you may know that he's still a part of you, but if you feel healthy and happy, his presence won't mean anything.

I have Person to blame for Ghost's existence. Person was the cause of trauma; the reason Ghost moved into the musty attic of my head and took a seat on the La-Z-Boy of my shoulder. They would never admit to it. Who wants to be the reason depression and a Ghost that won't stop screaming surround a child's longevity? I have yet to decide how I feel about Person. While it's true they instilled a mentality in me I'd rather never have had, Ghost became something I was

strangely grateful for. Children want attention, and if I couldn't get it from Person, I could always, without fail, get it from Ghost. Am I angry about this? I could say yes. I could tell you that Person messed me up so badly I'd instead have been dead before puberty, which is mostly true, or that I'd wish harm unto Person until they apologized for their transgressions. I could also say no, that I loved Person regardless of their choices that resulted in Ghost entering my life, which is also mostly true. I think what would be most accurate is to say I don't care. I dealt with Ghost the way I knew how, and I'm angry he existed, but I love him and want him gone so terribly, but I'd miss him if he were no longer around. Person has no impact anymore, so why fret over what could have been?

Ghost comes to visit on occasion. I don't miss him. I don't love him anymore, either. I'm merely content with the impact he had on my life. When he does visit, he tries to sit on my shoulder and murmur into my ear like old times, but his voice has changed. No longer is he a vengeful spirit but is instead back to his old prankster ways. He likes to force me to check the locked door five times before I can leave the house. He pushes me to go outside right before bed to ensure no one who could hurt me is out lurking. I found ways to deal with this. Yes, I had to check the door more times than most, but at least I know it's locked. It's cold and dark when I go outside, but I can look at the stars. He doesn't control me anymore. I take his probing and turn it against him so he doesn't feel the need to visit for a while. Ghost is precisely that, a ghost.