

FESTIVAL OF THE GHOST

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THE GHOST**

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1.50PM

I read somewhere that keeping a journal can help with the grieving process. Every time I have a thought about you, or something happens that reminds me of you, I'm supposed to write it down.

Well, today was meant to be the day of our final goodbye, so you were always going to be the only thing on my mind.

It was just you and me left in the hall. But I couldn't even, for the very last time, see your face and kiss you on the cheek. My silence was broken by a long, unpunctuated message I received from whom I assumed was the lorry driver. I stared at a ceiling light, like I always have to when I want to feel clean, doing what you and Mum used to call one of my funny little quirks.

But your casket wasn't even in a straight line. I needed the release, I needed to find its correct position. If I didn't then I couldn't be clean again.

I wheeled you until your casket was parallel with the back window. But then the flowers on top weren't in balance with the lectern, so I rearranged them to make sure the pinks and purples didn't touch. I looked down and I found myself clicking my fingers, trying to find the right pattern which would stop me feeling like there was a tumour growing in my head.

And in that second I noticed I was no longer alone. It was you.

I don't know how but you were stood at the lectern. You were dressed in black and your hair was up and your mouth was moving as if you were talking, but no sound came out. Then you stopped, and stared at the back of the hall.

I fell into a seat. You were in the casket. I had helped carry you in myself. The violence of what had happened to you was in there. But you looked so young. You were skinnier and smaller somehow, with a rounder face.

And I knew, right then, that I had seen you like this before.

Five years ago at Mum's funeral. You caught me sneaking in late and I had to stand at the back. You'd spotted me and welled up and you couldn't get your words out. And now I was seeing you go through it again.

And just like that you were gone.

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I grabbed at the air where I'd seen you. I looked at the casket, at the flowers on top. I went to look inside, but the thought of what I would see made me cold and weak.

Outside there was a sea of people in black. I walked through the mulls and murmurs. A man with a big collar said sorry for my loss. The undertaker, Mr Sparrow – the same one we had for Mum – asked if I was ready to head to the wake.

But all I could say was, – I saw her. I just saw Alexis in the hall.

And all he could say back was, – I'm not sure you should tell anyone that at the wake, son.

I pushed past one of your friends in a yellow coat and went back in. The lectern was in the same place, but now it didn't look like it was aligned correctly with the wall, as if its position made the whole world wrong.

I shifted it over. But this made me feel like my body was open to disease, so I started to brush down the parts that felt open, and at the lectern I saw a woman crying. She was wearing a bonnet and a man came up to her holding a handkerchief and he was bald, but he'd combed his hair over, and then they disappeared.

I heard the doors go and the undertakers came through. Mr Sparrow said, – The next mourners need to prepare now, son.

They were walking up the aisle. I said, – I saw her at the lectern, and then I saw a woman and a man.

I didn't even believe it myself. But I knew I had seen all this with my own eyes.

Mr Sparrow said, after a second, – It's been a stressful day for you. I tell you, son, what will help is if you get a drink down you at the wake. Talk about her. Let other people tell you about her.

He moved his hand slowly and put it round my elbow.

– I'll show you what I mean, I said.

I went up to the lectern and tried to adjust it, but I didn't feel anything. It was just a lectern in a hall in front of your dead body.

Mr Sparrow said, – We have to be fair on the next mourners, sir.

I ignored him. I started moving the lectern around but nothing happened. I did some of my finger-strumming rituals that you used to find funny when we were kids, even though I didn't feel the need to do them. But nothing was happening.

I followed Mr Sparrow down the aisle and I heard a younger undertaker whisper, – What is it with this guy and funerals?

Mr Sparrow told him to be quiet.

I shook the hands of a hundred people, all offering

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their condolences and offering to buy me a drink at the wake.

But I wasn't listening.

All I could think about was you.

6PM

At the Steamboat, Aunty kept on trying to get our little cousins to come over to me in the corner. But they could see that I didn't want to talk. I pretended to go to the toilet and left through the beer garden.

An envelope was half hanging out of our letterbox. I pushed it in with my knuckle, careful to only use the middle one so I didn't feel unclean.

A woman walked through our front door as if it wasn't there.

She was big, and her skin looked as if she had spent most of her life under the faraway sun and not the clouds of the dockland sky. She was wearing a blue apron and a scarf of yellow around her head, and she walked straight past me and she was gone.

I just wanted it to stop.

I wanted to feel clean again.

I let myself in. One of your boxes on the sofa had some papers peeping out the side. I had to sort them, to make sure they were all straight and in a line. I took

them and jabbed them tidy on the floor, then stacked them back in the box.

And I saw you.

This time you were looking out the window. You were wearing that dark blue hoodie you never gave me back.

You shut the curtain and disappeared.

I nudged the box again, but it didn't work. It felt like it was where it was supposed to be. I tried once more but I knew I was wasting my time.

Then I heard the front door. I walked out of the living room and there was a man dressed in black stood by the stairs. I vaguely recalled him waiting in line to shake my hand, because he had a big collar.

I didn't want another person asking if they could do anything to help. So I said, – You know, it's rude to just walk into people's houses.

And he said, – Didn't you hear me calling?

– This is kind of a shit day for me.

– I didn't mean to barge in. I didn't know how else to get your attention, sorry. My name is Ted Hurley. Your sister was my doctoral student.

When you got accepted, I remember you telling me how excited you were by your new supervisor. He was why you chose your home town over Bristol in the first place.

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I said, – Alexis told me about you. Didn't you go out of your way to help her get that bursary?

He said, – I guess so. Anyway, I'm sorry to bother you at this time. It's just that what I wanted to ask is better coming from me in person. I was wondering if you knew what she did with her thesis?

– Why do you need that? I said.

– She only uploaded certain chapters to her student records. But I know she was very close to submitting, and I feel that if I handed it in with a strong letter of recommendation, her doctorate could be awarded posthumously.

I couldn't explain how I regretted it now, how when we went to Auntie's birthday we ended up ignoring each other. So I said, – I don't know anything about it, to be honest. We fell out a few weeks ago.

Here is something I will never get the chance to say. Do you remember, when we last spoke, how you said I was smothering you after I accused you of being really distant lately? It wasn't you who was being the dickhead.

He said, after a moment or so, – Do you have any of her study stuff here? I mean I know it's not ideal, but if I could take it off you now I could submit it by the end of the academic year.

We went into the living room. I pointed at your boxes and turned to the window. I opened the curtains

to give him more light, but I couldn't stop tugging the one on the left, even though it was fully back. And then I got the urge to stub my toe and out of nowhere I saw four men at a table playing cards.

Two of them were black and one white and one from the Middle East, but they didn't have any feet, their ankles in the ground. They were not quite there, as if I was looking at their reflections in a pane of glass. They were smoking and one of them laughed, and then they were gone.

I looked at Hurley. In the end, he said, – I'm not sure what I saw there.

– I'm more glad that it's not just in my head, I said.

Then he looked at me straight and said, – It's not just in your head. I don't know how else to say this, but you've worked out how to loop.

6.20PM

He said, – I can't explain what I mean without showing you.

So I said, – Then show me.

When I shut the front door, I squeezed the handle until my hand cramped. Now I could tell myself that the pain meant I didn't have to go back and check it was locked.

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Hurley was waiting for me by the gate. – Took you a while to close the door, he said.

– I like to double check.

– You mean you had to perform a ritual.

He turned and walked. He would only know this if he did the same thing.

We went past a bunch of boys listening to some tinny grime on a phone, and made our way through the maze of the estate where the cars can't go.

Hurley said, – What do you know of the history of this place?

– Not as much as my sister.

We joined the road and got to Callaghan Square, the one with the tall glass banks and the fountain on the edge of town. He said, – OK then. Any idea what was here before this corporate monstrosity?

And I said, – This was all a building site when I was a kid.

– It was the Greek part of the city, he said. – Right next to the Somali quarter. Sailors brought their families over and settled in the streets where this square now is. They came from all over the world, and other sailors would meet Welsh women here and get married and make this their home port.

He looked around, then took off his shoe and lined it up so that it was perpendicular to the fountain.

I had felt the type of look on his face on my own. He had to get it right. It had to be perfect or it would leave him unclean. Then he took out some keys and arranged them until they were in a star shape and put them on the floor.

There were little kids playing in the fountain. Two brown boys wearing shorts and shoes and three white girls in long dresses. The girl in front turned around and she was smiling and running and then they were gone.

He put his shoe back on as I asked him what the fuck, but he walked off back towards the estate and I had to run to catch up. I asked him again, but there were some men waiting to be let inside the Salvation Army.

When I told him to slow down he stopped and picked up a couple of stones from the gutter. He put a few of them in a triangle and twisted his ear and I saw a bunch of black men in the road. One was rolling up a sleeve and two others were watching another man check how many bullets he had in a gun.

– I always feel bad for these guys, Hurley said. – A big crowd of demobbed Kiwi soldiers has barricaded them inside their lodgings. All for the crime of having jobs and being black.

And I said, – But that's not possible. That's the race riots of 1919.

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He looked at me and said, – That’s what it is, though. We’re seeing ghosts. These are the animations of past lives. When people experience a moment of high emotion, like joy or love or stress, an imprint gets stored where it happened. Events of the past are all around us, and if you can bring about just the right conditions, they can be released for all the world to see.

I sat on the kerb. He sat down next to me and I said, – This is a lot to take in.

– It gets quite cool after a while, he said. – I’ve seen Henry VIII with half his nose lost to syphilis. I’m one of the few who’ve seen Caesar greeting Cleopatra for the first time at the gates of Rome.

I said, – One of the few?

– Let’s just say we’re not the only ones.

I thought about what it could mean. I didn’t really care to see old kings and queens. If Hurley could see them, however, then maybe I could see Mum and you.

I said, – I think I wanna give it another try.

We walked back towards the dock, past the Lagos cafe and the turning for the mosque. Hurley stopped and said, – There’s one here. You’ll learn that. Look at that kerb jutting out.

It looked like any other. A car went past. I felt nothing.

He sighed and kicked a cigarette packet from the gutter and scratched his left knee.

Out of nowhere, a pretty young woman in a bonnet was looking at me. She was sat down at a table and she smiled. But this smile felt like it was for me. It was as if our eyes connected. The feeling of unease it gave me was enough to put a chill up my spine.

When she disappeared, I said, – I swear she could see me.

– Don't forget that it's an animation, Hurley said.
– She's in a dockside cafe, trying to catch a sailor's eye so he would go in and give her business. She was rather famous, actually.

– What was her name?

– Mary Jane Kelly.

I shrugged and said nothing.

– Maybe you haven't heard of Mary Jane Kelly. But I bet you've heard of the man who killed her.

There was only one person he could mean. Everyone knew the stories. So I said, – I guess she must have been one of the Butcher of Butetown's victims.

– The Butcher never actually killed in Butetown, you know. He did them all in other parts of the city. That was just the racism of the time. People back then believed that the murders couldn't have been done by someone of good Welsh stock, they must have been

done by a foreigner. Mary Jane Kelly, this poor young girl, maybe spooked by the reports of the Butcher in the papers, left for London. Then a couple of years later, on a wet, cold night in November 1888, this unlucky girl became the final known victim of Jack the Ripper.

I said nothing.

– Now you try, he said.

I smoothed down my arms. I picked up the cigarette packet and dropped it on its side. And then you appeared in front of us. You were hopping on one foot and bending down and then you disappeared.

For a long moment, we were silent. And then Hurley said, – I wish she'd told me.

6.50PM

You never had to step in and out of rooms on the same foot like I have to and you never touched the fridge door with every finger before you opened it. Mum always joked that you were the normal one. You were the studious one who followed after her, and I was the scatterbrain who was like the dad we had never known.

– What do you mean? I said to Hurley. – Alexis could do this too?

– She kept on doing the same thing, he said. – It doesn't really work that way. Maybe she was teaching herself.

I looked at the time on my phone. I had been gone nearly an hour. I walked off and said, – Come and talk it over at the Steamboat. People will start noticing I'm not there.

He caught up and we walked past the train station but he didn't answer, as if he was stopping himself from saying something.

Then he said, – It would only take five minutes to check all those boxes for her thesis. I know what I'm looking for.

But I had already seen enough of you today. So I said, – Give me your address and I'll post it.

He stopped walking and said, – I'll still have to make a case for it, you know. And the thesis itself could be worth something. It's one of the most important the history department has ever seen. I could help turn it in to a popular history book. It's ostensibly about the lives of the nine individuals the Butcher of Butetown killed, and she made a compelling case for a few more victims that have never been considered in the modern field of Butcherology. But she also told me at our last meeting that while this wasn't what the thesis

was about, she actually got right to the heart of the identity of the Butcher himself.

I had no answer. Deep down I knew that going to the wake was not about saying goodbye. It was about having so many drinks that I would be too drunk to think. Yet here someone stood, giving me a proper chance to do one last thing for you.

And, to be brutally honest, I could do with the money. We never came from a rich family. When Mum wasn't working, she gave most of her time away to those boring council meetings she used to obsess over. It had been five years. The payout from her death had almost gone.

I could see the Steamboat up ahead on the corner. Someone from the wake was outside, in all black, puffing out a big cloud of vape smoke. But instead of going back, we turned right at the junction and headed towards the estate. Hurley looked nervous as we passed some of the boys, but they knew why we were wearing black and they got out of our way.

Back in the house again, he looked through the four boxes on the sofa while I started on the eight stacked in the corner.

– Are you sure this is everything? he soon said. – It's unusual for a PhD student not to have reams and reams of notes.

– I wish I knew what to say, I said.

He sat down on the sofa between two boxes. He scratched his head. Then he said, – Are you sure she wasn't here recently? There's something about the cut of the carpet. I don't know. It just feels like an emotionally charged space.

I knew the truth. If it was emotionally charged it's cos I had been a bit of a prat to you. But instead we stacked the boxes against the far wall. Hurley stared at the space, hand on chin, and looked around. He moved the sofa an inch or two back and tilted the rug. Then he walked through to the kitchen and came back with a tin of tomatoes. He put it down next to the boxes.

A man in his fifties, eyes sharp as a twist of lemon, was walking towards us. He had a small boat on his back, almost like a shell. On each side of his neck from a rope hung a large salmon. He walked knee deep through the room and he was gone.

I knew why you didn't appear. The can was the wrong way round for a start, and the rug needed to be symmetrical with the edge of the wall. It was driving me nuts just looking at them.

Before Hurley said anything, I straightened the carpet and turned the can.

I stepped back and you were there, in your denim jacket and black tee like the last time we saw each

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other. You looked around and grabbed a pile of papers from the sofa, then chucked them in your satchel and ran for the kitchen.

– Did you see those papers? Hurley said. – That could have been her thesis.

I weighed my words before I spoke. I said, – In the middle of the page it said Festival of the Ghost.

Hurley clenched a fist and said, – I knew it. That was the title. Her research was tied into a religious holiday.

– She was wearing those same clothes the last time I saw her, I said. – I’ve thought about that night more than any other of my life.

Hurley stayed silent. – Your connection with her is obviously a lot stronger than mine, he said after a while. – You could probably trace her steps and find her thesis quite quickly. I can help if you feel like giving it a go.

I said yes, and we walked back to the Steamboat. We shook hands outside as Hurley insisted that he had an early start. I went back in. Everyone was at the merry stage of reminiscence, but looking for your thesis was all I could think about. Because while I had told Hurley the title, what I didn’t tell him was what was scribbled in pencil underneath: a single line of three words, saying, KEEP SAFE DANGER.

