

No Ordinary Ghost

Sol Natalia Dieguez

There's a ghost in my house.

Well, at least that's what I call it. It's a sneaky creature, this ghost. Always lurking in the shadows. Most times it's merely an echo in the back of my mind. A reminiscence of what's underneath the surface.

But sometimes it gets louder.

Nobody knows how it started. Or why it chooses certain moments to scream at the top of its lungs. I can't seem to understand its ever-swinging moods and repetitive tantrums.

All I know is this ghost is terrible news.

My parents know the creature is here but aren't troubled by it. We don't like talking about this ghost. It's awkward. Problematic. Sad. That's why we pretend it doesn't exist at all. We have a natural talent for forgetting about its existence. That's why it's terrifying to even wonder about its desires. What could a ghost want, if not to haunt its victims? Why is it always present but never there?

A ghost can't be just a whisper, can it?

No matter how subtle my ghost is, I want nothing but to make it go away.

Though this month is a good one. The ghost hasn't attacked in weeks. I had almost forgotten what it's like to live without a shadow breathing down your neck. It feels liberating.

School is a particularly safe haven of mine. I have friends there and the ghost gets lost amidst all the people. There is enough light in the classrooms and colorful

hallways to prevent darkness from creeping in. High-schoolers are always noisy as well, allowing silence to make itself present only at rare moments of weakness.

I'm at school right now, waiting to go to class as any regular sophomore would do.

I check all corners as I make my way to my locker. There seem to be no shadows waiting for me at the door. I unclench my fingers and take a deep breath. It's fine. I'm safe. Maybe the ghost has left for good this time around.

When I type in my combination, a hand meets my shoulder. Every bit of me flinches.

I force myself to calm down. This is school. The creature gets distracted here.

"How are you, Melany?" My history teacher's voice resonates in my ears. She's one of my favorites. Always makes classes fun, knows her way around classic literature, and genuinely seems to care about each one of us. She's the sweetest 60-something-year-old teacher I've ever had at Pinewood High. Nothing to worry about.

"Hi, Mrs. Langston." I turn around, resting my back against the corner of my locker. "I'm alright. Did I miss an assignment or anything?"

Mrs. Langston lets out a soft laugh. "Oh, honey, not at all. It's Friday. You don't have class with me until next Thursday."

Is it Friday already?

"Right," I say, looking into her gentle green eyes, "Then I guess I'm fine, teach. What about you?"

“I’m okay, Melany, thanks. Busy with tests.” Her smile weakens. The air becomes heavier as if anticipating what she’s about to say. “I talked to Sarah early this week.”

Miss Candella, the school’s therapist. I stay silent, wondering.

“Remember you asked me to talk to her about a month ago? You said she’d help me understand your situation. The day when... Well, the day you told me you needed to step outside the classroom.”

Right. That day. A huge victory for the ghost.

“I remember, Mrs. Langston,” I say as my breath quickens, “So you talked to her?”

The bell rings. Everyone else in the corridor starts moving toward the classrooms. Not me. Not my teacher. Not the shadows I spot from the corner of my eye.

“Sarah told me everything as you asked her to”, she continues. Had I asked Miss Candella to tell anyone anything? I can’t remember. But I trusted Mrs. Langston. I wanted her to understand, to believe me, to be on my side. “Now that I understand what you’re going through, I just wanted to make sure you’re okay. Do you need anything from me?”

The school is silent. Waiting for me to react. But I refuse to think about it. About any of it.

“I hope your parents are handling this properly, honey. These situations are never easy.” Mrs. Langston puts her hand on my shoulder again. It’s warm and it feels safe. But my mind is already in fight or flight mode. “Thanks for trusting me

with your story. You're one of my brightest students. I'll make sure you feel comfortable and safe in my class."

Does she know about the ghost? Maybe she has dealt with one in the past. Phantoms are never easy. She isn't wrong about that.

"Melany?" She asks, "Are you sure you're alright? You look pale. Talk to me."

I try to answer but words fail me. My limbs aren't responding. My mouth is dry, lips clumped together. All I see are shadows. All I hear is the ghost screaming from the inside of my brain.

Shame. I almost made it to the end of the week without seeing it.

"Mels, what are you doing here?" A third voice echoes near me. "Mrs. Langston, Melany and I have art class right now."

Claire, my closest friend. The first one to know. She believes in my ghost.

"I'm so sorry, Claire," Mrs. Langston apologizes, moving her hand away from me. I let out a heavy exhale. "I have a free period and let time slip away from me."

"It's okay." Claire crouches next to me to grab my books from the locker. "Come on, Mels. We gotta go."

I'm not moving, am I?

"She looks as if she's seen a ghost. Should we take her to the nurse?"

I want to tell my teacher that I don't look as if I've seen a ghost. It's right in front of us. It's everywhere. I'm seeing it with my two coal-black eyes. The ghost is lost in the wind. Dancing in the corridor. Lurking down the stairs. Mocking me behind my back.

But my parents advised me not to talk about it. Not to expose anyone.

“That won’t be necessary. I’ve got this.” Claire tugs my arm, making my whole body tremble with the movement. “Mels, we’re late. Do you want them to call your parents again?”

At last, that question forces me to react.

I shake my head, holding onto my friend. “I’m fine, promise. My blood sugar must be running low since I forgot to have lunch. I can snack on something while in class.”

Mrs. Langston looks at me in disbelief. “Okay. Be safe, Melany. Eat a granola bar or something.”

“Thanks, see you!” I exclaim with Claire already dragging me to class. Her long hair sweeps in front of me.

A hushed echo resonates within the confines of my mind. Is it a laugh or a cry?

I forgot to mention the ghost isn’t only at my house. It’s everywhere I am.

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The day went by in a blur. Art class managed to distract me for a while. But I still felt like I was floating. Soaring the skies, detached from everything around me. Looking for a way to make it go away.

When would it go away?

The moment I arrive home, my parents ambush me in the kitchen.

“Hello, Melany,” Father says, sitting on a stool by the countertop. His dark brows furrow with disappointment. “How was school?”

“It was fine.” I put the kettle on to make some tea.

“Then why were you late for class again?” Mother accuses me. Not again. She’s still standing, hands on her hips and a tremble on her lips. “The principal called.”

Had we gotten snitched by our art teacher? I can’t seem to remember. It would be best to check with Claire later. Hopefully, she wasn’t once more in trouble because of me.

“Anything to say, Melany?” Mother pressed, fingers gripping at her burgundy dress. “Your grades have sunk this year. How will you get into college if you keep neglecting your responsibilities?”

“It’s not my fault.” My voice falters. “It’s back. It followed me to school.”

Father clasps his hands together, bitterly chuckling. “Don’t start with those excuses again. It’s nonsense.”

“It’s not an excuse,” I whisper. Lights and shadows creep from the open windows. It’s still bright outside. But darkness always finds its way to me.

As I said, in this house, we pretend the ghost doesn’t exist. At least my parents do.

Just as I’m about to object, the TV turns on. The bright red hues from the CNN news banner spill past the living room and into the kitchen area. A reporter murmurs something about a tragic death. Apparently, a local girl was found this morning, after being kidnapped and brutally assaulted.

I know this is the ghost’s doing. My sister Lily is not only too young to play the news but is also upstairs, in her room, probably reading a book.

“Can’t you see?” I utter, pointing at the TV on the other side of the room. “It’s right here with us!”

The reporter is still sharing all the gruesome details. Tears threaten to sneak into my eyes. I want to cover my ears. Scream until the noise is gone and the red disappears from my vision.

My parents barely glance at the TV, immune to the images and information being shown to us. Their expression is nameless as the girl's family appears on screen, pain exuding from their cries.

"Don't be ridiculous, Melany," Father states, "You know the electricity in this town has a mind of its own."

My point exactly. Why do they insist on ignoring what's happening around them?

"But—"

"Cut it off, will you?" The tone in Father's voice is almost desperate. "Enough with the ghost stories! You're fifteen for God's sake, quit acting like a child."

The TV turns off just as the lights above us flicker.

"Come on, Melany, it's been almost a year." Mother sits by the window, blocking the scarce bits of sunshine that come into the room. She makes no comments about the TV incident or the faltering lights. "You should be fine."

The kettle starts to move, fogged air leaking from its insides. Proof of what's boiling underneath the tranquil surface.

"Mrs. Ubon said those things are quite normal for kids your age," Father reminds me, stress written all over his face. "We know you were very much affected. But it's time to move on now. You're mature enough."

Mrs. Ubon. My other therapist. The one I'm supposed to talk to instead of Miss Candella. The one who only speaks what my parents want me to think. No doubt she said having a ghost as intrusive as mine is normal.

"We just want you to live your life again, Mel," Mother says despite my silence.

The kettle rings, indicating it's time for me to flee. To stop listening to them ignoring the ghost's existence.

"Got it," I mutter, placing a tea bag and pouring the boiling water into the mug. It's my favorite, the one decorated to honor Anne Boleyn. Perhaps it would brighten my spirits. "I'm sorry, I have homework to do."

I step in between my parents. Neither of them says anything else. Still, I can feel their gaze following me up the stairs. Just like the shadows do.

I close the door behind me, almost slamming it for good measure. My collection of historical books surrounds me. Countless works of art detailing the past. I take comfort in them as my hands reach for the nearest candle. The first match lights but rapidly burns thanks to a nervous sigh of mine.

The second one manages to stay alive until I light up a candle. The sweet smell of jasmine and wood intoxicates the room. It's pleasant enough to help me regain clarity.

My life can't continue if I'm still stuck. I have a ghost to catch tonight.

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Truth is, I have no plan at all. Turns out catching a ghost isn't a very intuitive process.

I spent the entire afternoon conducting technical research. Desperate for a way to ban it from my house. From my body. Yet here I am, with sunset creeping around me, just as clueless as to when this started.

If I can't define my ghost, how can I learn to make it go away?

All I know is the creature doesn't like it when I ignore its existence for too long. It becomes needy, gathering its forces to strike out of the blue. I know it's about time for an attack. It hasn't haunted me on its worst behavior for quite some time.

I hear a knock on the door just as I'm about to read more on the subject.

My little sister crosses the threshold, stopping only a few inches away from it. "What are you doing?"

Only then do I notice half a dozen candles are burning on the floor. I'm sprawled among them, browsing the internet in hopes of a solution. The curtains are still pinned to the sides, allowing darkness to slip into the room. Shadows found a way in, despite the candles and the three different lights I turned on.

I shift my torso to face her. "I'm researching stuff."

"Cool." Lily takes a couple of steps and sits on the floor next to me. Her legs are crossed as she places her elbows on top of them. "Why are Mom and Dad mad at you?"

What a fantastic question, the ghost seems to whisper. It's here. No amount of light is enough to keep it far from me.

"Because they don't believe in ghosts," I whisper, locking my eyes against hers, "They think I'm being dramatic."

"Are you?"

“Of course not. You couldn’t understand, Lily,”

“Why?” Her soft, high-pitched voice reminds me of how young she is. How innocent. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Do you see it? The ghost?”

She shakes her head from side to side. “Mom says ghosts only exist in scary stories.”

The statement makes my stomach twirl. I suddenly feel sick. Angry at my parents for no longer listening to any words coming out of my mouth. Terrified of the creature that has me riveted to this pain.

“That’s a lie,” I admit, watching the nearest flame dance to the rhythm of our breathing, “Just because you don’t see the ghost doesn’t mean it isn’t there.”

“And why can’t I see it, Mel?”

“Because you’re too pure.” My fingers brush her hair, tucking a rebellious golden lock against her ear. “The ghost in our house isn’t here because of you. But that doesn’t mean it’s not real. Trust me, Mom and Dad have seen it. They just chose to ignore it long ago.”

The curtains begin to shake, even though there aren’t any air drafts here. All windows are closed and there is no silent cat to sneak around in this house. The heavy fabric swings from side to side, coming alive.

It’s menacing. But my sister doesn’t seem to notice.

Lily smiles, looking as if she’s found a solution to our ghoulish predicament.

“So why don’t you just ignore it too?”

It’s impossible to ignore my ghost. The oscillating curtains are proof of it.

“I try every day.” The shadows are now closing in on me, causing candles to waver by our sides. “But this ghost doesn’t want me to forget about it.”

Her wholesome smile melts into a hopeless grim.

She couldn’t understand. No 10-year-old ever would. Unless they had experienced the same as I have. But Lily is safe from the dark. It’s my duty to shelter her from it.

“Do you know Anne Boleyn is now a ghost?” I ask, trying to shake the sadness off her little face. “She haunts the Tudor Trail.”

“Nope,” she says, “Wait! What are you gonna do about *your* ghost?”

I lift myself off the ground, mimicking her stance. Every fiber of my being knows what to do. I just can’t figure out how to achieve it. How to make such a sneaky creature leave my life for good.

“I’m gonna catch and make it go away.”

The curtains drop to their original position. The ghost is listening.

“How?”

“I’m not sure yet,” I say, pointing to my laptop, “That’s what I’m researching about.”

“Why don’t you just face it? Tell the ghost to go away,” Lily suggests, frowning. Her tone indicates she believes in my ghost.

“I don’t think this creature will listen to me.”

“It has to, Mel. Just tell the ghost it’s not welcome here.”

Could she be right? Could this be that simple? What do I have to lose if I try?

“I might try it then,” I mutter, keeping an eye on the growing shadows,
“Thank you, sist.”

“Then you're not free to play Monopoly?”

Her begging eyes lure my fragile heart. But I need to cast away the darkness around me before anything else.

If not, I'm afraid I might lose it.

“Sorry.” I shake my head. “Maybe tomorrow, Lily.”

As my sister exits the room, my eyes spot a furtive silhouette crawling at her toes.

It's it or her, I realize. I can't allow the ghost to fester the entire house any longer.

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The rest of the night is spent perusing article after article. No internet tactic seems plausible enough to motivate me to try it. I already have candles flaring all over my room. Sage burning downstairs. Crystals laying next to my history books.

What more is needed to get rid of an invisible ghost?

Around midnight, I fall apart, sobbing silently on the floor. The subtle hum of a soft rain keeps my shadow company. I know the creature is here, watching over my pathetic attempts to outsmart it. The thought of it makes my blood boil.

I can't quiet its murmurs. Its endless supply of treacherous thoughts penetrates the depths of my mind. My heart starts racing as it considers the ghost's dangerous remarks. As it fights against undetectable wickedness.

Knowing I can't allow the ghost to stay in our house any longer, Lily's words come to my head. Maybe if everything else fails, it's possible to stand up to a ghost. To face the phantom and vanish it from any home.

All else had already failed me. I might as well give Lily's strategy a try. It would certainly be more useful than weeping on the ground.

A sudden breeze blows out the candles, killing their fires. All windows and doors are closed. There's only one explanation for it: the ghost knows I'll fight.

I light back the candles before leaving my room. It wouldn't be smart to awake the entire house with my screams, so I get ready to venture outside.

The back door screeches at my touch. A group of shadows calls my name, daring me to march into the night.

My vision is blurry as I take the first step. I can barely see where I'm going but there's grass beneath my feet.

The ghost welcomes me into the garden.

There, surrounded by darkness, I'm at its mercy. I feel its presence as I haven't in a while. It's intoxicating in the worst way possible.

The first attack catches me by surprise.

Most ghosts appear in front of their victims. They make themselves seen through ethereal apparitions or hazy shadows. My ghost is special, I know it. It's far too powerful to be satisfied with a mere jumpscare. No, this ghost infiltrates the mind. It slithers into my insides and whispers terrors from my very core.

If you listened to the things it speaks to me, you'd understand.

Its words ring true and it terrifies me. This creature feeds from the horrors in my soul. From the unspeakable I try to forget at night. From all I managed to convince myself it never happened.

The ghost knows my story. It won't let me forget it.

My vision turns black as the ghost strikes once again. I can sense water brushing my skin, droplets of rain hitting my head. But I see nothing. I feel nothing but rage.

To remember is to be in pain, to drown yourself in a sea of obscure memories. To know the worst has indeed happened and nothing can change it. Nothing can make you truly forget what you've been through. Yet anything can bring you back there at any moment. You will never be safe from remembering. Safe from reliving what you've endlessly tried to bury deep inside of you.

What can you do when there's nothing to do but remember to forget?

My knees meet the earth beneath me. It's wet, puddled by the rain. I try to clear my gaze but it's no use. I'm stuck in a void, lost in thought. Cursed with memories from the past. The pain I can't leave behind.

I gasp for air, earning only water in return. My hands bend to reach my ears, covering them in an attempt to silence the mind. To hush the truths my ghost doesn't allow me to slip into oblivion. The gesture is pointless, almost endearing because of its silliness. I can't quiet my thoughts from the outside. I can't even control them from within.

At last, the realization hits. My creature is no ordinary ghost. It's a trauma devourer. It's the past and present intertwined. A mirage. An effort from my brain to

understand, to process the brutal facts. Except some things will never make sense. Not even to the best of us.

I can finally define my ghost. But I think I bore it better when it was just a phantom.

My fingers let go of my ears, leaving them unprotected from the storm. I listen to the thunder and find comfort in the bitterness of the rain. It hisses around me, all over my body. I'm curled into a ball, begging for the tempest to pass.

Perhaps I just need to let it all out. To acknowledge the darkness and show the ghost it can go away.

I drag myself to my feet, peeling my skin from the muddy earth. My eyes are still closed. The black in my vision doesn't relent. Still, I don't need my sight to know where the sky is. To open my arms to the sides and lift my chin to the clouds.

Rain, washing all over me. Cleaning the mud from my knees, the grass from my fingertips. Cleansing my mind. Soothing the parts where it burns to think.

I let out a silent, desperate scream.

The quiet sound tears apart my insides. My open mouth fills with water pouring from above. Are these tears streaming down my cheeks or are they droplets from the downpour? Either way, it scares the ghost away.

My eyelashes flutter, allowing moonlight to shed into my eyes. It's warm despite being the dead of night. A few glistening stars illuminate the sky. The storm dies down, leaving only a soft, alleviating rain behind.

It creates the most beautiful silence.

I walk back to my room, exhausted. My clothes are dripping but I couldn't care less. I strip myself from them, placing a warm nightgown on top of my bare skin. The bed calls for me as I tuck under the covers.

A single candle is still flaring. It salutes me as I allow sleep to bear off all sorrow.

Part of me suspects the ghost won't be gone for too long. It will creep back into my life sooner or later when it notices me forgetting. But now I understand its evasive nature. Now I stand a chance against it.

At least until I let its identity slip into oblivion as well.