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Ghost Dance

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Ghost Dance

By Janel LaPalm

2043 Words

It had rained that night.

When the dark gray clouds had finally bled the last of their cool rain onto the earth below, a thick fog had risen off of the ground, obscuring anything more than a stone's throw away from the eyes of anyone that happened to be awake at that late hour. In the city, the dull illumination of the lamps lining the quiet streets shone in the fog, creating an eerie glow like some bright stone in murky water. The night was still as if it was holding its breath, waiting for some unknown signal to set forth its dark secrets.

A single, solitary figure strode through the fog, walking briskly, obviously in a hurry to get somewhere. She was, in fact, attempting to arrive home before her mother did; she wasn't supposed to be out so late. Looking back, she could never remember what she had been doing that she wasn't at home obeying her curfew, but that was hardly relevant. What she did remember was her walk home. She relived it every night, playing back in her mind like she was walking through it again...

She inhaled deeply. She loved the smell of nights like this one; they reminded her of time spent with her father. She could recall with crystal clarity the nights her father would take her out on walks, even when it rained, even when her mother protested. Laughingly he would swing her up on his shoulders, and he would run around the block until she could no longer hold on and he could no longer stand. They'd sprawl on the wet grass in front of their house, reveling in the beauty of the stars and the refreshing feel of the air, and they would make up stories. Playful images rose from their mouths and capered in their imaginations, tales of talking animals and fairies and her personal favorite: ghosts. She loved ghost stories. While other children might whimper and cover their ears and beg the teller to stop, she would be utterly spellbound, clinging to every word like it was a lifeline. As she and her father would lie there in the yard, the moon glowing brightly and the sounds of the night orchestrating a gentle, elegant song, her father had told her that it was on those foggy, crisp scented nights that the ghosts would all come out and dance, invisible to anyone that lived and breathed still. Smiling she would imagine the transparent specters twirling without end through the mist, never caring that that was the way they would spend the rest of eternity. She wouldn't mind spending the rest of eternity telling stories herself.

However one night her mother and father had been in a positively awful fight. Her father had made for the door, red faced and flustered, and she had known he was going for a walk. She

had slipped on her shoes and began struggling with the laces, wanting to go with him, but he had put a hand on her shoulder and shook his head. "Not this time, sunshine," he had said, and then he was out the door, gone.

That was the last time she would see him alive.

As he had walked the block like he had done so many times, cooling off from his quarrel, a drunk driver had come along, swerved to avoid a paper bag- a paper bag- and slammed the vehicle right into her very unsuspecting father.

At the moment of his death, she had been just about to fall asleep when he appeared at the foot of her bed.

"Daddy," she had said blearily, "how did you get here so fast?"

He had only smiled, the most beautiful smile she had ever seen. "I love you, sunshine," he had said.

He was gone.

She had never tried to find out where he had been killed, but she knew it had been on one of the streets they had formerly walked together. Sometimes when she went out, she could almost swear that she could feel his presence beside her, watching over her. It was on nights like this one, nights when the ghosts danced, that she always remembered the last time she had seen him.

A new sound broke her out of her reverie: that of an approaching car. An irritated feeling sprung in the corner of her mind; she hated the noise of man-made things breaking the peace. To make matters worse the car had its brights on, its over bright rays blinding her. Squinting, she shielded her face as the car rushed past. She paused, trying to blink the spots out of her eyes.

Then all at once, she could see them.

Hundreds of pearly white, semi substantial human forms loped about in the mist, dancing, just like the story her father had told her in her childhood. It was as if her thinking about them had brought them to life, her thoughts had made them real. They swayed hypnotically, whispering softly. She stood breathlessly, her mouth slightly ajar, wonder in her wide eyes.

They were so beautiful.

Every ghost had its own shimmery aura, an individuality in the way it moved. They were dressed in the same vestments as they had died: fancy business suits, hospital gowns, or regular everyday jeans with a t shirt. Some were alone, others had partners, and many had interlocked hands to form spinning circles of three or more. But in the same way every death was different, every dance was different.

She saw a vivacious, willowy woman in an exquisite colonial style dress gracefully twirling in a halo of flames. The woman danced the dance of one tried for witchcraft, convicted, and burned at the stake. She saw three little children, hands locked together in a never ending game of ring-around-the-rosie, little trickles of water dripping from their mouths, noses, and clothes. Their dance spoke of a mother gone insane, and drowning each of her children one by one in the bathtub. She saw a disheveled couple slowing revolving in place, both bearing identical bullet wounds to the side of the head. The dance they shared told of two that couldn't be together, so they committed double suicide. Every ghost portrayed the story of their deaths.

There were many more like these, and much more gruesome. But even the most morbid deaths had an almost elegant quality that could not be ignored. They were both beautiful and sad. She saw no ghosts that were unsullied by some horrible fatality; nearly all of them carried the marks of a brutal death. These ghosts she saw here were the ghosts of the ones who should have lived longer, been happier, and died at peace. Instead they were anchored here by their longing and regret, never having the chance to live the lives they were supposed to. Therefore they would dance for all of eternity, waiting on the peace and fulfillment they would never get.

She forgot about everything that had motivated her to get home, to go anywhere. The dance totally enchanted her, wouldn't let her think about anything else. She tried to memorize every feature and detail she could, drinking everything in. She turned around and around, trying to see as much as possible, but there was too much to see at once. Yet even though she carefully studied their every move, the ghosts paid her no attention at all. They passed her by like she didn't even exist. But their oblivion didn't only extend to her. Completely absorbed in their dances, they were completely unaware of each other. They spun and spun and spun, but never crashed into each other. Every ghost was in a perfectly synchronized individual universe.

Like a magnet is drawn to iron was she drawn to them. It was as if they had their own gravity. All she wanted to do was watch them dance until the end of time, or maybe even join them. They never said a word, but she felt like they called to her, inviting her to begin a dance of her own. Maybe she would. Maybe she would cavort and spin and swing until-

She had arrived home.

Subconsciously her feet had led her home, but suddenly she remembered why she had been in such a hurry. A quick glance at her watch told her that she was late- six hours late- and her mother was going to kill her. What had felt like mere seconds had turned out to be minutes, what she had felt was minutes had actually been hours. Had she really spent that much time gawking at the dancing ghosts?

With dread like a heavy stone growing in her stomach, she saw that her mother was indeed home, as was indicated by the car parked in the driveway. How would she explain her absence? *Sorry mom, I was distracted by the hoard of phantoms crowding the streets.* But then in a stroke of brilliance she realized that she could just climb through her bedroom window,

which she always left open for the fresh air, and pretend she had been hiding out in her room the entire time, deceiving her mother. She walked around to the back, the grass damp beneath her feet, and prepared to climb through the window.

It never occurred to her to wonder how she could see the ghosts, or why she wasn't bothered by them at all.

She managed to haul herself through the window with so much ease she surprised herself. She slid onto the floor, ready to quickly but silently throw on a pair of pajamas. Jumping up, she bent over to beat the dust off her jeans, but froze.

Her mother was sitting on the bed.

She felt an explosion of panic in the depths of her stomach, and opened her mouth wide to spill a steady stream of fruitless lies and excuses. As it turned out, she wouldn't have to.

She expected quite a confrontation, with yelling, screaming, and angry tirades from both ends. She would probably end up grounded, and some privileges taken away. She braced herself for the worst. But her mother just sat there, staring though her like she wasn't even there. She noticed then that her mother's body was shaking, shaking with sobs. Tears leaked like tiny streams from her eyes.

She was so unnerved. "Mom?" she said. "Mom, what's the matter?"

That's when she saw her father. He was standing there, the exact same smile on his face as the one he had given her that night when he had died, only sadder. This time, she noticed the signs of being hit by a car on him, the burn marks and the blood and the odd angle of his neck, or maybe they just hadn't been there the first time.

"My sunshine," he said, "My sweet, sweet storyteller." He gave her a nod of the head, an indication that she should look down. This time she saw the burn marks on her hands she hadn't realized were there when she checked her watch.

And that's when she knew.

She could see the ghosts because she was one.

She had been killed in the same way that her father had. That car, the one with its brights on, the one that she thought had flown right past her, hadn't passed her. No. The drunk had lost control, gone off the road, and plowed her right over. It had happened so fast that she hadn't even realized she was dead.

A mixture of emotions overwhelmed her like a giant wave. How could she be...gone?

"Dad?" she managed uncertainly, fear making her voice quaver.

“It’s alright,” he said, still smiling. Seeing that expression, she felt slightly comforted. He extended his hand to her.

With a mixture of both reluctance and eagerness, she took it.

Gently, he led her out of the house, passing right through the walls and doors like they were clouds. They stepped out onto the street, where the other ghosts were still dancing and dancing. It began to rain again.

Her father gave her a spin, and they joined the ghost dance, the dance of their deaths, all through the night, for the rest of time.