

The Haunting of the Human Mind

“A ghost can be a lot of things. A memory...”

Disconnected limbs are the worst ghosts. They have a habit of crawling around and resting on a spot they deem comfortable. But, when it's you they choose, all you want is for them to get off. The weight is terribly heavy, and you're just left questioning how an arm can move without a brain to control it.

The weight of your arm always pushes down on my shoulders. I feel that hand against my left arm, the fingers spread but just tight enough to keep me there. There's no body to connect to it—I never looked at it in the moment. But, sometimes, when I close my eyes, I can see all the others that were around, their eyes transfixed to your arm and their laughter cutting through the soft music you'd put on.

It takes a bit for the full hallucination to envelop me when the ghost arrives. The arm is always the first thing, but eventually, the post against my back digs into my spine. The laughter and music starts as an echo around my head, but it soon fades into the words they said, using them as a taunting joke.

“Blink twice if you need help.”

So I blink. I blink as hard as I can. I mutter “stop” to the nothingness around me that I can't see. I try to wiggle away, but without a body to hold it down, the arm follows me. The specific incident refuses to leave me. I cannot get rid of you, no matter how much I recognize you no longer have any impact on me. I don't care about human contact so much anymore; I don't flinch when someone gets too close. But your arm has this agency that allows it to remain with me, etched into my brain where memories of days spent having fun with my parents and enjoying my young life should be.

In the worst moments, all I can remember is the yellow lights, the laughter and voices, the weight on my shoulders, the pressure against my back, the smug authority I knew you stood with. You were so certain you were entitled to my love.

In an instant, I blink again, and I'm back in my room. You're so many miles away, but I still see that arm around my shoulders out of the corner of my mind, causing a slouch attributed to bad posture by anyone else around me. I know the real reason. I can't forget the real reason. But soon, everyone else will be able to see you, too.

“...a secret.”

You're not a physical apparition. When the cold falls over the room, I never see your shape. There's no body to be found, no vague image of any living thing. Instead, when the air is sucked from my lungs, when I feel the weight crushing my chest, it's just a voice. A taunting tone, laughing at its own words, finding amusement in my own destruction.

I hear your belittling constantly. You have a habit of showing up at the worst times. Your reminders that I'm no good at anything, and that I don't deserve the recognition I get whispers harshly in my ear as I stand before a crowd, microphone in hand and solo notes already lilting over the rest of the choir. You scream, voice harsh and biting against my ear, reminding me that no one really cares about me when I sit among my friends. You cause the world around me to bend and swirl, taking on distorted, nauseating images that cause the faces around me to look on with faux disgust. With the mere snap of your fingers, normal conversations turn to whispers exposing every vulnerable part of me.

I've tried everything to lay you to rest (even though, truthfully, there's a part of me that doesn't want peace for you. Then again, I imagine you not being allowed to torment me anymore would be the worst anguish for you.). Ouija boards remain still; exorcisms pass by without a flicker of the candle's light. Trained professionals coax confessions from me, attempt to get me to talk about you. Your wispy fingers have worked their way into the grooves of my brain, refusing to relent no matter how hard I try.

Every time I stare at the blood on the wallpaper, it always says the same thing: I HAVE CONTROL.

No one else in my life knows you're here. They noticed the change in me, to the point where it's immortalized in purple pen in my senior yearbook, but they don't know why. You've been excellent at possessing bodies and making it appear as though nothing happened. I admit you've perfected your craft.

Every night, I must deal with the disembodied whispers alone. One day, I hope you'll fucking move on to the afterlife of wherever-the-hell you'll move to and leave me alone.

"Grief..."

I like to think there's still an indent on my comforter. I know it's not there, but it helps to pretend. The indent isn't a perfect circle, because you always stuck your head out and would lay it on the blanket, or against my leg, but its roundness is almost comforting. When I go home, I still pull my knees into a perfect angle, in case you decide to come back one night and rest for a while.

The sobering reality is there, lingering in the back of my head, but I like to believe you're still with me sometimes.

On nights when I feel overwhelmed, beaten down by emotions, I sometimes think I can hear you whining outside my door, begging to be let in so that you can curl up next to me and bring the comfort you were always so good at providing. Even in our final moments with you, you laid your head on each of our laps, trying to stop us from crying.

Realistically speaking, I know that you're now resting on the mantle, reduced to ashes stored in that ornate box. But, even at school, I think that you're trotting alongside me when I go for walks, or resting your head against my lap when I think the world is too much.

I thought writing this would be easy. I thought I was mostly over it, and just missed you a little bit. I didn't expect the tears, the desire to just get this section over with and not go into detail. I didn't think my chest would grow tight, and that I'd want your comfort once again.

I wish I could bring you back.

“...*anger*...”

“It was just a misunderstanding.”

“It had to be a misunderstanding.”

“He's a chill guy. There had to be a miscommunication.”

These particular voices come with a side effect of boiling blood. Sometimes, human outlines appear; sometimes, they're so clear that I can make out individual faces. But, more often than not, all of them blur together in a taunting mass. I could fight as hard as I wanted, but they always wanted to believe the arm did nothing wrong.

I don't have much evidence for it, but I like to believe that ghosts sometimes will put on pretty faces, all to lull others into a false sense of security. They'll do whatever they can to convince those who haven't been haunted that they have good intentions, that they couldn't possibly do harm. They make themselves look as close to human as possible to trick you into telling them your secrets. I thought I was smart enough not to fall for it after all the other apparitions I'd faced, but they got smarter. They put on the softest smiles, used the kindest touch and told me they would listen.

It all appears completely normal, until I even dare to mention the arm. All of a sudden, accusing one of their own of something terrible causes the disguise to evaporate. Suddenly, their skin becomes sunken and spotted, their sharp teeth bare, and they scream with the force of a hurricane.

“It was just a misunderstanding.”

“It had to be a misunderstanding.”

“He's a chill guy. There had to be a miscommunication.”

Their anger and need for vengeance feels palpable in the air seconds before they vanish back into the past. Maybe it's some sort of phantom disease, because every time they visit, I'm left with that same anger, directed back at them for dismissing me.

“...guilt.”

Last night, the ground moved beneath our feet as the black spots of astroturf bounced. Tonight, the field is still. I always know what to expect, but it never makes it hurt less. There you go, turning a cold shoulder as the crowd closes in, as the rest of the friends we spent our time with act like nothing happened; like no time has passed at all. Why is it only you?

I ask myself like I don't know, like I can't trace the exact origin.

“He misses you, you know.”

And you were summoned in an instant. No second is spent without feeling something looming over my shoulder. No trip to the store back home can pass without the fear—or is it hope?—that we'll cross paths.

The nightly poltergeists always go the same. Whether in front of the others or secluded when I catch up, you tell, with an anger I've only seen you pretend to have on stage. I can't call your anger unjustified. I'd feel pretty shit, too, if someone stopped talking to me without warning. And every time, I sob my way through my explanation: how ____'s words can never be undone, how he manipulated my view of you; how, when I tried to speak up, I was told he was “cool” or it was just a misunderstanding and not years of yelling, breaking me down, making me nothing; how that arm trapping me when I begged for help was all in good fun.

I explained I just needed to run. But you can't outrun ghosts. You and him and him are still here.

Your responses change every time, since we've never done this dance. We've never let each other have that closure that could put it all to rest. Have I invaded your dreams, too? Do I disturb every second of your mind, wondering what happened? Do you know what I look like now, or am I still the image of our last visit three years ago?

I wrote a letter in a journal explaining everything, thinking it would help. But the ghosts we never see can't read our private thoughts. If I keep writing things for you, will you eventually stop haunting me?

I miss you, too. But I'm trying not to. I can't tell if I want to forget you, but, please, stop haunting my sleep. You and I both know I never got much of it to begin with.

“But, in my experience, most times they're just what we want to see. Most times, a ghost is a wish.”

Very rarely, the ghosts will pity me and show me something comforting. Their images will remain glamorized, locked in the only phase I remember them by. It's been many years since I've seen their corporeal forms, so I can't say what they'd look like now. They remain stuck in

those young years, those years filled with ignorance. But perhaps, subconsciously, that's exactly what I want to see. At least, it might be what I want to see in this exact fantasy.

It never really changes. I know there are only a few scenarios where we would all see each other again, but I'd never dare enter any of them in reality. Instead, I allow the ghostly vision to take over for just a while. Maybe it's dangerous to let them into something so quiet and intimate, but I do it anyway. What's a little bit of peace cost? I don't really care.

It's unrealistic to expect that they'd all be happy to see me. I understand that well enough, even when I'm deep down the rabbit hole. In reality, there are only a couple of them I'd want to see again. Some can never be forgiven, others I simply tolerated in the first place, but at least being in the same room with that select few again, wrapped in laughter and the warm feeling of a comfortable familiarity.

Funny to think that a haunting could bring some sort of comfort. That one could feel not-so-alone, or relieved from the burdens of their life. Typically, I looked at ghosts as the sort of thing never to mess with. I believed they were to be left alone. But, sometimes, one has to let them in for a little while. Even if they lead you to a balcony and threaten to have you fall, or begin to terrorize you with images and thoughts of threats just outside your door, sometimes, they just want to show you something. Sometimes, they just want to show you *exactly* what you want to see.

I've never had a clear grasp on that soft, glowing image surrounded by old friends, but the calm sensation it brings is enough to get by for a while. Should we let them in? Ideally, no. But is it so bad every now and then?