

Memory Ghost

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There is a ghost living in Manny's apartment. It is quiet and stands still in the corner and watches him work and (not) eat and (not) sleep. It watches with blank eyes as Manny writes, as Manny bites his pen with coffee-stained teeth, as Manny reads poetry all through the night and jots down the lines he likes, as Manny tries to write and struggles to put any words on the page that will stay there longer than it takes to erase them.

The ghost is always quiet, until it isn't. Until Manny lies awake in bed at night and stares at that empty place beside him and cannot fall asleep. Then the ghost whispers into his ear all the things he doesn't need to hear until he is sending 2AM text messages to a number he deleted from his contacts two months ago but has had committed to memory for four years.

One morning, while Manny is drinking coffee in a café called Ground Up that's down the street from his apartment, a girl wearing a knit scarf and a gray jacket and wedge sneakers and a skater skirt walks in. Her hair is red, and while the ghost doesn't normally follow Manny out of his apartment, it is there when Manny sees her. His hand tightens around his cup until he looks more closely at her face and realizes that he doesn't know her, that it isn't her. His heart slows down to its normal pace. The ghost is still there, though.

The girl sees him watching her.

Manny looks away.

She walks over to the counter.

Manny forces himself to stare at his notebook.

The ghost watches the girl.

“Nice shirt,” someone says, a few minutes later. Manny looks up to see the girl. She is smiling like they share some kind of secret, and Manny looks down to check what he is wearing. The shirt has the name of a band on it. He looks up at her again and notices that under her jacket she is wearing the same one.

The ghost fades.

He smiles back at her. “Thanks. They’re, pretty good, huh?”

“Yeah. I saw them last summer at Starlounge. Were you there too?”

Manny nods. “Yeah, I totally was.” He went by himself, he remembers, because she didn’t want to go with him. But this girl is holding a cup of coffee and doesn’t look like she’s in any kind of hurry, so, “You can sit, if you want?” he offers.

The girl pulls out the chair across from him and sits down, putting her drink on the table next to his notebook. “I’m Everly, by the way,” she tells him with another smile.

“Manny,” he says.

“Do you like their new album?”

“Definitely. I love that like, folk-meets-indie sound they’ve got going. And the lyrics are just so good. Like, ‘I wish I wrote that line’ good, you know?”

“They really are,” Everly agrees, picking up her cup again to take a sip. Everly glances down at their table as she drinks, and Manny watches her eyes catch on his

notebook with all of its messy scribbles and scratched out lines. She puts the cup down and says, "So, you're a writer?"

Manny unconsciously pulls the book closer to himself. "Yeah. I mean, I write, so, yeah. Mostly poetry."

"Oh, so you're a *poet*," she says, which makes Manny smile because she is teasing him and not judging him. "Can I read some?"

"Uh," Manny looks down at the notebook and tries to think of something he's written that is finished enough for Everly to look at, drawing a total blank.

"It's fine, you don't have to show me if you don't want to. I like to sing but I don't do it in front of other people very often so it's cool. But, I'm sure you're better at writing poems than I am at singing," she says with a laugh.

"Now I just want to hear you sing," Manny says, getting her to laugh again and shake her head.

"Smooth, but, not today." Somewhere on her person her phone vibrates. Everly pulls it out of her jacket and looks at the screen and then says, "Ah, shit. I have to go. It was nice talking to you though!"

"Yeah, you too," Manny says.

She stands up and then hesitates for a moment before glancing at her phone again. "Here," she says, unlocking the screen and tapping a few buttons. "I'll text you sometime, okay?" Everly hands him her phone, opened up to a 'create new contact' page.

The request surprises him a little and he is glad that she thought to swap numbers before she left because now that Manny's thinking about it he definitely wants to talk to her again. He types his name and number in and gives it back to her.

"Thanks," she says, glancing down at the screen and hitting 'save.' Then she picks up her coffee and pushes in her chair, saying, "See y'round!" and giving him a small wave goodbye.

"Bye!" Manny says, waving back at her and watching as she leaves the café and exits out onto the sunny streets.

Later that afternoon Manny gets a text:

hey, it's Eve!

He makes a new contact and saves her number. The ghost stays away all day until that night when it looms over Manny and does not let him sleep at all.

Eve texts him a picture of a poster three days later. It is for the band they talked about: an advertisement for an upcoming show. She sends him a second message:

check it out!! want to go?

Yes, Manny wants to go, but the ghost is standing next to him now and he feels tired. He hasn't really gotten a lot of texts from anyone in the past few months and thinking about the last person to do so brings up bad memories, so he puts the phone down without responding and goes back to scratching lines through his writing.

hey

did you get my messages?

The ghost guides Manny's hand to the button that will delete their conversation. He hesitates for a moment, but it's easier to make the problem disappear than it is to deal with his feelings. He clicks on the little trash icon, saying 'yes' when it asks him, 'Are you sure?'

Manny wakes up at 1PM to the sound of his phone ringing. The ghost moves quickly around the room to hover over it and Manny feels his stomach drop, scrambling to answer his cell before she hangs up because she hasn't called in so long, what if he misses the call and she won't answer when he calls back—

It isn't her, though.

It's Eve.

Manny rubs his eyes to try to wake himself up. He'd thought... but, it hadn't been her.

The ghost moves through him, making him feel sick with nervous tension as he checks his voicemail and listens to the message that Eve left.

"Hey, um, it's me, Eve. Sorry if I'm bothering you, I just wanted to call and—" In the recording she pauses, then sighs into the phone. "Actually, whatever. If you don't want to go to the thing, just say so. I thought you were cool, but," she pauses again, "Whatever." That's how it ends.

Manny stares at his phone. His thumb moves to hover over the green phone button that will call her back and the ghost leans in to whisper into his ear and say, *don't do it*. The

ghost's eyes are not blank but glowing red. *It's better this way*, it says, ever a voice of reason against the illogical impulses of his heart. *You'd only ruin everything again. You couldn't get it together before and she left. Why would this time be any different?*

What would be the point?

Manny lies back down, still clutching his phone. It's stupid, but... he *wants* to go to the show. He wants to go *with Eve*.

The ghost raises its voice to tell him *that's a bad idea. She'd only leave you in the end*, it says, grabbing his wrist and squeezing tightly, sending painful aches throughout his body and into his chest. *You haven't changed at all, why expect anything different this time? You haven't even tried to be better. Why let someone else hurt you?*

It's just a show. It's not even a date. They could just be friends.

He wouldn't have to get hurt.

Manny ignores the ghost as it tries to pull his hand away and hits the call button. The phone rings and the ghost hisses all the bad things that are going to happen because he's doing this into his ear, its eyes like burning fire against a pale transparent body.

"Hello?"

"Uh, hi, Eve. It's Manny."

"I know," she says. She doesn't sound happy, and next to Manny the ghost shouts, *SEE?*

"Okay, um, I'm really sorry for being a dick and not responding to your messages. I've just been feeling kind of shitty lately I guess." He pauses, but she is silent and the ghost

is still clawing at him, trying to get him to hang up, so he keeps going. "But, I'd really like to go to that concert with you, if you're still interested?"

Eve is quiet for a few seconds and then he hears her sigh. "You're not going to flake on me again are you?"

"No, I promise," he says.

"Okay, cool then. Do you want to meet somewhere before and then go in together? It'd be easier to find each other that way." The ghost goes quiet.

"Yeah, that sounds good," Manny says. "How about where we met before? At Ground Up? Say, six o'clock?" The ghost lets go of his wrist.

"Sure. I'll see you there, then."

"Yeah, okay, for sure."

"Bye, Manny."

"Bye, Eve."

Manny hangs up the phone and relaxes into his bed. He'd messed up, but she isn't mad. She still wants to go with him.

The ghost is banished to its corner, watching from afar as Manny gets out of bed for the first time that day and goes into the kitchen to make lunch.

At night it stays silent, and Manny sleeps and dreams about a new red-haired girl.

There is a dark star that burned brightly once but has now gone out.

But its light still reaches Earth

so that even though it is gone the star still lingers on.

It could be thousands of years before it goes away completely,

but there is no chance of it ever returning.

That starlight cannot be reignited,

even if I try my hardest to imagine it coming back

even if I call and ask to talk, just to talk

even if I do change.

I forgot that there are other stars in the sky, too.