

Writing Contest entry  
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Fiction

## GIRL'S GUIDE TO THE GHOSTS YOU'LL EXPERIENCE IN LIFE

### THE FIRST GHOST—

Your mother's smile is the first one you'll ever see. She'll have the softest hair and the gentlest of voices. Every morning, after you wake up, she'll brush her fingers through your hair and hum. You will never experience this feeling of safety with anyone else. She'll do this every single morning without fail.

"If you search for tenderness..." she'll sing. She loves Billy Joel. You'll always hear him and think of her. You won't sing along. You'll be too young and out of tune and won't want to disrupt her. She'll still be alive.

Each morning, after combing through the knots in your hair, she'll make breakfast. She'll love cooking. Baking too, but mostly scrambled eggs with bacon and honey. You won't mind eating the same breakfast. Children love their routines. As long as the ends of the bacon are crispy, you'll be content, and that's enough for her. She sings while she makes you food, too. A little louder than when doing your hair. She'll open the windows and let the air spill into the kitchen. The smell of honey will dance under your nose daily.

The house will sometimes smell of lavender as well. Lavender and honey. Fridays are going to be laundry days. She'll bounce you on her hip as she switches the wet clothes to the dryer, humming. More Billy Joel. She'll try to show you how to do laundry, try to explain separating loads to a child, but it won't work. It won't stick in your brain and that's probably why you'll always mix your colors. But she'll try. And after the failed attempts at keeping your attention, she'll resort back to her singing.

"You love me, right?" She'll ask you once or twice.

"Yeah," you'll respond every time.

"I love you," she'll say back. She'll go back to switching the clothes over, allowing you to keep playing with your hands on the floor beside her. You'll be so young. You won't understand anything.

Things won't really change as you grow older. They'll just adjust. You'll be ten and then fourteen and then sixteen. She'll still sing every morning and at least make you bacon. The honey bottle will never move from the countertop. She'll fold your clothes every Friday and sit them on your bed while you study at your desk. Lavender will continue to fill your room on the weekends.

You'll be seventeen when she finally finds comfort in another man. It won't take long for him to move in, and suddenly there will be bacon and sausage every morning. The honey will still sit on the countertop, but there'll be sweet and sour sauce next to it sometimes, and occasionally some honey mustard. The house will smell overwhelming every day. You'll have trouble finding the sweetness in the air. Friday clothes will start smelling like detergent and not lavender. You'll adapt.

She's going to start dying after they get married and he fully moves in. He'll complain that her singing distracts him and that she should listen to more than Billy Joel. She'll fight her inevitable death every day. He'll yell at her often for burning food too much. The ends of your bacon will stop being crispy. He won't like honey, so it'll move from the countertop to the cabinet and then one day, the garbage.

“Where’d the honey go?” You’ll ask one morning.

“I don’t think it’s good for you, you know, eating that shit every morning.” He won’t even look up from his phone when he says this to you.

Every week, they’ll dance together through the kitchen. A slow dance. He’ll dip her, only her head will hit the floor. Humming will be replaced with the loud music of violent yelling and pans crashing. Your least favorite song will be the plates dropping. If anything, you’ll prefer the sound of glasses breaking. It’ll go on for hours. Their waltzing will never really slow down. Sometimes, late at night, if you press your ear against the bathroom door, you’ll hear her softly hum again. The beautiful kind. It won’t last long. Her voice will get drowned out by the sounds of the shower water running. On the days where all you can smell is blood, you’ll light a honey scented incense.

When she finally dies, it’s going to go almost unnoticed. She’ll welcome death with warm arms. Finally, you’ll never see them dancing again. No music will play. The only thing you’ll hear is the ringing in your ears. The only humming will come from the dryer, because you’ll start doing your own laundry. You’ll do your own hair. Food will always be cooked just enough. Every night you’ll watch her carry her hollow body to bed.

When this happens and you start to realize she’s gone, you aren’t going to know what to do. No one ever does. No one ever really figures out how to deal with the loss of their mother while she’s still alive. When your stepfather is at work, make her a cup of chamomile tea. Lay down in bed next to her and hold her hand. If things start to feel really bad, comb her knotted hair for her. Fill the bathtub for her. Sing to her. There’s not much to do, because she’s already gone, too young, but you can still love an absent person. It won’t be easy, but you can do it. Always make sure you keep the pills out of her reach, but try to trust her as much as you can. Never give up on her.

## **THE SECOND GHOST—**

In your early years, your mother will have a couple distant friends. Those distant friends will have children of their own. You’ll all live in the same neighborhood in the same town, and you’ll all be a part of the same school district. Your mother will have a favorite friend, which means you will forcibly have a favorite friend. This friend, she will also be your only friend, really. You’re going to see each other every other weekend in elementary school. You’ll spend hours together on your living room floor, surrounded by pieces of barbie doll clothing, while both your mothers drink wine in the kitchen. They’ll laugh together so you both will feel obligated to laugh together.

The laughter will stretch on for years and then one day you’ll both be starting middle school. Your best friend, she will sit next to you on the bus every morning. You’ll both exchange sketches of the things you like to look at. She’ll tell you yours are pretty, and you’ll tell her the same. You’ll pass notes in your classes and sit together at lunch. Your lockers will have pictures of each other stuck to the sides. She’ll teach you how to do makeup and give a bubblegum smile. You both will watch the same cartoons, and the same childish sitcoms, and the same sing-along films. You’re going to like candy mixed in with your popcorn. She’s going to like caramel on hers. You’ll never compromise; You’ll just get your own bowls. She’ll tell you all of her secrets, the kind preteens always harbor deep inside them.

"I don't know if my mom loves me," She'll tell you one night.

You won't know what to say to her, because your mother will love you deeply, and you'll be taught that mothers are supposed to love their daughters no matter what, but you'll sit there and listen to her. You'll only be thirteen but you'll know how to listen. Remain quiet, and don't make it about you.

High school will roll around and you'll both begin to change. This change— it won't be anything good or bad. But it'll be necessary for both of you. Your interests will change. You'll join the art club and she'll join the theatre club. She'll start watching dramas, and you'll love scary movies, so you won't go to the movies together again. When she gets caught up in play rehearsals and cancels after school plans, you'll spend time with the other friends you'll start to make. Every few days, she'll still call you to talk, and you never ignore the phone.

You'll go see the play when it's ready and give her flowers afterwards. She'll thank you for being there. If you look too long into her eyes, you'll see that she isn't talking about the performance. Make sure you give her a soft smile.

You'll still see each other often. You'll still spend time together, but you both will also spend time with your adjusted friend groups. Years will go by as you both switch through lovers, and new friends, old friends, and different places to spend your hours. She'll keep calling you to chat and you'll spend time together when you can. It'll get harder, though. You'll start to run out of things to talk about.

One day, you'll be sitting in her car eating frozen yogurt after school. It'll be senior year. You'll both be budding adults merely weeks from graduation.

"Did you see the new episode?" She'll ask you.

"Of what?"

"Rain. I told you about it last week."

"Oh. Right. I forgot. Sorry, I'll watch tonight." You'll feel bad. You'll feel so very bad for forgetting about something she cares about, but you can't bring yourself to care about it.

"It's fine. You don't have to watch it." There'll be an emptiness in her voice as she smiles uncomfortably and goes back to her phone. She'll be texting her other friend about the show, probably.

It'll be in this car on this late spring afternoon that you realize that there's nothing left for the two of you. You'll remember all the times of awkward silences, and not having anything to talk about. You will think back to the apologies for not paying attention. For not knowing what to do. For canceling plans to see other people because, while you both won't find anything to hate about each other, you also won't find anything to like anymore. You both will have changed too much to find comfort in the other.

And in this moment, you will feel the ghost of your friendship hovering between the two of you. It'll start to sink with you that sometimes you only stay friends with someone because of how convenient they are. There will be nothing left for the two of you but the memories you hold of barbies on the living room floor.

You will both graduate, and you won't talk to each other again.

You won't know how to mourn this friendship for a while. You probably won't feel like it's okay to be upset, because it wasn't romantic and you'll naturally be taught that romantic is the most important bond. It is okay. It's always okay. Make sure you keep the pictures you took together in high school. Keep her phone number just in case. Like

her posts on Facebook, but refrain from messaging her. Never tell anyone else the secrets she told you— those are sacred. Ghosts don't always have to be evil. Protect her memory and hold it safe. It's okay to grow out of things. This doesn't mean all the good things from the past should be wasted.

When you see her back in town at her mother's funeral, place a solemn hand on her shoulder. Reassure her that her mother doesn't define her. She will be able to find love within herself one day. After you tell her this, remind her it'll be okay, and retreat back to your respective seat in the back of the church.

### **THE THIRD GHOST—**

You are going to do a lot of things in your life, and some of these things won't be good. Remember, this will not make you a bad person. Good people aren't good people because they've never done anything wrong. They're good people because they learn from their wrongdoings. They change.

Your guilt is going to follow you all of your life. It'll linger behind you, maybe ten steps back. Don't be scared of it. It won't hurt you if you don't let it. Some days, it will stand over your bed in the middle of the night. Don't give in. Just go to sleep. It will stare at you until your bed becomes an ocean and you're fighting for air. Keep your eyes closed. Don't give it the satisfaction. It will consume you.

When you look in the mirror, you might see it lurking in the irises of your eyes. It'll remind you of the day that you tell your mother you hate her. You'll lock the bedroom door in a pre-teen fit and block it with your dresser. You'll break all your picture frames, destroy your paintings, and break your lamp. You won't even understand why you got so angry. Your mother will forgive you. You will not. Look away from the mirror when you notice yourself gazing. Cover them all with cloth if you have to.

When your guilt manifests as a person, you must accept your fate. In your thirties, you'll see the girl everyone made fun of in high school. You'll remember saying mean things. You'll remember laughing when the fist hit her face and she kissed the floor. You'll also see the scars on her body, faded to nearly nothing. You'll see her bones trying to break free from her body. Do not smile at her when she doesn't smile at you. She'll remember too. Know that you will always be the villain in someone else's story. Act against how you used to be. Force yourself to grow. Guilt does not water the plant. Guilt digs up the roots.

When you are in high school, you'll crave a small body. You'll see yourself in a way no one else sees you. You'll crave to see yourself in that way too. When you try to eat food, guilt will stick its fingers down your throat. Forgive yourself later. Forgive yourself years down the line. Don't let yourself forget that you were a child and you were hurt.

When you have bad thoughts, the kind that keep you up at night, guilt will crawl into your ears and whisper to you.

"You are terrible," it will say. Talk louder than it. Play music into your ears. Play music in your bedroom. Turn the volume up on all the televisions near you. Do not let it feast on all that will be left of you. It is one of the hardest ghosts to deal with, and it is one of the few ghosts that live within you. They will never leave you until you leave yourself. Do not listen to them. Do not let them win.

## THE FOURTH GHOST—

Your grandfather will treasure you as you grow up. He will sit by your bedside at least once a month and read you to sleep. He will take you on neighborhood walks. He will hold your hand while you sit atop the coin operated rides. He will see your mother in your eyes, and your cautious hands, and he will love you.

He'll know your favorite color is yellow. He'll know that you like your bacon crispy. He will know exactly what restaurant you'll want to go to after a tired day of shopping. You'll love it when he surprises you with gifts. Toys as a child, followed by notes as you grow older, and then jewelry. He will easily know the way to your heart, since you were born from the remnants of his own heart.

He won't forget your birthday at first. He will bake you a cake. He will wrap your gifts in kitten paw paper. He will write on your card:

"I love you with all I have in me."

The handwriting will be sloppy because of his age, but the sentiment will light a campfire inside of you. It'll keep you warm.

He'll play dress up with you for hours. He'll watch all your at home dance recitals. He'll record every one of them, and before his memory starts to go, he'll label each VHS with your name and the date.

When his memory starts to go, it'll be slow. It'll be painful. You'll have to be strong for him, as he won't even notice. But you will. You'll watch him struggle to remember where he put the keys before you take him to the mall. And when you get to the mall, he won't be able to remember the name of the store you're going to. Don't get annoyed. Just tell him the name and move on. When you're both eating lunch at the food court, he will lose his place in the middle of his story. Try to remind him what he was talking about. It won't be too late yet, so he'll remember.

Slowly, you'll watch the fear glaze over his eyes. Time will go on and he'll forget what job you have. He won't be able to remember the name of your partner. Forgive him. He'll be doing his best.

"I forgot," he'll say every time you see him.

"I know, and that's okay," you will tell him. It won't be his fault that his memory will die before him. It won't be your fault that you can't save him.

He will start to forget your name. And your mother's name. And his deceased wife's name. And then, one day, he will see your face and he won't recognize the light in your eyes. If you cry, do it in your car before you go inside his house. Otherwise you'll overwhelm him. Remember, he'll be the one who's most scared. You'll be tempted to show him those VHS tapes. Don't. Put them in the back of your car and take them home for yourself. You'll only make him more upset and stressed. He won't understand why he can't remember any of it. If he wakes up one morning and doesn't know the name of his passed wife, don't remind him. He'll be too deep into this to be able to remember her. You won't like to see him cry. He'll do it anyways, every single day, but control what you can like you were taught to. His soft cries will haunt your afternoons. He'll never understand death again.

No one ever truly learns how to cope with the premature death of a loved one. No one ever truly learns how to cope with the premature death of a loved one when

they're still alive. You'll be angry that he'll eventually look into your eyes and see nothing. Don't take this anger out on yourself. Don't take it out on him. The flame may burn out, but you will always be able to relight the campfire. Make him feel safe. When he asks you who you are, introduce yourself again. Introduce yourself every time he asks. Ask him to dance. Show him how to dance again. Hold his laughter inside of you.

When your family decides to put him in a home— and they will— help them clean out the house. You'll find more notes. You'll find notes he never gave you. You'll find notes he wrote to you when he knew your name, but never remembered to give to you. Then you'll find the notes he wrote to nobody. The chicken scratched desperate cries for someone. Save the ones that make you feel safe and burn the rest. What no one else knows won't hurt them. Hoard the physical reminders you have of him.

Visit him in the home. Do it for him and not for you. It's going to hurt you. You're going to cry in your car, or in the nursing home's cafeteria. It'll be okay to do this. No one will judge you. If you look around, you'll see that everyone will do it there too. He'll be happy when he sees you, until he isn't. Talk to him until the anger sets inside him and the nurses step in. When he gets violent with them, leave. Feel compassion for him. He's alone. You may feel alone, too, but you'll have the safety of recollection within you. Try to remember that he has nothing. Don't dwell too much, or the fire will go out again.

Some ghosts haunt you without intention. Some ghosts can't harm you if they don't understand.

When your grandfather finally dies years later, allow yourself to cry at the funeral. Think about the freedom his soul will feel. Pin up pictures of him when he wasn't hollow. Play video tapes from his wedding when he knew how love felt. Tell yourself that the man who screamed at you wasn't him. Reread all the notes he sent you and remind yourself that he loved you even when he didn't think he did.

## **THE FIFTH GHOST—**

Your third boyfriend will be more like your first boyfriend— or at least, your first real boyfriend— because the first one will be in middle school and last two weeks, and the second one will last a few months, but he'll only kiss you once. Your first real boyfriend will be right at the start of college. You'll meet him in your English class and he'll tell you how nice it feels to finally meet a competent girl. You'll take this as a compliment. It's how you'll be conditioned to think.

He'll chase you for weeks. He'll run after you down the building's hall, and in the grocery store aisles. He'll find you on the street in town when you're going to the post office. After a few failed attempts, you will finally agree to a date.

He will take you to a restaurant in town and he will be nice to you. He will be just nice enough, and that will be good enough for you, because the men in your life never taught you what's best. He will order the biggest plate on the menu, and then ask you why you're eating so much. You aren't going to know what to say, so you'll smile. It's okay.

He'll be mean to you a lot. You'll allow it because you were always taught that boys are mean to the girls they like.

You will both be together for a few weeks when he tells you he loves you. He will tell you he loves you more than he loves his mother. He will tell you that he wants to

spend his dying days with you. He'll tell you how many children he wants. You will just tell him you love him too. He'll ask you to move in with him and his roommates, and you will, because you'll be young and you'll think that this is what love has to be like. It isn't.

It won't take him long to start hitting you. At first, you'll accept it because you'll think it's all you can get. But you'll mention it to your mother one day, since you'll think it's normal, and she'll tell you to leave him or she'll call the cops. You'll take a few days to think about it before your eye gets blackened. You'll use a knife to keep him away while you leave his apartment. You won't ever go there again. Your belongings will be retrieved by your uncles days later. He will have a black eye too when you see him on campus again.

He'll end up sleeping with four of your friends. He's going to think this will get under your skin. It won't. Don't let it. Get a new friend group and block his phone number.

When he messages you with paragraphs every year on your old anniversary, don't read them. Don't respond. Block him any way you can. When he writes you letters instead, give them to the police. Understand that it isn't your fault. You will be doing what's right. When your next lover takes you out to a restaurant, try not to see him in their face. Not everyone will want to hurt you. It will be hard, but you can create something better for yourself.