

## HEREAFTER

By Jennifer Reinfried

I was twenty seven when I died.

The urge to move on to bigger things had just started nagging at my mind, but I still felt grounded in my quirky little hometown of Breskin, Arizona. Not because it was small; it wasn't one of those towns that people curse their parents for settling down in before having children. You know, the ones with only one Subway and maybe two bars to choose from. No, it's because my family was there, still alive and encouraging most of what I did with my life. I met my wife there, got married last year at one of the three churches in town. There were memories, promises for a good future for our family of soon-to-be three, but still, I thought about leaving. Who doesn't at some point? The thought of traveling, seeing the world, finding somewhere new to call home beckoned to me. I knew, however, that we were young, my wife and I. We had our entire lives ahead of us, and plenty of time to figure out what we were going to do with them, so on that fateful night that proved me oh, so wrong in August of '85, we decided to stick to one of our annual traditions.

The carnival we went to wasn't extravagant, but still hosted the usual cheap thrills. That's the whole point of carnivals, isn't it? I never cared whether I went to lose money at the rigged game booths or to hop on the cheesy rides that were only terrifying when you realize how shoddy their construction was moments before they begin to careen you through the air. It had three roller coasters, a large ferris wheel decked out in blue and white lights, a painfully dull haunted house, and too many booths at which carnies hawked shitty prizes at couples and families. None bothered with our group as we wandered like a lazy current through the sizeable late night crowd.

"We still have to go on the *Long Jump*," Susie said, a pout more in her eyes than on her lips.

"We'll get there." I grinned over my shoulder at my wife. "First things first." Pointing as we walked, I led our group forward. She followed my gaze, staring up along dark, spiraling wooden tracks.

"Oh, no." Susie shook her head, her thin black hair twisting and jumping. "Not me."

Our friend Mike jumped in, almost literally, a cocky upward lift of his lips making his brown eyes sparkle. "Why not, chickenshit?"

He's such an asshole. I mean, he can be cool here and there, but man, most of the time, I couldn't stand his conceited "I miss being a jock" attitude. I'd known Mike since we were freshmen. We've had

some kick-ass times, but ever since our senior year, he'd become intolerable. I've tried to find more and more ways to avoid him ever since.

Susie ignored him. Her gaze bounced between game booths. "We can shoot those rifles over there. Or maybe go through the fun house."

"Sure, either works for me. But at some point, I have *got* to try the *Sadist*. It's new this year." I reached over and put my arm around her waist, then shouted behind me to the fourth member of our posse. "You at least gonna go with me, Wade?"

Hands in his pockets, he watched the ground as we walked instead of taking in our surroundings. He'd always been quiet, always been shy, but once he opened up, he was one of the coolest guys I'd known. I'd met him recently, through Susie. Unlike Mike, I enjoyed the Wade's company.

"Yeah." He shot me a half grin when he glanced up.

"Looks like it's just me and you in the fun house, Susie." Mike winked at her and attempted to put his arm around her shoulders. I pulled her closer to me and flipped him off.

As we approached the *Sadist*, I smiled up at the twisting tracks. "One quick ride, babe?" Susie looked annoyed, but I pressed my luck. "Promise. The line isn't even that long."

"I know, but just watching you on that thing will raise my blood pressure." She took my hand and pressed it to the small bulge protruding from her normally flat stomach. "You know that isn't healthy for me right now, Roman."

Smiling, I kissed her, giving up immediately. "No sense in scaring little Jack."

"Jack? I told you, it's going to be a girl." Her sly smile was enough for me to kiss her again.

"Dear God, get me out of here." Mike, his eyes wide, shook his head. "Fuckin' PDA is disgusting."

"Yeah, totally," Wade cut in, although his voice held sarcasm on the edges. "I can't *stand* it when married people expecting their first kid express their love."

I grinned in his direction, liking him more by the minute.

Mike ignored the comment and threw his arms around our quiet friend. He tangled his fingers in Wade's short, light brown hair and gave what he probably assumed was a playful yank. "Well, fuck, if you two aren't going, Wade 'n I'll—"

A loud scream tore through the night. Wincing, I turned to see nearly everyone by us straining their eyes to the sky. People began running, and that's when I, too, looked up.

Cutting through the air, a black coaster car hurtled toward us.

Time slowed. I'm not kidding, it really did. I had so much time in that moment to consider what was happening that I noticed the bent wheels on its right side. I saw the horrified faces of the older couple

that hadn't been flung from the car yet, their knuckles white as they gripped the handlebar across their lap, the realization of death clear in their horrified eyes. I noticed movement to my right as Wade and Mike flung themselves wide of the projectile that careened toward me.

My arm was still around Susie, hand near her pregnant stomach, and my mind was made up before I realized I had a decision to make. I shoved her. I shoved her *hard*. The man in the flying car turned his head and our eyes locked. I opened my mouth to scream. The last thing I remember was thinking, praying, that my child would be all right after Susie's fall, then the world turned black.

There wasn't any pain. I mean, for the most part, I was unconscious, thank God. No, the only hurt I felt was when I opened my eyes and saw my wife.

I was on my back, draped supine in the dirt we were standing on moments before. Susie stared at me and screamed. Her hands were coated in blood that dripped down her forearms. Thinking it was hers, I tried to sit up. Straining my core did nothing, though. My hands twitched, and my legs flailed across the ground, but that's all that happened. I tried again, and again, then Wade's face filled my vision, blocking Susie.

I tried to yell at him to move out of my way, and that's when I felt something fucked up. Each time I tried to get words to come out of my mouth, a vibrating sensation occurred on the left side of my neck.

I couldn't hear what Wade was saying. I ignored the fear and concern in his eyes, the trembling of his fingers when he touched my right hand. Mike, who was hunched over behind Wade, began dry heaving, but I didn't care. All I could focus on were my wife's screams.

Mouthing my words, frustration boiling through me at being unable to communicate or even fucking move, I finally looked around. I couldn't turn my head, but when I moved my gaze downward, I noticed something pretty damned obvious: the handlebar of the coaster car, the one the terrified couple had been gripping so tight in their hands, protruded away from me, right underneath my jaw.

As my hands spasmed, I forced them up, fingers searching for the point of impact. Even when my fingers touched the metal sticking out of my neck, I didn't believe it. The *Sadist* had lived up to its fucking name.

"Move! Get back!" Police arrived and began pulling people away, including a still screaming Susie. Her eyes, so blue, so deep, those eyes that I could have swum in forever, still stared at me. Despair clawing her face into a horrific grimace. I reached for her.

"Fuck," a cop grumbled as he dropped to his knees next to me. I don't know why everyone had to get in my goddamn way. I just wanted to see my wife before I died. He took my outstretched hand, but wouldn't meet my gaze. "You're going to be fine."

What a fucking liar. I had a metal bar sticking through my neck. Asshole.

I knew I was dying. I could see a hazy darkness intruding on my sight, along all sides of my vision. It was closing in on me in slow waves.

As my thoughts began to crawl I turned my focus away from the cop, away from Susie, and stared instead up at the stars, white pinpricks against a deep violet background.

Breathing became harder. Or had it already been difficult? Or had I even been breathing at all during the minutes I'd been conscious, minutes that felt like they'd never end?

I heard snippets of other cops talking, saying things such as, "the car crushed his whole chest," and "Jesus, look at his neck," and "wife made pot roast again."

The moment I heard that last comment, I stopped hearing anything at all. I lay on my back in the dead quiet. The stars had disappeared, succumbing to the hazy shroud that now fully covered my vision. I couldn't move my eyes, or the rest of my body, any longer. I lay still on the ground. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched the now inky figure of the idiot cop who had been complaining about a wife that he would get to go home to later. Movements continued around me, each person that had surrounded me before were now nothing but large black smudges. They moved away from me, toward me, over me, and I just lay there, unable to focus on anything other than the murky grey darkness that had taken over my sight in the last moments of my life. The silence of this new experience was so loud, I thought my mind would snap.

I blinked.

Shocked, I blinked again.

The haze continued to cover my sight, but hope fluttered inside of me, and I turned around.

*Wait a minute, I just turned.*

I was standing up, surrounded by the same dark smudges shaped like bodies.

*Did I...survive? No. I couldn't have...*

Glancing down, I discovered I couldn't see myself. I didn't have feet, or hands, hell, I didn't even have a body. Then how could I move? Feel emotions? How was I even *seeing*?

Frantic, I continued to turn until my eyes rested on a young man laying on the ground, clear as day. He was dead. I sobbed out a silent groan. He was dead.

He.

I.

I was dead.

The dead can't cry, but they can mourn.

I stared at my body, processing my death but still too stubborn to fully believe it, until it faded from my view. Shadows of blurred ink moved around in a continuous motion.

There was no way I could have known how much time passed before I looked away. It felt like minutes, but I didn't have a clue. Shock finally began to wear from my system.

The hazy grey shroud remained in all places, making the dark shapes fuzzy and irregular around the edges. Absolute silence ruled, giving the area I was in a lonely, desolate feel. One figure passed nearby and I reached out to touch it, only to have my hand stretch completely through the form, with nary a sensation. I tried feeling another, then one more, with the same results.

Anger bubbled up in my gut. I began to pace back and forth on a ground I could barely see, so similar to the rest of the greyness it was. Clawing at the black figures, the sense of unfairness built inside my stomach, and irritation and confusion rose in my throat. I wailed as I tore at the air, at the figures. No noise sounded, regardless of how hard I pushed the agony from myself.

In a burst of clarity, I noticed a light cut through the gloom in weird, irregular blinks. Facing it, I stopped my childish rampage. I didn't feel drawn to the light as it pulsed, but I didn't feel scared of it, either. More just, I don't know, curious. It was something new, and I had nothing better to do than punch at shadows, so I stepped toward the pleasant, soft white glow.

As I walked, the light grew brighter.

Sudden movement to my left caught my attention, and I glanced around to see a little girl, no more than five, with short black hair pulled into two tight bunches on the sides of her head. She was laughing, making no noise to me, and in one hand she clutched a man's fingers. I watched her in awe, wondering why I could see her so clearly, until my gaze traveled up to the man's face.

It was Wade.

Relief washed any uncertainty, anger, frustration, and confusion from my heart, and I sprinted toward my friend. Although he was mere feet away, I ran and I ran. Don't get me wrong, I was closing the distance, just really fucking slowly. He and the little girl walked in what seemed like circles to me, wandering around the other figures in the grey haze, never coming into contact with them. Each time they changed direction, I corrected my course to intercept the pair.

I ran for what seemed like miles upon miles before I finally reached them.

The dead can't cry, but they can feel exhaustion.

Hunched over, I fought against a wave of tiredness so intense, I thought I was going to pass out. My head, or where it should have been, got so heavy that I could barely lift it to see my friend. A great weight sat between my shoulderblades, threatening to crush me into the invisible ground that I stood upon.

Why couldn't I just look up at Wade? Why is it that, when I finally have something good happen, I can barely move?

Struggling with everything I could give, I finally straightened.

My friend stood still in front of me, his eyes down, smiling at the little girl who gripped his fingers so tight. He was talking to her, but of course, I couldn't hear a thing. He crouched and put his hand against her back, still speaking, eyes crinkled at the edges with his grin.

Had he always looked so old? Or was it the greyness that covered everything that made him look different? His eyes were supposed to be green, his hair brown. Maybe that's all it was— the shroud, the gloom.

Peering closer, I realized my friend had deeper smile lines around his mouth, and new lines across his forehead. When he tossed his head with a silent laugh, I noticed his hair, which was always cut short, now layered across his temples and halfway down his neck. He looked different, but it was Wade.

I reached out to touch him, knowing that my hand would pass right through, just as it did with the shadows before. He did not react when my fingers went through his face. I pulled my hand back and looked down at the child he was speaking to.

I could see the ground they both stood on. Grey blades of grass that surrounded her little grey shoes moved in a wind I could not feel. Looking up, my vision was finally clearing, I could see past Wade to a carnie booth.

They were at the carnival. *How is that possible? Had only minutes passed? They why does Wade look older?*

I looked at the little girl again. *So this is your kid, huh?* I thought. Squinting at her face, I realized she had familiar eyes.

*Oh, fuck no.*

I did the first thing that came to my mind at that point, the first thing I'd expect anyone in my invisible shoes to do: I followed them.

It wasn't easy. For every step they took, it seemed I had to jog five. At first I weaved around passing smudges and shapes, but eventually felt it didn't matter, and I began passing directly through whatever came into my path. No sensation came over me when I did, regardless if the smudge was small and human shaped or large, unmoving, and impossible to identify.

No matter how tired I was, I kept Wade and the little girl in my sights. At times they were far away, but for the most part, I was able to keep close by, watching the sharpness of their surroundings

change while they walked through what I recognized as my hometown. They passed the familiar, such as Sherman Theater, the bar Susie and I frequented called Bug's, and the long, flat building of my old high school. Other places were new to me. I'd never heard of The Limited Root or Wranglers in the twenty seven years I'd lived in Breskin.

After a while, we ended up on a street I'd seen many times before. The clarity of my vision around Wade and the little girl didn't stretch far, but I didn't need to see a sign to tell me this was Bigby Lane, where Wade lived. Susie and I had visited the area often because there was a cool arcade a few blocks down from the residential area. Passing houses I had ignored in life, I followed my friend and the girl up onto his porch.

Wade extracted keys from his front pocket and, without letting go of the little girl's hand, unlocked the entrance to his home. I hesitated a moment after they went inside, wary of entering the house, scared of what I was about to find. In that short amount of time, the door shut, and the clearness of my vision began to fade. I panicked and stepped - Walked? Floated? - forward.

There was no resistance as I passed through the door. I found myself in a small, cozy living room. The entire area was sharp and clear. I didn't know if it was because Wade and the girl were both in it, if when they moved from the living room it would grow insanely blurry again.

Wade was hanging up his coat, speaking to the little girl. I wondered what her name was. *Susie had been right*. How she had known that early, I haven't a clue, but I didn't care. In that moment, the only thing I could focus on was my daughter.

She had pale grey skin, deep grey eyes, and black hair like her mother's. She was wearing a cute grey dress that complimented her grey shoes, which she pulled off one by one while sitting on a grey floor. Am I being too bitter? Sorry.

Wade came closer to her, and she raised her arms in his direction. Laughing silently, he picked her up and carried her to the couch. I followed.

I watched them work on a jigsaw puzzle, the pieces scattered across the carpet. I smiled as they had a pillow fight, which Wade clearly let her win. He lay helpless and prone on the living room floor, hands protecting his head, laughing. It was like watching a silent movie without subtitles or dialogue cards.

After their goofing around, they returned to the puzzle, and that's when the front door opened. I caught the movement out of the side of my vision, and turned to see Susie enter the house, her long black hair cut in a short bob. My heart stopped a second time when she turned and smiled.

My Susie.

She was beautiful. Other than the haircut she looked exactly as I remembered her. No wrinkles yet marred her face, and her lips and eyes were the same as before. Her hands, always so delicate, hung up a light jacket next to Wade's, and something in me clicked. Something selfish. Something angry.

I knew all along, of course. Ever since seeing Wade at the carnival with my daughter. But as I had with my death earlier, I just didn't allow my mind to make the conscious connection, didn't let myself think about it until it was right in my face.

Wade stood from the floor and walked up to Susie, who wrapped her arms around his neck and planted a long kiss on his mouth. My invisible jaw clenched, my unseen hands flexed into fists.

Now ignoring the little girl, who was still engrossed with the puzzle, I opened my mouth and began to scream.

The dead can't cry, but they can rage.

I yelled and yelled, making absolutely no noise, but I could feel the grating in my throat, the agony that burned in my chest. My fingers twitched into claws.

A sudden pressure in my chest didn't even pull my attention away from Wade and Susie. They walked toward my daughter, his arm around her waist. My eyes felt as if they were going to burst out of my skull. My head pounded, but I continued my temper tantrum. Images of Wade fucking my wife kept my anger fueled until the pressure in my torso snapped, and things got very weird very fast.

One moment, Susie and Wade were smiling down at my daughter, then, in a fast blink, their expressions changed to fear. The little girl on the floor stared up from her game, mouth wide, tears falling down her grey face. I whipped around in anger, furious at the unfair hand I had been dealt, and that's when I noticed the pieces of her puzzle flying through the air.

My rage withered as I turned to watch. One piece with a drawing of a cat's eye meandered through my chest. Following its path, I stared as it twisted away from me and joined the rest, churning in mid-air. Glancing at Wade and Susie, I saw confusion behind their fear. I remembered the expression on my wife's face as she watched me die at the carnival, and my anger disappeared in a snap.

The pieces fell to the floor.

Okay, I knew at that point what had happened. I poltergeist-ed the fuck out of that puzzle.

I soon discovered that I could move things, which led to me becoming obsessed with communicating. Not with Wade, not with my wife, but with my little girl. I needed to talk to her, I needed her to know I existed. That I was never going to leave her side. That I would protect her better than

anyone else could. Hell, I could go through walls, through any solid object that stood in my path. And now I could move things. Who wouldn't want a ghost protecting them?

After the pieces fell to the floor again with not even a whisper, I watched Wade bolt forward and grab my crying daughter. Susie stood where she had been, staring at the living room carpet. Irritation surged inside of me at her "deer in the headlights" reaction. I mean, sure, I bet my little show had been shocking and scary, but the fact that Susie hadn't jumped forward to ensure our little girl was safe pissed me off. Wade did. Told you I liked that guy, even if he started screwing my wife after I died.

Hey, I know, I know. He was there for her. He went through the same horrors she did when I was crushed and impaled by the runaway *Sadist* car. I get it. They comforted each other. He was no doubt there for the birth of my daughter, and he obviously helped raise my little girl.

But it still hurt.

A blinking light behind me pulled my attention away as Wade consoled a still crying five year old, as Susie still stared at the living room floor with wide, grey eyes.

There it was again. That weird, soft yet bright glow, flickering in my direction. Shrugging, I turned my back on it. I didn't care what it was, what it signified. I had a purpose, and I was going to watch my little girl grow up.

When I pulled my sight back around in front of me, however, I couldn't see a thing other than the grey shroud again. There weren't even three black, inky shapes where Susie, Wade and my daughter once were. Panic leaped up my throat, and I first waved my hands around, then started twisting back and forth. Nothing changed. The fuzzy greyness stayed the same no matter where I looked. Screaming wordless nonsense, I charged forward in the direction I thought my family stood.

I ran and I ran. There sure is a lot of running for the dead that linger.

After what felt like half an hour or so, I stopped. My chest burned, my eyes dragged downward, but I didn't give a shit. I spun in a half circle, my gaze frenetic, trying to find the slightest clarity in the haze. But there was nothing.

I wandered the desolation for so long. The agony I felt from losing my little girl crushed my soul. Here and there the blinking, twirling light would flash at me from afar, but I never bothered with it. I continued my fruitless searching, always on the brink of exhaustion. I kept trying to stay positive, telling myself that I found them once, and I'd find them again.

It took hours and hours before I finally changed my mind about the light. The next time it showed its soft glow, I stopped walking and faced it.

*That one time I moved toward it, I thought, that's when I came across Wade and my daughter.*

I had assumed it was the light everyone claimed to see that pulled you to the other side, but maybe I was wrong. Maybe it's how I connected with the living world, how I could find my girl again. I took a cautious step toward it, then glanced around. Nothing happened. I walked forward about five paces, but still, nothing cleared in my vision. The only thing I could see perfectly was the light.

*Fuck it.* I sprinted toward it, all the while glancing back and forth at my blurred, grey environment.

As the twirling light increased in size, I began to feel, I don't know, lighter. Grinning, I strained to increase my speed, eyes locked on the glow in front of me. Faster and faster I ran, or floated, or whatever the hell I was doing to move. The lightness in my chest expanded, and elation threatened to burst from my throat. If I had hair, it would be flowing backward. If I had eyes, they'd be watering with my speed. I hadn't felt so alive since my death. *Roman the Invincible. Roman the Mighty Dead Guy. I can do anything.*

Something moved to my left, and I stumbled. The feeling of pure joy in my chest faded when I turned away from the glowing expanse in front of me.

There she was. In perfect clarity, I saw my daughter laughing up at Wade. She now stood next to him, her head coming to a stop just below his chest. *What the fuck?*

It was her. There was absolutely no doubt about it, but why did she now look like a twelve-year-old?

Looking up at Wade confirmed my fears. His wrinkles had deepened, his hair, now cut short again, looked a lighter grey than it had before, when I'd seen him last. Susie was there, too, on the other side of Wade, smiling, fingers of one hand entangled with his. Her hair was still short but now, her smooth face sported laugh lines and the faintest crinkles on the edges of both of her beautiful grey eyes.

I found them. I found my family again.

I dropped to my knees. Sobbed a silent cry of relief mixed with frustration. *Why were they so much older? I had only been running a few hours, maybe four at the most.* Yet here they were in front of me, proving to me that at least six or seven years had passed. I took slow, hesitant steps toward them.

Time had no hold here, wherever here was. My death felt as if it had happened the day before, but that was obviously not the case.

I still didn't know what the light was, or why it showed up when it did. But I knew that by following it, I would be reunited with my girl. Making a mental note to never run fully into the glow, at least not until I understood more, I sank to my knees as they passed.

I had no idea where they were. The clearness that surrounded the three of them showed me they walked on uneven wooden planks. I could see my daughter's long black hair fluttering in a breeze. My wife held a shopping bag in her free hand. Wade was saying something to her, something that my daughter apparently found hilarious. She hunched over next to him, clutching at her stomach in mock pain as she giggled.

Her smile looked like Susie's. So did her eyes. Everything about her reminded me of my wife. Well, almost everything. My girl's nose had a slight crook in it that matched mine, barely noticeable unless you peered closer. Her eyebrows were thicker, like mine had been. Shoulders slightly wider, yet still feminine. Her hands were long-fingered and delicate, like Susie's. I wondered if she played any instruments. Or any sports. I stood there, watching them walk along what seemed to be a pier, until I noticed something familiar in the background.

A ferris wheel.

Grimacing, I scoffed. *What is it with them and carnivals? I died at a carnival.*

Looking closer, I realized there weren't any other rides around, just booths. Inky smudges that I knew were other people surrounded us but I stopped caring about them long ago.

Following their slow gait, having to jog to keep up, I made sure I didn't lose sight of them again. I kept my gaze locked on my little family, fearful that the moment I looked away, they would disappear again.

A bit later, we all arrived at the lobby entrance to what I thought was a fancy hotel. In the little clear vision I was granted around the three of them, I could see elevators with a shine on their doors, a long row of silver rectangles with minute writing on the front, men in crisp suits holding doors open as my family stepped into a cab. I swooshed inside before the doors shut.

The ride upward – Wade had pressed the button for floor fourteen – was uneventful. I watched my daughter as she conversed with Susie and the man she considered her father. When the doors opened once more, I stepped with them out into a carpeted hallway, lavishly decorated with grey flowers that spilled over the edges of small end tables, accentuating extravagant grey wallpaper.

I floated into a spacious living room behind them, glancing around at what I could see of their new digs, but not really caring.

My daughter bounded away from Susie and Wade, who had just turned to kiss each other. Instead of watching that awkwardness, I flitted after my little girl. She wasn't even that little anymore. The only time I paused and nearly lost sight of her was at the entrance to her bedroom. Her door was decorated with posters of young teenage boys posing in odd stances, staring at the camera with sultry looks that

twelve year olds should never even know how to do. Amongst the posters and photos a single word jumped out at me. The lowercase letters, written and colored in grey said, “Jackie.”

Jackie.

My daughter.

The door nearly shut as I stared at her name.

The dead can't cry, but they can feel pain.

I watched her grow up. I followed Jackie everywhere she went. I know, it sounds creepy, but if this was your only chance of being with your first and last child, even if you couldn't talk to her, hold her, comfort her, wouldn't you do the same?

The light never showed itself while I was with Jackie, or at least, I never noticed it.

Once in awhile I would garner enough anger to move something, either by seeing Wade squeeze my wife's ass, or when Jackie fought with Susie, or even just thinking about the sex that no doubt took place between my widow. There was one time where I yanked the books off of Jackie's bookshelf, all in a big, sudden blast. I felt awful, seeing her jump to her feet, mouth open in a silent scream as her wide eyes assessed the damage with confusion and fear. Another time they were all having dinner and I felt a fit of jealousy climb up my insides, and I shattered each of their glasses. Milk splattered every which way. I scowled, ignoring their silent, terrified protests.

Eventually, I discovered Wade and Susie were looking for new places to live. I scoffed, knowing full well that I would follow them wherever they went. I could never lose sight of my Jackie again. Sure enough, I watched them pack up and leave, but I wasn't far behind.

I followed them to their new home, and the four of us settled into a wonderful routine of me watching them exist and them not knowing I still did.

A few weeks in their new place found Jackie fighting with Wade and Susie. Two days passed before another doozie of an argument. I began to tell myself I should be thankful I couldn't hear anything after all. Fight after fight after fight. I assumed it was the move that had been so hard on my daughter. I wanted to comfort her. Hell, I wanted to comfort Susie and Wade, who looked so exhausted after a few months that they seemed to age five years before my spectral eyes.

Taking solitude in Jackie's room never lost its charm, though. Being around her was a blessing. Time didn't speed up while I kept her in my sight, and I was honored to spend every passing day with her. I observed her in class, while she did homework at night, when she ate breakfast, lunch, dinner. I watched as she blossomed from a preteen to a young lady of seventeen. It didn't even feel like five years to me.

She was growing so fast. Without me. Without even knowing I existed. That I loved her more than I loved myself. That I stayed behind after I died just to watch over her.

I had to communicate with her. I had to try.

Working up enough anger was easy. I focused on my untimely demise, the unfairness of a life with Jackie being torn from me without even having an option. The misery I endured every moment I couldn't touch or speak to her. The anguish of being forgotten.

Once I had the fury I needed, I attempted to write my name using a pencil lying next to her notebook as she studied.

The pencil snapped into three pieces.

Frustrated, I tried writing it on her window, which was fogged from the cold, snowy weather outside.

All I did was crack the glass into a spiderweb.

The more upset I got at my failures, the harder I tried, and the easier it was for me to reach that anger I held onto.

I broke vases trying to get them to hover as Jackie walked by. Chalk exploded at my touch. Pages tore out of books. Speakers trembled and sparked. I just couldn't talk to her. I seethed with irritation, frantic to give my daughter some kind of sign that I was there for her until one day, I noticed the dark circles underneath her eyes. How she had begun to smoke weed nearly every night, desperately trying to wave the stench out of an open window. That she hadn't spoken to her parents in weeks, would simply storm in and out of their lavish Wisconsin condo.

*Oh, no. No, no. I've been haunting my own daughter.*

The dead can't cry, but they can feel like shit.

I stopped trying to communicate with her altogether, but by then, it didn't matter. I had gone too far. It was too late.

I'd messed up. I'd let my selfishness consume me. Had I truly been there for Jackie, things might have turned out differently. Or perhaps not. Regardless, I wish I could have done something to stop my daughter from killing a man.

Roman the Moron. Roman the Asshole. Roman the I Should Have Just Gone Into the Light and Let My Family Live Their Lives.

One night, around 11:42pm, Jackie paced back and forth next to her bed for twenty minutes straight. I wondered what was wrong, why she didn't crawl into bed. She had school in the morning.

When the time hit midnight and she grabbed her backpack from the floor, I freaked. She cranked open the only window in her room. Wind buffeted her unwashed hair, and snow fell on her tired face. I waved my hands through her helplessly as she climbed from her warm room and dropped five feet to the snow drift below her window. *You don't even have gloves*, I screamed after her, fear and worry filling my chest. I knew I could turn back, try to wake Wade and Susie, but I followed my daughter instead. If she got into trouble of any sort, I could no doubt at least try to protect her with my Power of Poltergeist.

I trailed behind her as she trudged through more snow drifts until she reached the street, where a car waited for her, its headlights off. I thought about trying to fuck with the car, but Jackie was quic. She was inside, slamming the door before I could even replace my worry with enough anger. The car jumped forward, and I sailed inside before it could get away from me.

With no clue where we were headed, I watched my daughter talking with the driver, a young man with long curly hair, and another, older male in the front passenger seat, who had no discerning features I could see. He looked like a normal kid. They all did.

Seventeen minutes later, the driver pulled the car alongside a dark street. The three of them stared out into the night. I turned my gaze as well, trying to see what they were looking at, but failing, my eyes only picking up the oh so familiar grey shroud.

There was no sidewalk where the three exited the car. There was no sound as they snuck through the darkness. There was no glint of metal as the second boy handed my daughter a pistol.

Jackie took the gun in her bare hands, fingers clutching the grip, knuckles tipped with white as she pointed the gun at her feet. *Jesus, point it in the air!* I yelled at her in silence. *Or put it away!* Fear and anxiety, however, weren't enough to move anything, to try to stop them. All I could do was watch as they walked along the side of a drab brick apartment building. The area seemed to be a decent part of town; not high-end, but not a ghetto. A glance at the windows showed nothing but darkness, making the establishment peaceful and unassuming in the dark, snowy night.

Their footfalls disturbed the white powder on the ground, but mine did no such thing. I screamed silently behind Jackie as she followed the two young men around the back and knocked on a screen door missing its window. A plastic bag was taped over the opening, limp, unmoving. The three waited until a light snapped on, grey and pathetic in the darkness.

A short man twice their age invited them inside, and I followed. He didn't look like a drug dealer to me. I always assumed they were missing teeth, were covered in sores and boils, and stared at the world through a dope-filled glaze, but this guy looked normal. No facial hair, thin but not emaciated, with a nice smile. I glowered at him.

The entire exchange took less than ten minutes. Their host didn't waste any time. He led them to a large side room set up like a business office that would have been inviting had it not been filled with chipped and scratched secondhand furniture along the walls, a flickering fluorescent light, and peeling vinyl flooring. Oh, and the drugs sitting on a desk.

I didn't see any weed, just small bags of powders in different shades of grey, some with finer consistency than others. The man pointed to the one closest to him, talking to Curly Hair, who nodded and sniffed a few times, looking down his nose at the guy.

*Quit acting tough, you idiot.* I wanted to shake him, scream in his face. *Get my daughter out of here! Now!*

Their host didn't like Curly Hair's attitude, either. After words I couldn't hear were exchanged, the pair got in each other's faces. The shorter man was shoved. He shoved back, then threw a punch.

To my horror, Jackie whipped her pistol out from her coat pocket and aimed it at the older guy. Curly Hair threw a fist into the man's jaw. His victim stumbled and fell to his knees, waving his arms around, trying to grab hold of his attacker. Plain Kid pulled his own gun and joined in the silent shouting. I tried desperately to see what he was saying and failed. My eyes flew back to my daughter in time to see a boy — he couldn't have been older than Jackie — run into the room, mouth open. All four of them turned at the intrusion, and the short man made his move.

Lunging, he knocked Plain Kid's arms into the air. I didn't hear the shot as the gun went off, or hear the pistol clatter to the floor, but I saw my daughter's body twitch to one side in a sudden spasm as a bullet slammed into her shoulder. Her black hair, so like her mother's, flipped to one side. She whirled and fired two shots into the man who was defending his product, his home, his child. Big grey holes opened in his chest, and he fell backward.

Curly Hair and Plain Kid rushed toward Jackie. Curly Hair wrapped his arm around her and began to lead her out of the room, down the hall, out of the apartment into the snow coated night. They were yelling at her as they hobbled, and she at them. And there I was, yelling at all of them. *How could you be so stupid? What the fuck were you thinking?*

My daughter was hurt. Dark grey blood spilled from her shoulder and oozed down her arm, but at least she was up and running. Curly Hair disentangled himself and ran toward their car, leaving Jackie with Plain Kid. I urged her along with silent words, begging her to hurry.

I didn't see the man's son appear behind them with the dropped gun. Neither did they.

They got fifteen feet.

Fifteen feet.

I yelled as I watched the man's son raise the pistol, and time for me slowed down once again.

The barrel rose.

My daughter bled.

The snow fell all around us.

Something inside me snapped. I felt a burst of fury bolt out of my chest. I watched as every single window of the car shattered, covering Curly Hair in tiny pieces of safety glass.

I screamed as hard as I could, and the son of the dead man flew backward into a nearby tree. I didn't hear him hit. He fell facedown in the snow, unmoving.

I screamed again, and the headlights of the car shattered.

My daughter had fallen to her knees a couple yards away from the car. She watched in horror as I dented the hood of the car, then the roof. As I crumpled the open door.

Turning on the men who had convinced my sweet, beautiful daughter of such a heinous act, I lashed out at them. Curly Hair was backing away from the car, fear all over his face. I snapped his arm.

As he fell to the ground in agony, I crushed Plain Kid's throat.

My fury didn't end, *couldn't* end. I screamed and screamed and screamed, and each time I did, more destruction reigned.

I became so angry, my vision blurred.

It worsened.

Black inky shapes began to move past me.

I stared at them for a long moment before it hit me. Spinning back to where my daughter had kneeled, bleeding, I found the ground empty. I had thought I was protecting her, but I had only made it all worse. She had run from me. She had run, and in losing sight of her, I was lost.

The dead can't cry, but they can feel as if they're dying.

Again.

And again.

And again.

I glanced around, this way and that, but nothing changed. The smudges continued on their stupid pointless routes.

I let out a silent howl.

The light turned on behind my back, and I knew what I had to do.

I ran toward the light, knowing it would bring me back to her. I had to make sure she was safe. I had to make sure she survived that awful, cold night. I had to watch over her, protect her.

*I'm coming for you, Jackie,* I thought as I sprinted closer to the glow that would connect me with my daughter again.

