

The Ghosts of Us

By Daniela Barzallo

The first time I saw you, you were wearing my favorite pajamas, the ones with the cute little bunny shirt. We were both seven then, and as soon as we locked eyes, we screamed. You because you'd never seen a ghost before. Me because I'd never been one before, I guess.

Mami—your mami I mean—heard and came running, and for a moment I actually thought she was coming to me before she wrapped her arms around you. You didn't seem to notice, your big eyes overflowing with massive tears as you looked at me. I wiped my own on my sleeve, looking around at the bedroom, the butterfly bedspread, the Barbies on the floor.

"Mami, look," you cried. "Look!"

But she didn't spare me a glance. I resisted the urge to scream again. "There's nothing there, Carolina. Just a bad dream."

You looked at me again. We blinked and sniffled.

We figured out later that I'd somehow gotten run over by a car on the street right outside the neighborhood. And somehow you hadn't.

"Are you going to haunt me forever?" You asked.

So yes, we got off to a bad start, you and me, but it got better.

Like the time you brought that cute little stuffed duck, the one with the pink eyes? You were nearly thirteen then, I think. You had given up trying to convince Mami that I was real. And I had the feeling that if you were being honest, you would have had to admit that you weren't convinced yourself. But real or not, it was clear I wasn't going anywhere.

That day, you threw the toy at me, and I just barely managed to catch it before it hit the ground. You'd never brought me anything before.

"For—for me?"

You shrugged like it wasn't a big deal. "Figured you'd like it. Got it in a claw machine, but I'm too old for that stuff."

I pressed the soft skin of the stuffed animal to my chest, memorizing the delicate feel of cotton and plush. I smiled so wide I felt the phantom pain in my cheek.

"Play with me?" I whispered.

You hesitated, then shook your head, "Maybe later."

I remember on one of the last days before you moved out, you tried to teach me how to French braid my hair.

“No, no, look, honey, it’s easy,” you said. “You just need to pull this section here and then this section and—no, *honey*—”

It was all “honey” and “sweetheart” then. Like you were trying to make up for the rude names you had called me when we’d first met. Or all the days you spent ignoring me as I cried miserably in the corner. Or all the breakdowns you had when you screamed at me, desperately trying to convince yourself I wasn’t there. The last time had only been a few years ago, but you apologized to me the next day.

“It’s okay,” I had said. “I spend a lot of time wondering if I’m just imagining you too.”

So that was the last time you questioned my existence.

But now that you really were leaving me, you hardly ever left my side. I think you were starting to forget why you hated me.

I think I was starting to realize why I hated you.

“Honey,” you said, tugging harder on my hair. “It’s really not that hard. If you would just *try*.”

“Why?”

“Why *not*?”

“Don’t wanna,” I said.

“Don’t you want to know how?”

I giggled, “Why would a dead girl want to learn anything?”

“You know what? Fine. Fine. That’s fine. Perfectly fine.”

And then you screamed.

You did come and visit me after that though. One time when you came home, you hugged me so tight, I could feel your heartbeat, I could smell your breath, I could wonder what it would be like if we came together again, you and me, and if it would mean you would die or I would live, and which one would be worse.

“Do you really think it can only be one of us?” Your voice shook. “I mean, that only one of us can be real?”

“Maybe,” I admitted.

“I want it to be me,” you said. “God, I’m sorry, honey, but I want it to be me.”

You stepped back enough that I could see your eyes fill with tears. You pressed a wet kiss to my forehead, and all I could think was that I hoped you didn’t get any snot on our favorite pajamas that I was wearing.

It’s been a while since you’ve come back, but I always think of that first day. How after all your screaming and crying died down, Mami went back downstairs and left us alone.

“You—you’re me, aren’t you?” You said.

I blew my nose on my pajama sleeve.

“But you’re dead. You’re dead, and I’m not.”

“I guess,” I said.

We blinked at each other. It was just you and me. Like always.

“Are you going to haunt me forever?” I asked.

The End