

TO KILL A
GHOST

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TO KILL A GHOST

Last Halloween my friend Al asked whether I wanted to go ghost hunting.

Ghost hunting?

He pulled out this aluminum Y with a slack wire running across its arms.

"I got this in the mail," he said.

"What is it?"

"A ghost zapper. It shoots out electrical waves that kill ghosts."

"You can't kill ghosts," I said. "They're already dead."

"But you can make them *dead* dead," he explained. "Finished. Kaput. No more."

"How does it do that?"

"Ghosts are just waves themselves. Brain waves without a body. The waves go right through your skull and make you see what looks like a ghost."

"You mean you don't actually see ghosts?"

"Your brain sees ghosts."

"My brain sees you."

"Your eyes see me. Then your brain. With ghosts, your brain sees them directly."

I thought about that for a moment. Then I asked, "Why do you want to kill them?"

"Just something to do. Anyway, they don't

want to live."

"Why not?"

"Like I told you. They're brain waves left over from something in their lives that was unresolved. Like maybe they were murdered and the murderer was never caught. Stuff like that."

"Killing them won't resolve anything."

"It'll resolve *them*," Al said, grinning. He brandished the zapper. "Help give them that little push over to the other side."

"How do you suddenly know so much about ghosts?" I asked.

"Came with the zapper."

We decided to meet at the cemetery behind St. Edward's at 11:30 PM, figuring that midnight was the most likely time to see ghosts.

When I got to the gate, Al was already there waving his zapper. It was a cold, crisp, moonlit night, so cold that I was shivering even in my sweatshirt and ski jacket. Though not only from the cold.

"You take the zapper," he whispered. "Hand it up to me at the top of the wall."

The gate itself was six feet of sheer wood, but the wall was rough stone and could be climbed. So when Al got to the top I handed him the zapper, then heard it drop on the other side, then heard Al drop and started over the wall myself.

By the time I got down he was already stalking ghosts like a cop, jerking around rows of headstones with his zapper held out arm's length in both hands, finger on the switch.

"What are you doing?" I whispered.

"Shhhh," he whispered back.

I shrugged and started wandering among the headstones. The moon was three-quarters full and halfway down to the horizon, so I could see pretty well. Nothing but names and dates and little phrases, like "Loving Father and Grandfather," and "We'll Miss You Always." Some kids. That was sad.

Al caught up with me and began playing with the switch on his zapper. I heard the thing buzz, then saw a faint blue light shoot across the arms of the Y.

"Cut it out!" I whispered. "You want to see ghosts or not?"

He put the thing down by his side and stopped fiddling with the switch.

"I'm freezing my ass off," he whispered after a few more minutes. "Come on, let's go. There aren't any ghosts here."

"How do you know?"

"It's almost midnight on Halloween. If you haven't seen any by now, you aren't going to see them."

Suddenly one appeared about three rows of headstones from us. He was about six feet tall and broad, and walked with a light shuffle as though his feet were tied loosely together.

Although he looked solid, he walked right through the rows of headstones as though they were beams of light. He had his arms raised as if to strike us, and his face seemed twisted with rage.

"Holy shit!" Al screamed, throwing his zapper

to the ground. He raced for the wall and clambered over. Within seconds he was gone.

The ghost kept coming at me, white as though drained of blood, but with eyes like black holes. He was wearing weather-beaten clothes, also drained of color, just a tee shirt and jeans, and I could see white sneakers as he cleared the last row between us and began to stumble directly towards me.

He's just brain waves! He's just brain waves! I kept repeating to myself, totally unconvinced, then scrunched myself together in preparation for the final blow. But he walked right through me, as though I weren't there.

As I watched him recede, I picked up the zapper, curious about whether it would work, though reluctant to find out. Having survived my first ghost, I was less afraid of them, less willing to wreak some unknown havoc with what I held in my hands.

I decided not to use it except as a last resort, partially because I wasn't sure what damage it might do, partially because I had no desire to end a ghost's existence unnecessarily.

I continued to wander, looking for more ghosts. Within a few minutes, another appeared, a young girl, maybe eight years old, standing forlorn among the headstones not ten feet away.

She was also a bloodless white, but less solid than the former ghost, since if you looked hard you could see the headstones behind her showing through her body.

She had her eyes cast down, as if in sorrow, a

look of unutterable sadness. Then she looked up at me.

My heart stopped dead as I looked into the holes she had for eyes. Holes leading to a howling nothingness, not eyes at all but windows to annihilation.

I screamed and shrank away, hiding behind a headstone. When I dared look up again, she had resumed looking at the ground, so I took the opportunity to tiptoe backwards away from her.

Then I turned and ran. I had had enough.

But before I got to the gate, two more ghosts appeared in my way. One second not there, the next second there. They were a man and woman, and for some reason I knew they had been married and had died together.

They came at me holding hands, swooping about two feet off the ground, the same white, bloodless faces, the same horrifying holes for eyes. I ducked and hit the dirt, but they had already gone right through me.

And then came other ghosts, swooping, stumbling, walking, standing – a host of grief, a crazy ballet of sorrow. And the moans! A river of moans, each ghost a tributary pouring in its pain.

I couldn't look. I lay on the damp grass between headstones and hid my eyes and ears in my arms, the zapper useless in my right hand.

"Oh, God!" I moaned to myself. "Oh, God, Oh, God, Oh God, Oh, God!"

I wasn't afraid of the ghosts. Not by now. They

seemed to be of a different density, as though they existed in spaces between my atoms and there was no way we could touch.

No, I was made afraid, terrified, really, *by* the ghosts. I never knew the universe could hold such misery. I wondered how much each of them had suffered in life, and why they now still had to exist.

And then they were gone. Just like that. Appear, disappear. And I was lying on the damp grass alone.

I got to my feet. Nothing. I ran for the wall beside the gate. Nothing. Leaving the zapper behind, I climbed the wall, pausing at the top to look back. Nothing.

Dear God, I prayed. Thank You!
And I climbed slowly down.