

YARN

I see dead people — No, seriously, I do.

by Katie Zakrzewski

*“Why aren’t you scared of me?
Why do you care for me?
When we all fall asleep
Where do we go?”
Billie Eilish*

For as long as I can remember, Death has hung over my family and my household like an ever-present cloud. He lurks in the background of every event, peeking through the windows patiently. Sometimes, the hair raises on the back of my neck, and I know that he is nearby.

“Laugh now,” he whispers softly. “I will have my day.”

Even after just these few lines, you might be thinking to yourself, “Katie, we have a name for that — depression/ anxiety/ PTSD/ paranoia. Take a melatonin and go to bed.”

And while, if I didn't know better, I might be inclined to believe you, I hope that you'll give me a chance to explain.

Death and I have always been close companions.

What started as the loss of a beloved childhood pet when I was 5 years old steadily ratcheted up in intensity — the tragic loss of siblings, my beloved Grandpa and father figure, my grandmother, more pets, beloved animals in the neighborhood that had paid us visits, close friends, neighbors, more grandparents, cousins, great aunts and uncles, and long time church friends who had become like surrogate grandparents and family. Young, old, rich, poor, two-legged, four-legged, winged, gilled — it didn't matter. Diving into my family history — as much as a child with access to family heirlooms could — made it apparent that untimely and tragic deaths were a morbid family tradition. Every single generation of my family had lost at least one or two children under the age of 10.

The loss of my 4-year-old brother, though, when I was 12 was the final straw that led me — and all of

my schoolmates — to come to a relatively simple conclusion: the Zakrzewski family was cursed.

I don't know how anyone in my family ever could have been important enough for anyone to put a curse on them. Largely speaking, my family was composed of poor farmers whose hobbies mostly consisted of drinking, playing the accordion, and going to Mass. And before you ask, no, our houses didn't sit on an ancient burial ground, but the remains of a brick factory. Census records turned up nothing interesting there, either.

I even heard Dad exclaim one evening at the dinner table while my other young brother and I did homework in our rooms, "This block is cursed. That has to be it. Four generations have lived on this block. It *has* to be cursed.

And while I spent most of my childhood agreeing, my theory was mostly blown out of the water by another realization when I moved out of the house at 18.

You see, for reasons that I can't explain, my entire life, I've seen dead people — not just the fresh ones, the tragic and contemporary losses that made up a large part of my childhood. I mean ghosts.

I don't know what I believe anymore when it comes to the world "beyond the veil." If I didn't routinely see dead people, I'd believe that ghosts and the things that go bump in the night don't exist. My Mom explained to me when I was in my early 20s that out of all of my siblings and cousins, I always seemed to be a little more "aware." She'd catch me looking at something intently that no one else seemed to see, or listening to something that no one else heard. Even as a small child, I'd tell her about other people in the room, or she could tell by the expression on my face and my demeanor that something felt "off."

I was always a pretty serious kid for my age. Being surrounded by death all the time, unsurprisingly, makes you pretty serious. But one of the earliest instances — that I actively remember — had to be when I was around 9 years old, laying in my bed late at night. My bedroom door was open, and the light from the lamp in the playroom, as my parents called it, illuminated my wall through the door frame.

I was a writer and bookworm from a young age. I'd lay in bed until my parents went back downstairs

from tucking me in. I would sneak a small booklight and whichever book I was reading at that time, or a notebook and a pencil, out from under my pillows and blankets and read and write to my heart's content. (It's worth noting this little habit was discovered when I started sleeping in past my alarm clock for school because of how late I'd stay up and read and write.)

But this evening, something felt...different. I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up. It was troubling — everything seemed normal, but *something* felt off.

I looked up to find a silhouette on my wall, as if someone was standing in front of the lamp in the other room. My blood ran cold. At first, I innocently thought that my parents had set a trap for me, laying in wait to see if I would actually go to sleep or not when they tucked me in.

But I realized that the silhouette was nothing like my parents. The figure was a tall man, and the silhouette began to move, growing larger on my wall as it presumably drew closer and closer to the doorway of my bedroom. With a whimper, I burrowed under the blankets and watched as the figure loomed in size as it drew closer — and when

it *should* have reached the doorframe, peering around the wall to stare at me in my bed — it disappeared.

Okay, so what, maybe I was an imaginative kid. Surely that was the only incident, right?

Just a year or so later, my Grandpa was out tending to the back garden next door. I'd be helping him pick and water his tomatoes and cucumbers, so I decided to run upstairs and put on an old t-shirt while my Mom attempted to corral my younger brother, and fed my youngest brother while he feasted in his high chair.

As I pulled the shirt over my head, standing in the middle of the playroom, I looked up to see a cloaked figure looming over me, stretching high overhead. I let out a bloodcurdling scream, and my younger brother, who had been sneaking up the stairs to scare me, looked baffled as I screamed right in front of him at seemingly nothing, grabbing him and running down the stairs.

Mom, who was in on Nick's prank, started laughing.

"That must have been a pretty good scare."

But Mom's look shifted to one of bewilderment when she saw my unusual hysteria and Nick's puzzled look. Nick innocently whispered.

"I didn't even get a chance to say, 'Boo.'"

When my youngest brother, Sam, died when he was four and I was 12, it was the proverbial christening of the U.S.S. Adulthood. My childhood — whatever remained of it leading up to this tragic event — was effectively drug out back and given the Ole Yeller treatment.

Grief makes people do strange stuff. Suddenly, everything — no matter how benign — becomes a divine sign, or proof that someone is trying to reach us from beyond the grave. As my parents and grandparents insisted that the green crayon that we inexplicably found in the middle of the living room or the fact that the Burger King cashier had the same name as my deceased brother were all divine signs of life "beyond the veil," I withdrew to have quiet chats with my remaining brother, or to bury myself in a book or to isolate on a swing in the backyard.

The number of funerals my brother and I found ourselves altar serving for was on the uptick.

“Do you ever think that maybe we’re all already dead?” I asked Nick at one point as we looked for four leaf clovers in the backyard.

“I dunno,” he replied, not taking his eyes off the greenery beneath us. “But I’m not sure that we’d know the difference.”

More dead friends, family, and animals. We were on a first-name basis with people at the local funeral home. I am still close friends with them today.

But during my teenage years, things really reached a fevered pitch — now I was seeing things when I prayed, and not nice things. More than that, I was now waking up in the middle of the night with that strange, foreboding feeling again — except this time, there usually *was* someone standing beside my bed.

They were normal people — just like you and me — except something had happened to them, and now they were stuck.

One young man was just a few years older than me. He shifted awkwardly beside my bed in the early

morning hours, seemingly afraid that I'd scream upon waking.

I blinked a couple of times.

"Do you need help?"

He nodded and looked down at his feet.

"I don't understand what's happening," he whispered softly.

By this time, I'd gotten used to this kind of activity — I'd wake at all hours of the night to find an unusual figure at my bedside, explaining that they were suddenly dead, that they were irked by this (understandably so) and were having a hard time crossing over. Mostly, they just wanted to talk. I imagine a sudden pilgrimage like that one is a hard one to make.

Usually, small talk and quiet company seemed to do the most good for whichever visitors came to me. Not long after, they would leave just as quietly as they appeared.

“What did you eat before bed?” Nick murmured sleepily into his bowl of cereal the next morning when I told him what had happened the night before.

“Nothing unusual. Did you seriously not hear anything?”

“No.”

“Do you ever ... see stuff?”

“No?” Nick asked, looking up. “Maybe you should tell Mom and Dad.”

“Why? So they can have a dead kid *and* a crazy one?”

My father, in all of his old-school ways, wasn’t exactly a champion of mental health. I’d mentioned to my Mom after the death of my grandmother that I was thinking about killing myself. Mom was alarmed enough by this to drag my father into the room, who effectively shrugged and told me the upcoming holidays would give me the break that I needed from school to rest.

Throughout high school, I volunteered at death-centric locations — Hospice, funeral homes, cemeteries. I began to look at death-centric jobs after college — embalmer, coroner, and forensic anthropologist. Death was just a normal topic for me. In many ways, it was the only constant.

Three months after I turned 18, I moved into my college dormitory. I was looking forward to having a modern space to call my own. The dormitory was the nicest on campus, with all of the amenities. I was already thankful to be out of my house and neighborhood — a black cloud constantly hovered over the zipcode.

I started seeing a therapist in college, who was mortified at how much I had endured with no mental health assistance. That was all I'd ever known. It wasn't all that mortifying to me, at least. And all the ghosts — those that speckled my past *and* the ones that appeared nocturnally beside my bed, seemed to be gone.

Until that night, he appeared.

I was sitting in the living room of my dorm late one night, working on a couple of papers, when I noticed something out of the corner of my eye; I

saw him — a tall, solid black figure. A man, with long, sharp claws that tipped his fingers and stretched down beside him. My therapist and Mom would refer to him as the ShadowMan, and he would become a recurring character in my life. He had no discernable features, other than beady eyes that were often hard to focus on.

He stood there at the end of the hall for hours while I quietly worked and watched him out of the corner of my eye. Eventually, he disappeared, but in the days that followed, my roommates began fighting — brutal, vicious, petty college girl fights. One of my roommates had a suicide attempt in her bedroom, next to mine, late one night and begged me to take her to the hospital. Our other roommates joined us, seemingly out of guilt.

When we returned from the late-night hospital trip with one less roommate, I crawled into bed to sleep, lazily gazing at my history notes on the whiteboard mounted on the wall beside my bed, the reflection of the Christmas lights on my wall innocently twinkling in the whiteboard's reflection.

I was almost asleep when I felt it — that tingling. That foreboding.

I wearily opened my eyes to gaze at my reflection in the whiteboard, my eyes widening when I saw another reflection with me. I watched the reflection quietly as the ShadowMan drew near and perched over my bed, dragging his long, sharp claws menacingly over the quilt pulled up around my shoulders.

“We finally meet...” he whispered. “I’ve been following you for a very long time...but you’ve only just now noticed...”

Suddenly, I saw flashes of several important events throughout my life — graduations, core memories, vacations — and I could see him standing off in the distance in every memory.

“All those tragic losses...all those deaths...the endless breakups...the inexplicable mishaps...that was all me...” he hissed softly in my ear. “I won’t rest until I destroy you...until I make you suffer...until I make you destroy yourself...”

I have never seen my mother dial a phone number as frantically as she did that weekend when we sat across from each other at lunch after I told her what

had happened. She began to work her way down her Rolodex of every prominent Catholic clergy member and religious she'd ever known through working as the secretary of our parish. While I was afraid she'd go overboard, I was thankful she was calling the Church instead of the psych ward.

"How long has this been going on?" She whispered incredulously over her margarita.

"Seeing dead people? A long time."

"I had a feeling," She revealed. "But this one in particular. This shadow man."

"I only saw him for the first time a few days ago at the end of the hall and again in my bedroom, but he said he's always been there."

"And what does your therapist think?"

I dipped a chip in salsa.

"She told me not to stay up too late at night 'cause that's usually when it happens. She diagnosed me with anxiety and depression, but she said she talks to a lot of people that have that who don't see dead people in their rooms."

Mom hummed softly, still texting priests and deacons and nuns and everyone in between.

“She doesn’t think you’re crazy?”

“If she does, she didn’t tell me.”

“Did she give you any prescriptions or any way to protect yourself?”

“She told me about setting boundaries and doing activities that require using my imagination during the day to wear my brain out for bed. She gave me an antidepressant, but it made me a zombie, so I stopped taking it.”

Mom’s phone rang.

“Oh, Deacon! Yes, it’s good to hear from you. Yes, I’m calling about my daughter...”

I decided it was probably time to leave before Mom got the Vatican on the phone.

The resident’s assistant told Mom that there had been no morbid crimes or incidents in the relatively new dormitory to cause a haunting of any sort, and no other students reported seeing or feeling

anything. My roommate, upon returning from the hospital, moved out of the dorm.

In spite of the lifestyle changes, a revolving door of prescriptions and assessments, and a host of prayer and spiritual discernment, the ShadowMan would still occasionally pay a visit. During one notable visit, the night before an exam, I grabbed a pillow off the bed and launched it at him.

“Come back later, asshole,” I had grumbled.

“Are you sure it’s a ghost?” my parish deacon asked the next day.

“I don’t know what it is, but it keeps showing up and said it plans to continue to until I’m destroyed.”

“Did you dabble in anything you weren’t supposed to?”

“I mean, I tried a strange brownie at a party—”

“I mean Ouija boards, a seance, the occult?”

“No?”

He hummed softly.

“And you’ve been evaluated by your therapist?”

“Yes, and I’ve tried a couple of different prescriptions, but nothing ever seemed to work, and what did made me apathetic and didn’t make this stuff go away.”

“And you blessed your room?”

“Every day.”

“And a crucifix?”

“Beside my bed.”

My deacon sighed, scratching his head.

“Random ghosts and this one in particular...I’m not sure what to make of this.”

“That makes two of us.”

As life went on, I continued with school, eventually graduating and continuing my work. I keep myself routinely busy, so I don’t get as many visitors anymore.

I’ve lived in the apartment I moved into my senior year of college for 6 or 7 years. Roommates and

friends have seen and heard strange things, but only when I'm around, it seems.

My first roommate and I were sitting in the living room, visiting with her aunt, when a huge candle came inexplicably flying off the bookshelf and shattering at our feet. My second roommate and I were sitting in our rooms and heard a bloodcurdling scream in the kitchen — there was obviously no one there. Another time I was on my way home late one night from work and found a small girl wearing a white dress standing in the middle of the grassy front lawn of the complex. I found out a few weeks later from an older coworker who had a girlfriend living at the complex in the 80s that there used to be a large swimming pool there, but the owners filled it in after a little girl drowned.

I have seen the ShadowMan periodically since his first appearance. There's no rhyme or reason to when he shows up other than the fact that it's at night. Between working and volunteering and recently getting married and trying to buy a house, I'm usually too worn down to notice those strange things.

But just a few months ago, after an incredibly grueling week at work, I crawled into bed,

exhausted. Blearily, I looked to the foot of the bed and saw my first visitor in a long time. She was a young woman, bathed in a soft light. My vision swam as I fought to stay awake, to see what she needed. Her voice was soft as she whispered.

“I’m worried about you,” She said as the darkness around my vision grew deeper. “That light in your eyes has nearly gone out...”

In my dream, I am sitting in the grass, surrounded by four-leaf clovers in my grandparents’ backyard. It’s just as it was when I was a little girl, warm in the evening rays of the summer sun, radiant with childhood happiness.

Sitting quietly in the grass a little ways in front of me, looking humorously out of place, is Death.

But that tingling feeling. That foreboding. It’s gone.

“What are we doing here?” I whisper softly.

“We are simply being.” His voice is flat, matter of fact. All-knowing.

The windchimes tinkle and brush against each other musically.

“You know a lot about me. You’ve been around me a lot,” I whisper.

He nods.

“Who is the ShadowMan?”

“I do not know.”

I’m quiet for a minute.

“When will you come back into my life?”

“When I am needed.”

The birds twitter in the trees as the shadows of the leaves dance on the side of Grandpa’s shed, the sun bathing the backyard swings and picnic table and chiminea in its final golden rays of the day.

“Why are we here, in Grandma and Grandpa’s backyard?”

“Because I know how much it means to you,” he says. “And it will not be our last time together in this place.”

“What do you mean?”

He runs his pale white fingers along the lush green clover patch, and I watch him.

“Most people run from Death. You seem to run toward it.”

“I’ve just always been around it,” I say. “And figured I might as well keep being around it. Not everybody can.”

“Are you afraid of me?” He asks, his fingers picking at the lush greenery as he absentmindedly inspects the clovers.

“It wouldn’t do me any good.”

He makes a sound, almost like a chuckle, as the sun dips over the horizon. The blue of the sky gives way to purples and oranges and pinks and yellows like a palette of watercolors has been spilled across the dome.

“The next time I meet you here, in this place, it will be our last meeting,” he says matter-of-factly. “Here we will talk, just as you have talked to so many — those whom I could not get through to — and when there is nothing left to say, the darkness of my cloak

will envelop you like the night, and you will go to that place beyond the veil. To that place, not even I have been.”

With a smooth motion, he plucks a four-leaf clover and admires it quietly. I whisper.

“I will think of you when I get there. Until we meet again.”

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