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So Very Silently

by Lauren Harkawik

If they want to, ghosts can get so close to you that they can smell the syrup on your breath at breakfast. They can feel the soft fuzz that collects on your flannel shirts throughout the day. They can see the way you inhale ever so slightly right before you tell a lie. They can hear the zipper on your pants as you lower it.

Most of them don't want to get that close. But if they want to, they can, and you'd never know it.

Katie Boyle, suspended in time at 38, didn't know how she died, or when. When she was alive, she would've guessed death would start with an explanation, but it hadn't. At first she didn't even know she was dead. She found out when she saw her family on 63rd street and followed them. They went to the funeral home. It was her funeral. Her mother threw herself at the casket, her brother sat alone in the corner, and her father chugged a flask in the bathroom. Katie's heart shattered, and she felt a pain searing enough that she didn't ever want to feel it again. Unsure of what to do, she ran to the park along the water and collapsed into the grass.

Katie wondered if had there been a "Welcome to Death" ceremony or something, she would've learned things. She had a lot of questions, like, what was she supposed to do? Could she scare people if she wanted to? Did she need to eat? Sleep? Drink? Could she get drunk? Was she immune to hangovers?

And where was she? She could tell she wasn't in heaven. She had stumbled into her own funeral, a wholly unheavenly experience. Maybe she had a purpose to fulfill before she could leave earth. Or — well, maybe she had just been left behind. Maybe no one knew she was there. Maybe she'd slipped through the cracks. Maybe ghosts weren't even supposed to exist. Not how she seemed to exist, anyway.

She sighed, loudly, and no one turned to look at her. In her time alive, Katie was someone who sometimes took up too much space. Drinking; pills. She frequently wove herself through city streets, crashed through parks, and stumbled onto trains. Sometimes she talked to herself. Sometimes she sighed loudly like she just had. Sometimes she threw up. All of these things turned heads. She was used to it. The way people would stare and then quickly realize they were seeing something they didn't want to, so they'd look down. But today, no one even turned their heads. No one saw what she couldn't look down to avoid, which was herself, but dead.

After some time in the park, her funeral felt like a distant memory —and maybe it was because maybe time moves differently in the afterlife, who knows, no one's explained it— and she was starting to feel really unsettled. The idea she'd been left behind took over. She should've been sent to heaven or hell. Before she died, she would've said she had a casual relationship with the concepts of both

heaven and hell. “Who knows,” she would’ve said, defeated or uninterested or both. But now she was very sure they were very real, and she was very not in them.

She studied herself. She was wearing ripped jeans —the comfortable pair, not the pair that were tight around her waist— and a white t-shirt. And she had a crinkly plastic grocery bag, which had a sweatshirt in it. That was good, she thought, in case she got cold. Could she get cold? Ugh. She put her hands down in the grass and that moment might have passed her by, but she felt an ant crawl on her hand, which she figured was good because it meant she could feel. But as she watched it crawl, she saw her hand on the grass and saw the grass had not moved beneath it. It was like to the grass, her hand wasn’t even there. Someone who used to take up too much space wasn’t taking up any space at all.

She decided she needed to know if there were other people like her around. Maybe they’d have answers. The grass gave her one scientific method to follow, and she ran with it. Time passed, but again, who knows at what rate. However long it was, she filled it with getting very, very close to people. She observed whether their body touched the space around them. Rob Jenkins, a 42-year-old construction worker, sat on the subway and, below his boot, a piece of gravel moved. That meant he was alive. Sophie Fillion, a 72-year-old retired nurse, used her finger to make a trail in some salt on the table at the diner. That meant she was alive. Speedy Tom took a shower and water bounced off his body. That meant he was alive. She called him Speedy Tom because when she was alive, he’d once wanted to have sex with her five minutes after meeting her, and she’d gone for it. In death, she took longer than she needed to confirm he was alive. What? He didn’t know.

Katie would’ve thought the more people she realized were alive, the more lonely she’d feel. But she started to relish getting so close to people she could smell the wine on their breaths, the shampoo in their hair, and the garlic on their fingers. She started to become obsessed with what small detail she’d get to collect without them ever knowing it. She especially liked that they didn’t know she was there. One day, she was watching Emma Brown, 35, a baker, knead bread dough. Katie loved the way little bits of flour flew into the air with every kneading thwack. Emma stopped very suddenly and looked around like she’d heard something, and Katie thought maybe the jig was up. But then Emma went back to kneading.

Who knows how long she would have gone on like this. But one day she was sitting between Julie Fortner, 26, and Nathan Jole, 28. It was their first date, and they were sitting on the same side of a booth at Cafe Notte, the kind of place with candles on the table, which Katie never went to when she was alive because the is not the kind of thing Katie did. Katie could feel their body temperatures rising as they inched closer to each other. She closed her eyes and basked in the energy of getting ready to touch someone for the first time. She started to feel like she wanted to lick one of their faces or twirl their hair. But instead she opened her eyes and yelped, because sitting across from her was Frank Boyle, 63.

“Daddy?” She hadn’t called him that for years. She didn’t know how long she’d been dead but she hadn’t even called him that in life for years. But she was caught off guard at the sight of him.

He smiled a sad smile like he was happy to see her but sorry he could. “Baby girl,” he said, his voice free from the gravel of the pills he’d put himself to sleep with and the whiskey he’d used to wash them down. “What are you doing?”

Katie looked to the side to side. Julie was chopping a meatball into tiny pieces. Nathan was picking the red onions off of a salad. “Just watching,” Katie said, sheepishly.

Her dad shook his head, reached out his hand, and pulled her straight through Julie Fortner, who shuttered as a draft had just burst in through the door, though it was closed.

Frank pushed Katie through a wall and into the parking lot, where winter was everywhere—the frost on the cars; the fog by people’s mouths; the blackness of the air.

They stood under a fluorescent street lamp, and Katie took a good look at Frank. “Are you—?” She couldn’t finish the sentence, but he nodded, and then he put his hands on her shoulders. “We have to go,” he said urgently like they were about to miss a flight. “We gotta watch your Ma. Make sure she’s okay. She needs us.” Later, Katie would think to ask how he’d known what he should do, or where she was. But just then, she blinked at him and felt tears brim her eyes as she listened to the echoing emptiness of the cold winter night.

In all the people she’d watched, Katie hadn’t gone to see her family. The thought had crossed her mind, once, because she’d seen Jan White, the upstairs neighbor, and she’d had a strong memory of the way it felt to step through the door of the building she grew up in Bay Ridge and the way the smell of her mother’s spaghetti sauce would waft down the hall even on summer days. But the memory had given her a pang that felt like the one she’d felt at her funeral, and she’d decided she wasn’t strong enough for it. To see if they were still sad, or if they were happy without her.

“No, no, no,” she said quietly. As she did, she heard her father’s words play again, crackly, like a record. “She needs us.” Katie wondered if he had needed her, too. But she still said, “I can’t. She’s. It’s. It’s too—. And now you’re here? I—. No. She’s too sad.”

Frank put his finger under Katie’s chin and lifted her face, bringing her eye line up to his. “Of course she’s sad,” he said. “That’s love.”

Frank walked toward the street and, in spite of herself, Katie followed. When she was three, she toddled behind him into the little garden on the side of their building, and he gave her more attention than he did the herbs or tomatoes. Ever since, she’d felt compelled to follow him, even when she’d gotten too old and jaded to do it.

But she felt panic rising in her. She couldn’t see her mother — not now, not so alone. Katie was about to run away, but as she turned on her heels, silence grabbed her. There was ice and snow on the ground, but no crunching beneath them as they walked. Her dad was there, but his cadence wasn’t.

She closed her eyes and remembered the last time she was alive with Ma. They were walking in the sand in Far Rockaway, right near the edge of the water, which washed over Katie's feet and soaked the bottom of her jeans. A few paces ahead, Ma was chasing the dog, their feet leaving craters in the sand. In her memory, Katie muted the waves and focused in on the quiet shuffle of skin traipsing through the sand.

They were was so alive, then.

Katie reached out and grabbed her dad's hand. His hand in hers, he gave a good squeeze and then looked down and winked. In return, she smiled and looked down, as if to say thank you. And then silently—so very silently—they went to Ma.