

GHOSTS CAN BE BOYFRIENDS TOO

I woke up, the feeling of empty weighing to one side of the bed. I heard Derek again in the other room, talking to himself.

“Remember that time we went camping and everyone caught us doing it in the forest?” Derek laughed.

The silence answered him.

“Derek, you’re sleep talking again!” I screamed from the bed.

He went silent, came into the room, apologized, and went back to bed. This was the fifth night in a row. We had just moved in together, so I wasn’t sure if this was normal or not.

In the morning, I asked him if he needed to go to a sleep therapist, but he declined. We spent the morning reorganizing the kitchen. He took breaks to call his mother and to reassure her that Jesus was not coming to take us away for our sins.

“No, Mom, we were not in church this week,” Derek replied. “Mom, I’m not going to church, just get over it.” He hung up the phone.

Derek had previously organized the kitchen, but he placed things in weird spots. Everything was alphabetized. Cereal went next to the Coca Cola, flour went next to the forks, soap was next to the sugar.

“Derek, you can’t keep the poisonous stuff next to the sugar.”

“Sugar is poison.”

I nodded in agreement. I went back to reorganizing and started to move the pill bottles into one spot. Derek tried to argue with me, but I didn’t think it was smart to have random pill bottles everywhere. Some of the pill bottles were unlabelled; I asked him to label them so that we didn’t mix them up. He refused, so I labelled them with the names of the things they sat between, like “bran / breads,” “mint tea / napkins,” “Pringles / protein powder,” etc.

When we finished, we ate leftover pizza and watched a show on TV about a chef who was going restaurant to restaurant explaining to the owners why they should just shut down unless they let him help them. One restaurant

was pirate-themed, and the servers dressed in costume. The chef turned it into a bar and grill called “Corporate Bar and Grill.” The owners cried tears of joy as more and more customers poured in, until there were too many of them and they overwhelmed the restaurant. Money was falling out of the restaurant’s till, and the servers’ tips were falling out of their pants. I woke up with Derek asleep on my lap. I shook him awake, and we crawled into our bed.

In the middle of the night, I heard him talking again about how I had moved everything in the kitchen.

“Derek, you’re talking in your sleep again,” I groaned.

Derek turned to me and stood up immediately. He had a disgruntled look on his face.

The night rolled around me, never letting me sleep. Derek continued to talk in the other room.

“I can’t say that *Showgirls* is the best movie, but of course it has its high points.”

There was a silence.

“No, Nomi Malone is not supposed to represent socialism, that doesn’t make any sense. I guess she could possibly represent poverty and the difficulty of being a woman.”

There was a silence.

“Sure, if you like having sex like a blow-up mattress being rapidly deflated.”

Another silence.

“Are you ever going to forgive me for that? You left. I mean, you were dead. What was I supposed to do?”

I walked into the room. Derek looked at me as if I was interrupting. He got up, walked to the bed without saying anything, and promptly fell asleep.

In the morning, we continued to organize the living room. I put out all of my comics and figurines, and Derek followed behind me and put them in boxes.

“I don’t want your figurines out. They look ridiculous.”

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“This isn’t just your home.” I grabbed my figurines out of the box.

“Fine. But you can only put out three. I don’t want people to think I’m dating a child.” Derek could tell I was upset, so he came and rubbed my back, kissed my forehead, and whispered, “a very handsome and funny and smart child.”

We finished by noon, and there was only one box left, labeled “Jared.” I went to open it, but Derek grabbed my arm.

“No, that one is going to my mom’s place. We don’t need to open it.”

“Who’s Jared?”

“Just an ex-boyfriend.”

“Can I at least see what’s inside?”

“No. Just leave it.”

That night we went out for the first time in weeks. We started at the nautical-themed pub across from our apartment. I ordered a grog, which was a margarita and beer served in a sand bucket. Derek ordered a water. The server said we looked familiar and gave us a free basket of onion rings they called “float tubes.”

We moved on to the club down the street, and I drank beer until Derek came back from the bathroom and said he wanted to go to the bar down the street. At the last bar of the night, Derek came back from the bathroom, dancing goofily, and I started to laugh uncontrollably. He continued to dance toward me, so I stopped him. “Derek, since when do you dance this much?”

He didn’t respond and kept dancing. I tried to get his attention, but his eyes searched the room. I told him we should head home, and he nodded in agreement. As we walked home, Derek kept stopping to shake his butt at me. I remembered how light he was, like he couldn’t touch the ground. I wanted to hold his hand so that I could anchor him to the ground. I felt so heavy, but sometimes he lifted me off the earth when we were together.

He slept through the night, or at least I was so drunk that if he woke up, I didn’t notice.

I made us coffees and brought one to him in bed. Derek had post-drug sadness in his eyes.

“You were really high last night.” I put the sugar next to his coffee.

“I know, it was lots of fun.”

“It just felt weird. You didn’t look like yourself at the end of the night.”

He rolled away from me and ignored his coffee.

When he finally woke up, I could hear him talking to himself. It escalated into shouting when I heard a door slam. Derek ran out of the bedroom crying. He grabbed his coat and didn’t return until the evening.

When he finally got home, he started to pace back and forth in front of me.

“Okay. So, I know you’re going to think I’m crazy, and this always happens, but I need to tell you something, okay? And you have to promise you won’t think I’m crazy, because everyone always says that I’m crazy and leaves, and I just can’t deal with that right now, okay?”

I assured him that I wouldn’t call him crazy and would be fine with whatever he had to tell me.

“So, you know that boyfriend I had a long time ago that died?”

I nodded and put my hand on his knee.

“Well, he’s haunting this house. But, like, not haunting.”

I continued to nod.

“See!? You already think I’m crazy! Look at you.”

“I was just nodding.” I pulled him into a hug and comforted him. We sat and talked for several hours while he recounted everything from Jared’s death to the first time he saw him as a ghost. Now, Derek told me, Jared comes back every year around this time to ask Derek to get back together.

“I can’t do it. I can’t date a ghost. But I still love him so much.”

I gently patted his back. “I’m right here.”

“Sorry,” he mumbled into his hands.

“What if we just focused on me and you. This other guy, this, uh, ghost, he’ll just have to deal with it. Okay?”

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Derek nodded and rolled his body into my lap.

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I woke up and noticed Derek's spot was empty. I could hear mumbling coming from the other room. I grabbed my glasses and shuffled into the living room.

"Derek, come back to bed."

"I can't. We need to talk."

"Is everything okay?"

"No. Well, yes. But also, no. Yes and no, if that makes any sense."

"No, it doesn't."

Derek began to snuffle, and his body started to shake, which meant he would begin crying if I didn't calm him down. I rushed to his side and rubbed his back until he stopped shaking.

"I—I need to leave you."

I stared blankly at him.

"I am leaving you for Jared."

I stared blankly.

"We've been seeing each other in secret." There was a pause. "It's ... I didn't expect this. Can you say something, please?"

I tried to calm down, but burst out, "Jared isn't real! If you want to leave me, just leave me. Don't fucking make shit up about ghosts."

"You promised you wouldn't call me crazy!"

"I never said you were crazy. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have phrased it like that. I just don't want you to leave."

I calmed down and asked if Jared could come into the room and talk to the two of us like adults.

"He can't just float into the room like some sort of fairy. He's a ghost."

"I'm sorry, I don't know as much about ghosts as you do," I said, uncertain if I was being sincere or not.

The conversation went like this: Derek and Jared talked for a few hours

as I watched. It was three in the morning when I suggested that we try a relationship that involved the three of us. Derek's eyes were glowing; he loved the idea. I told myself that it was only a ghost—not like we were getting into a three-way relationship with a poltergeist.

So Jared officially moved in. Derek opened up the box he'd been keeping hidden from me. It contained Jared's belongings: his toothbrush, his cardigan, a necklace, some old notes. We put his things out and even made room for him in the bed. We started to set a place for him for dinner, and like clockwork, when I'd leave the room to go to the bathroom, his meal would be eaten and Derek would be cleaning up after him.

I was hesitant at first, but dating a ghost had a lot of upsides. Jared would sneak off into other apartments and tell us exactly what the other neighbours were doing. Whenever either of us were upset with a co-worker, Jared would agree to haunt them for the evening.

One evening I came home with a Ouija board, excited about this gift for Derek, but it only made Jared angry. He said that it was insulting to ghosts and that I was probably “ghost-racist.”

Jared and I never talked directly; Derek was always our translator, and I could usually tell where Jared was because Derek would lock eyes with him. The way he would intensely stare at one position in the room almost made it possible for me to see Jared—like a silver outline would form. Derek was more than happy to communicate between us. We only fought a handful of times when we accused each other of taking up more of Derek's time. It quickly escalated into a series of insult-throwing fits, in which I called him a “Casper-looking motherfucker,” and he called me a “useless flesh bucket.”

The first time we tried a threesome, it was awkward. Derek kept shifting me, saying that I was sitting on Jared. I felt a cold breeze against my skin where Jared and I pressed against each other. Sometimes I just sat back and watched as Derek wove his body with Jared's; I could almost see Jared's outline through Derek. Sometimes Derek would direct Jared and me; we were never very good at being together without Derek, but we both tried to make it

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work. Derek would yell, “You’re not even trying—you’re on opposite sides of the bed!” and, “You look ridiculous; you’re just jerking off the air. Jared is over here.”

One evening, the three of us went out to the nautical-themed bar. I’d already had too many grogs to go anywhere else, but Jared wanted to go somewhere new. Derek promised me we would go home soon. When we were walking, Derek sped up. I yelled at him to wait for me. When I caught up to him, I was walking too fast, so he yelled at me to wait for him. Then he rushed past me and turned left into a dark street. He didn’t come home for another hour. He crawled into bed and mumbled an apology. Then Jared rolled in around five in the morning, and Derek apologized for him.

When I woke up, Derek was already bent over the counter taking a bump of coke.

“You’re not supposed to be doing cocaine to wake you up in the morning,” I said.

“Why not? It has the same chemical effects as caffeine.” He stared at me with a look of complete confidence in what he was saying. “It’s just the conservatism of society telling you that one drug is better than the other.”

“I—uh, I never thought of it that way.” I took a small line, and it quickly woke me up.

Soon we were going out every other night. The same routine repeated itself: As we were heading home, Derek would disappear into the dark. Later, he’d sneak into bed and apologize, followed some hours later by Jared, and Derek would apologize on Jared’s behalf.

It was one month later when Jared’s dinners stopped disappearing during my routine bathroom breaks. Derek looked at me, frowning.

“Jared isn’t eating.”

“Does he not like my cooking?”

“Maybe. He’s been really mad at me lately.”

We continued our routine, but the dinners continued to go uneaten. Derek would leave them out overnight. For a week, he left the dinner there to prove

a point to Jared about how rude he was being. The food grew mold, while ants and fruit flies made the meal a home.

Later that week, I woke up in the middle of the night. The bed was empty. I could hear yelling in the living room.

“What did you expect?”

Silence.

“I can’t!”

Silence.

“I know you can’t just find a body, it’s impossible. I’m trying to understand you, but you’re asking too much from me.”

Silence.

“Because I love him too much.”

Silence.

“If I did that, how am I supposed to know where I would end up? Then I would lose you and him.”

Silence.

“I just don’t think I have it in me. I can’t do it.”

I sneaked back into bed; I’d been eavesdropping on a conversation that wasn’t meant for me. When Derek came back to bed, I made extra room for Jared. Derek was weeping.

The next morning, I made the three of us breakfast. Derek split Jared’s food between the two of us, then calmly stated, “He left us.”

I looked up at my figurines. In the centre was Harley Quinn. I looked at her grin, the way she held herself. Poison Ivy stood next to her. I shouldn’t have felt abandoned and rejected by a ghost, but it was just as painful as I remembered heartbreak to be.

That morning I went to the comic book shop. I picked up as many new comics as I could and even picked up several figurines. When I got home, I put them out. Three figurines didn’t feel like enough. I always felt safe when I saw them, like they were protecting our home. They were heroes who would fight for justice even when justice wasn’t on their side. I waited for Derek to

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argue with me about the figurines, but he didn't say anything. Every morning I would wake up and put out another figurine until the room was covered in tiny replicas of human beings in bright clothing wrapped tightly around their muscled bodies. Derek still refused to recognize their existence, like they were an audience of ghosts for our relationship.

A month later, Derek left me too. One evening he disappeared with just a bag of his clothes. He'd left behind Jared's belongings. Derek left without a note, and he never called me again, never tried to reach out to me. But I never tried to reach out to him. Something told me there would be no point.

A month after that, I found out from a friend of a friend that Derek was living in Toronto. He had found a new boyfriend within days of arriving and already moved in with him.

I wanted to tell him that the day after he left, Jared came back. I could tell because from then on, the leftovers from dinner would disappear in the night. I put out all of his things from his box, intermingled with my figurines. I think he liked this because after I did this, I found the Ouija board on the counter with the planchette pointing toward "hello."

Now we're trying to learn to speak to each other without Derek to translate the spaces in-between.