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16-Bit Ghouls: A Novella

Alyssa M. Bersine
abersine@nmu.edu

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16-BIT GHOULS: A NOVELLA

By

Alyssa M. Bersine

THESIS

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

16-BIT GHOULS: A NOVELLA

This thesis by Alyssa M. Bersine is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Faculty Chair in the Department of English and by the assistant provost of Graduate Education and Research.

Committee Chair: Jennifer A. Howard Date

First Reader: Matthew G. Frank Date

Second Reader: N/A Date

Department Head: Dr. Robert Whalen Date

Dr. Brian D. Cherry Date

Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research

ABSTRACT

16-BIT GHOULS: A NOVELLA

By

Alyssa M. Bersine

This novella follows twenty-something phone psychic and recluse, Jane, whose dead brother haunts her Super Nintendo. When he prompts Jane to find his killer, she must learn how to navigate a world where he is absent. Jane struggles not only with the ghost, but also with letting go of the nostalgia and anxiety that prevent her from moving on with her life. *16-Bit Ghouls* is a story about grief and growing-up.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

Last winter I decided to reinvent myself as a writer. This was prompted by a note card I'd written for myself one night amidst a bout of self-loathing. It consisted of new "rules" I would follow as I went into my second semester of graduate school. The semester before I had dabbled with exercising the "problems" I saw in my own writing. Namely, that the content was too weird and horror influenced, there were too many inhuman characters and not enough raw human emotion. I created a notecard and taped it to my desk, sure my next work would adhere to the following rules:

1. No one dies.
2. No monsters, mythical creatures, or otherwise.
3. *No. Ghosts.*

When winter semester began, I was enrolled in a fiction writing workshop with Matt Bell, where we were challenged to write a 30000 word novel over the course of the semester. We started immediately that week, churning out over 2500 words per week. I desperately tried to conceive a concept that would impress my peers and show them just how serious I was as a writer. I'd write about a man living alone in a mountain. A misanthrope, who was perhaps living with a teenaged girl? My first story attempt was scrapped, just like everything that followed. Desperate for an

idea, I reverted back to my same old tricks. I ended up conceiving a ghost story. But, I convinced myself, this would be different. This would be a "literary" ghost story.

At some point during my undergrad, I'd come to think of literary stories as anything that dealt with human emotion and interaction over plot points. When faced with writing something I specifically intended to be literary, I interpreted that to mean boring. The novel I ended up writing was terrified of all the things that make ghost stories, or any story, interesting. There was little to no character development, and I was unable to commit to any rules to being a ghost. Instead, I focused entirely on trying to write pretty, detailed scenes that didn't mean anything and didn't allow the reader to form any sort of connection with the plot or the characters. It wasn't something I was proud of. I spent so much time worrying that others would think it was genre fiction that I completely removed anything that could make it special.

At the end of the semester, I had 40815 boring words strung together in a word document. Determined to do *something* with it, I chose to re-work the novel concept into my thesis. Initially a painful process filled with regret, I soon found myself inserting things into the story I was interested in. Pop culture references, horror elements, nostalgia, and kitsch. The novella began to take shape for me, and I began to really care about the work. It occurred to me that the sort of stories I wanted to write wouldn't be sold on the same shelf as Vonnegut and Faulkner, but that was okay. I no longer needed that validation to feel like my writing was worthwhile.

My progress was halted once again after letting a colleague read my work.

While discussing her interpretation of the story, she brought up how she could see it selling, eventually, as Young Adult. I instantly felt like I'd been punched in the face.

Young Adult? Was it that bad?

I was once again caught up by the label of the piece. It didn't matter that she'd liked the novella, or that she enjoyed Young Adult fiction, or that I had read some phenomenal novels that fell into the Young Adult category. I couldn't shake the feeling that it made my novella less than something else.

I've tried to understand why my gut reaction was to be offended by the idea of my writing being Young Adult, or why I'd spent so long trying to create something I wasn't interested in. It's easy for writers to fall into the pit of one label and never scratch their way back out, especially for women. Fiction written by women constantly has its merits examined and scrutinized by readers and critics. Young Adult happens to be one of the pits female writers are shoved into without a second thought. And while it's a genre that's produced some of the most stunning books of the last decade, it continues to be panned as low-brow literature by critics. Young Adult is often criticized for simplistic writing, stereotypical characters, and melodrama. Some critics even cite it as a plague on the literary world, the downfall of the modern novel. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that the readers who thought *that* was Young Adult had never had their heartbroken by Francesca Lia Block's Weetzie Bat's three magic wishes or Patrick's struggle to accept his sexuality in Stephen Chosky's *Perks of Being a Wallflower*.

16-Bit Ghouls is the result of my anxiety about creating a "grown-up" novel. Instead of omitting things that intrigue me, I decided to examine them more closely.

I discovered that this new story explored the way we cope with change, death, and growing up in a way that felt honest to me. We all have metaphorical ghosts that follow us through life, phantoms of the people who've influenced us in both profound and debilitating ways. It's hard to let go of the past or the comfort of nostalgia for easier times in our lives, but it's necessary to carve out a journey that's worthwhile. Jane, the protagonist, is afraid. She's afraid of losing her connection to her dead brother. She's afraid of basic human interaction. She's afraid she's just as awful as everyone around her thinks she is. In an attempt to protect herself, she becomes a recluse, her only contact with society through the telephone. In order to move on, she must force herself to examine this anxiety and her own worth as a human being. In the end, the only way to start the next part of her life is to say good-bye to not only her brother, but her hometown. It's a necessary journey that many of us make to try and understand what we're meant to do in this life.

In an awkward 1974 interview in New York, David Bowie is asked whether he wants to be understood by his audience, who were known to create very intellectual analyses of even his most bizarre material. Bowie responds by reminding the interviewer that first and foremost, he's a storyteller, "and I don't care what anybody says. I like doing it and it's what I shall continue to do." In place of my "rules" for writing in grad school, I've stuck up this quote on a piece of card stock, a reminder to write the sort of fiction I want to write, not what I think I should be writing. When I'm feeling discouraged, it helps to think that if Bowie could build an entire career on stories about space travel and androgynous aliens, then I can get away with a couple of ghost stories.

16-BIT GHOULS: A NOVELLA

The phone rings three times before Jane answers. She speaks in a vaguely European accent, picked up from countless hours watching BBC dramas, and introduces herself to the caller as Madame Tallulah, servant of the spirit realm. For \$2.99 a minute, she's happy to read tarot cards and dole out fortunes, but she specializes in speaking to the recently deceased.

"What kind of accent is that?" the caller asks.

Jane holds the phone at arm's length, to sigh and crack her neck. These calls aren't unusual, but this is the third call of the night, her lucky number. Her third call is almost always a middle-aged woman who wants to speak to a dead lover, or a lovesick girl who wants to know if her boyfriend is cheating. The third caller is almost always the longest call she receives all evening, pushing well past the free five minutes offered over a crystal ball in commercials starring an actress who calls herself "Ms. Chloe," the patron saint of phony psychics everywhere.

Jane is certain the current caller is a college student looking for cheap kicks. He'll waste five minutes of her time, but ditch before he has to pay for anything. She isn't allowed to hang up herself. The Call Center doesn't like quitters.

"It's European, darling," Jane says. Her eyes linger on a carton of cigarettes stuffed under her dresser. She isn't supposed to smoke in the house, but her uncle will ignore it if she keeps the window open. "I'm from a small--"

"You sound like Jean-Claude van Damme's mother," the caller says.

Jane reaches for the cigarettes. "Why don't you tell me something about yourself. Where're you calling from?"

"Oh, Jane," the caller says. "I'm not calling to get my fortune read."

No one is supposed to know her real name. Madame Tallulah is supposed to erase Jane. Her palms are sweaty, and she places a cigarette behind her ear. "You're from the Call Center."

"You don't recognize my voice?" he says. "It's me, Winter."

"My brother's dead," Jane says. Her brother has been dead for months now.

"Very dead," the man says. "Look, I need your help. I--"

Jane, heart beating rapid as a rabbit's, slams the receiver back onto the cradle. Jane props herself on her window's ledge. The attic window offers a choice view of the street below, void of any light but one flickering streetlamp. Her hands are shaking too hard to light the cigarette. She gives up, resting her head on the cool glass pane. Outside, a streetlamp flickers. The wind scatters dead leaves and garbage along the sidewalk.

The caller hasn't exactly scared her, but she feels unsettled. Likely, he was just some creep who'd done a little digging around the internet to find out her identity. Jane had probably talked to him before, maybe gave him a bad reading. Or, he was some asshole she'd gone to school with, who had nothing better to do than harass her on a Friday night. It was a small town; Jane was a local weirdo. Children steered clear from her house on Halloween, their parents refused to make eye contact with her in the store.

It wasn't that any of them thought she was a real psychic. She'd been pegged as a fraud when she was just a kid. Instead, all 2000 residents of her hometown knew her as a liar, a shut-in, a failure. All true.

"Well, shit," she mutters, frosting the glass with her breath. If the caller had wanted to make her feel bad, he'd accomplished that.

Downstairs, her uncle's alarm clock begins to wail. She could tell him about the caller while he gets ready for work, but he won't believe her. He'll shake his head. He'll say, "I don't know where you come up with this stuff, Janie."

Jane avoids her uncle, mostly. She only goes down from the attic when she wants a bowl of cereal or a glass of water. He never comes up to the attic.

The house used to be so crowded she had to share a bedroom with Winter. Her grandmother was carted off to the nursing home first. And then Winter moved into an apartment of his own. After he died, Jane's mother used the life insurance money to buy herself a small house. Jane's uncle could have sold it then, but he wanted to keep it in the family. He let Jane stay for free.

He tells people he inherited Jane with the house, the same way he would talk about the mice in the walls. An infestation.

Jane could call her mother. She might even believe her. But Jane hasn't talked to her mother much since Winter died.

Winter drowned in a lake mid-January. His body was uncovered by ice fishermen, false teeth crammed in the pockets of his jacket and a ruined note pinned to the lapel. His left eye was missing. The autopsy found no evidence of foul play, but rather a cocktail of liquor and painkillers in his system.

In some fit of sleeplessness, Jane had decided to pierce her own ears the morning Winter's body was found. She'd had the heated needle and small potato pressed against her numbed earlobe, was about to drive it in when the phone rang.

She'd placed the potato aside, pinched the sewing needle between thumb and forefinger as she answered. It was for her mother. Jane lied and said that's who she was, and the cop on the line told her that they'd found Winter on the bottom of the lake, and they needed her to come in and identify the body. Jane dropped the needle, lost in the carpet until she would step on it weeks later, lodged in the heel of her foot.

None of it had added up for Jane. She had identified the body with the empty eye socket, collected the false teeth and note in a Ziploc bag. She'd seen Winter the day before over coffee. He'd been talkative, excited, normal. He'd told her about the new denture molds he was experimenting with at work, and about an apartment he was looking at. The police ruled it a suicide, anyway.

Jane had spoken to three cops in an office, two of whom she recognized from high school. It had been a cramped space, the three men leering over Jane as she sat in a cracked vinyl chair. The room smelled of stale coffee and sweat, take-out meals and Styrofoam. She thought she could smell urine.

"No one's been murdered here since 1910," one had said, his mustache quivering with laughter.

"The eye," Jane said, "and the teeth."

"Fish ate his eye, probably," another said, sipping coffee from a Dixie cup.

"Looks like he stole those teeth from the dental office he worked for."

"But the note."

The third cop ran a thick hand through thinning hair. "The note was completely ruined. All the ink had washed off."

"Look, Jane," said the first, "doesn't it seem more likely your brother was hopped up on Vicodin and god knows what else and drowned himself?"

"No," Jane said. She didn't like the way they were so eager to dismiss Winter when they hadn't even known him.

"You got a list of suspects?" the second cop asked. His teeth were stained yellow-brown.

"No," Jane said. The clock on the wall was three minutes too early. The sound of the minute hand ticking made her jaw hurt.

"Aren't you that phony psychic girl," the third cop said, "the one who went on the Cami Hart show?"

"Go home, Jane," the first cop said.

No one believes Jane about anything, but she knows her brother was murdered. Maybe the man on the phone had been the murderer. Maybe he could tell her who killed Winter.

Jane listens to her own heart beat, to the sounds of her uncle rifling through cabinets and pacing between rooms. She waits for the phone to ring again.

Jane's taking calls again the next night. She's been doing this psychic gig for a few years now, and she knows that a lapse in calls will result in immediate termination. Psychic hotlines almost always have a high turnover rate. Jane is considered a "senior consultant" on her paperwork.

The woman on the line wants to speak to her dead cat. Jane, tugging at a hole

in her leggings, can't get her heart into the call. She tries to explain that no, she cannot speak to dead animals, but the caller is persistent. An automated message tells the caller that the free five minutes are up. Would she like to continue talking to Madame Tallulah?

"Well," the woman says, "are you gonna talk to Pancake or what?"

Jane says she will. She could use the extra cash to buy new leggings.

Downstairs, she can hear her uncle rummaging through the cupboards in his sleep, organizing cans and packaged food.

"There was something special about Pancake, wasn't there?" Jane says. She manages to triple the size of the hole in her leggings. She lies back on the futon, bumping her head on the metal arm rest.

"He was very special," the caller says. "Sometimes he would just look at me, you know. Like he knew exactly what I was thinking."

"He had an unusual amount of psychic energy for a cat. I can sense that. Do you believe in reincarnation?"

While the caller describes how, yes, she did sense Pancake had an old soul, was maybe an artist in another life, Jane looks at her window. Someone has written "Hi, Janie" in the condensation. Jane opens the window and pokes her head outside, face slapped with cool wind, but there's no one around. It doesn't matter. She's on the second floor. The writing came from inside.

"Listen," Jane says, interrupting the caller. This is bad for business. The Call Center would frown at this. "Pancake thinks you should buy a new cat. Name it

Waffles or something."

She hangs up.

The phone seems to never stop ringing. Jane stops answering. The only one who calls anymore is the Winter-imposter, trying to scare her.

It's beginning to work.

"Press START" appears all over the attic, in the dust on the TV screen, spelled out on the floor in cereal, written with red marker on the walls. She's running out of logical explanations. Her window and door are blocked up to keep out intruders, and she hasn't been sleeping enough to act as a somnambulist.

Wherever the messages are coming from, they favor her Super Nintendo. It's one of the few trinkets she's collected from Winter's pitiful estate, along with plastic sunglasses and novelty pens. Jane rummages through a milk crate filled with games. At the bottom of the crate is a cartridge with the label peeled off. Someone has written "PLAY ME" in red marker. Jane goes through the crate twice more before deciding on the mystery game. She has no idea what it could be, but touching it makes her fingertips itch.

The game doesn't work, not at first. The screen is a mess of scrambled pixels, monotonous mechanical whirring. She turns off the console, fiddles with the wires in the back and blows into the cartridge, tries again.

The second time, a logo Jane doesn't recognize pops up, followed by radio static. An image forms on the screen, a merging of gaudy colored blocks to create

something resembling a face the color of a bruise, greens and dark purples. The hair is copper and slick, like it's wet. One eyeball is missing, giving way into a black void. The other is green like seaweed, more vibrant than any human eye.

"Hey, Janie," Winter says. "How's it going?"

"Fuck." Jane yanks the plug from the outlet. The ghoul face frowns. There's a sound, like the pop of a blown fuse, and the screen goes blank.

Jane turns off the TV and crawls into bed. She pulls the blanket over her head, just in case. She doesn't want to remember what her brother looked like dead. She had thought she had scrubbed it from her brain, but the image on the Nintendo has brought it back. She could practically hear the coroner asking her to look for distinguishing features while she identified the body--crooked teeth, auburn hair, a tattoo of a whale that spread out along the sternum.

Jane wakes up covered in cereal. She finds entire walls caked in red marker. Her crate of Nintendo games is completely replaced with label-less cartridges, all saying "PLAY ME" in red. Her phone never stops ringing. She stops sleeping entirely.

She worries she's going crazy. Maybe her brain is melting away like old snow. Maybe she has cabin fever.

She stops leaving the attic. She lives off of cold cans of Spaghetti-Os and dry cereal. She logs into the Call Center and speaks to clients, but it's hard for her to pay enough attention to keep the calls going. Jane watches her ranking decrease a little with each call. Callers stop requesting to speak to her. The Call Center is hesitant to

filter calls her way. It only takes a handful of days for her ranking to fall to 239 of 250 of the psychics employed at the Center. She'd been 3 before.

It's the sleep deprivation that eventually breaks her.

Jane sits down in front of the TV at 3 p.m., a full week after the haunting began. The cacophony of spring wafts up from the window--springtime birds chirping endlessly, children singing pop songs, tires kicking up the last dregs of slush. Noise punctuated by the phone--that fucking phone--screeching.

She turns the Nintendo on, and is met once again with the sound of a radio left unattended, the building of pixels to form first the suggestion of a face, and then the features of something long dead. Jane finds herself staring into the black hole where his eye should be. She shifts on her used futon, waiting for the face to speak.

"It's about time," Winter says. His voice sounds sonorous, like he's speaking to her from the bottom of a deep hole. "You think I've been hanging around here for kicks?"

Blocky droplets of water drip from Winter's hair. His empty eye socket is cavernous. The other eye winks occasionally.

"You're dead," Jane says.

"Well, no shit." The screen changes. Winter's avatar is standing on blocks of blue ice. One by one the blocks fall out view, and Winter falls in dark water. The music changes to something fast-paced and urgent. He dies clawing at his own neck, choking up bubbles. YOU ARE DEAD flashes on the screen.

"Classy," Jane says, crossing her arms over her chest. "Why're you here? Why now? Things were just starting to go back to normal."

"You tell me," Winter says, as the words fade to reveal his pixelated face once more. "You're supposed to be an expert."

"You must have unfinished business," Jane says.

"Bingo," Winter says, pointing two fingers at the screen like a gun. "I want you to figure out who the hell murdered me."

"You weren't murdered," Jane says, "the autopsy showed--"

"Don't tell me you buy that bullshit," Winter says. "I taught you better than that."

Jane let's herself sink into the lumpy mattress. "I can't help anyone."

"Bullshit. What kind of attitude is that?" Winter says. "Look, I'm running out of time. I can get you pointed in the right direction, at least."

"That's it? Don't you have a list of suspects or something?"

"No idea," he says. "That's the thing about being a ghost. You can remember everything else about your life with perfect clarity, as long as it's nothing important." The screen becomes cloudy, and Winter blips in and out. "Listen, you need to talk to Ruby. She'll help."

"Are you kidding?" Jane rolls her eyes. Ruby has been Winter's best friend since Jane can remember. "Ruby hates me. She'll never even talk to me."

"She doesn't hate you. She thinks you're a compulsive liar. Everyone in town does." Winter fades to a specter on the screen, more suggestion of light than color. An exclamation point appears above his head, though Jane can barely make it out. "Go through my old stuff, I have some of Ruby's books still. Use them as an in with her."

"Mom gave most of your stuff away."

"Seriously?"

"You know how she gets when things aren't perfect."

"Jane?" Winter's voice begins to fade, too. Jane isn't sure she's hearing it at all. It feels like an impression in her head. "I have to go now. Find the books and talk to Ruby."

"I didn't mean it before," she says, "I don't want you to leave." She reaches toward the screen, her fingers pressing against the cool glass. Winter snorts.

"I'll be back. Try again at 3 a.m. And Jane?" His figure fades to blinding light, and Jane has to shield her eyes from the TV. "Take a shower or something. You seriously look like shit."

And the screen blinks out. Children play jump rope outside her window, reciting nursery rhymes they've learned from school. Cars inch by. The tone deaf paperboy sings along to metal blaring through his headphones. There are 2000 people outside her door, and she feels more alone than she ever has.

Jane can't remember the last time she left the attic, or even talked to someone aside from her uncle or clients. She can't even remember the last time she showered. She twists her fingers through the dirty knots of her hair.

She misses Winter. It seems like everyone else has moved on after his death, but she can't. Often, he'd been her only friend. He understood the fleeting moods of their mother and the monotony of small town life. Most importantly, he'd always believed Jane.

Jane pulls herself together enough to smoke a cigarette. She sits by the

windowsill and blows smoke carefully out onto the street.

She can pinpoint the exact moment her life was ruined: *The Cami Hart Show*.

An episode about psychic kids. Jane and her mother had flown all the way to Toronto to sit on a panel with three other ten-year-olds who had past life experiences or could predict the future. They were kept in a small beige room until it was time to appear on the show. Jane had thought the other kids were weird. They cried and hung to the leg of their mother, or they didn't say anything at all. When it was time, they were ushered onto the stage, which was all shades of blue. Jane and her mother sat on a plush couch that squeaked whenever Jane moved. Her mother had told Cami Hart her entire life story, almost all of it made up. And when it was Jane's turn to talk to the dead relatives of the audience members, she froze up. She sat quietly in her seat and examined the flowers on her new dress.

Cami Hart pushed the microphone in her face and said, "Don't you want to tell everyone about your powers?"

And Jane said, "No. I made that all up."

Everyone in town saw it, of course. It wasn't every day someone made it on anything other than the local news, and Jane was something of a celebrity by the then. They'd thrown money and gifts at her, and she had made up stories about their dead relatives.

When she and her mother returned, they were outcasts. No one came by her mother's for psychic readings. Jane was labeled a liar.

Jane stubs her cigarette out in the window frame and drops the butt onto the grass below. She can't tell anyone about Winter's ghost or his murder.

Jane pops each of the Nintendo cartridges into the console and presses play. The games have all been erased, replaced by Winter's ghost. When he's not haunting the system, a start screen loads. Tinny music begins to play, and the words "Dead Bro" form in round, cartoon letters. Jane presses start.

The main character is a cluster of pixels that resembles Winter. Jane plays through her brother's death over and over again. This 8-bit Winter collects teeth for points. He avoids hooded-figures with scythes. Jane gets very good at this. The same level loops over and over again, a street that looks not unlike the street he grew up on. When she collects enough points, Winter dies. It's different every time she plays. Giant scissors snip off his head. He drowns in a fishbowl. A stray power cord zaps him. The screen turns black. "Restart?" the game asks.

Jane restarts. She collects points faster. She avoids all of the hooded-figures. Nothing changes except the way Winter dies. He's attacked by a pack of werewolves. He's cut in half by a magenta laser beam.

Winter haunts the machine in shifts. He shows up promptly at 3 a.m. and 3 p.m., interrupting Jane's game. It's like a screen saver, something to remind her he's around but without any sort of commitment. He only ever stays for nine minutes, which is nearly long enough for Jane to ask important questions like what it was like to be dead or if he'd met any famous dead people.

He looks different each haunt. Sometimes he looks like he's been dead for

years. Sometimes he's ten years younger than he would be. Sometimes he looks the way he had right before he'd died, bad teeth and sharp cheekbones. He's always missing an eye.

"I wish you'd go away," Jane says, pressing buttons on the controller. Nothing works. "I liked my life before."

"No you didn't," Winter says.

She logs into the Call Center. Not many phone calls trickle through--a punishment for missing her hours the previous week. The callers she get aren't interested in staying on the line for any longer than the free five minutes.

"I only have a minute," they say. "I need to know if my boyfriend is cheating."

Or: "Save the mystic bullshit, I need lotto numbers."

Jane plays solitaire on the floor in between calls. Her shoulders throb from leaning over the cards, trying to make them out in the dark. There are long waits between calls, minutes spanning to hours. She could use this time to contact her mother or Ruby. The house with the books is only a few blocks away. But Jane doesn't know what she'd say, to Ruby or her mother.

When calls do come in, she begins each with a long introduction that eats up time.

"I don't care who you are," one caller says. An old woman who wheezes with every breath. "I want to speak to Miss Chloe like on the commercial."

"Oh, Miss Chloe is out to lunch," Jane says, shuffling her cards. "I'm a very dear friend of hers."

"Lunch?" the old woman says. "It's 2 in the morning."

"It's noon here."

"Where the hell are you people?" The woman works herself into a coughing fit. Jane talks over her.

"The moon," Jane says. "It's always noon in space."

"What?" The woman asks.

"Miss Chloe's private island," she says, laying out her cards. "It's very nice here. Shall I consult the stars?"

No one wants a consultation. Jane tries to figure out how much money she's made for four hours of work. It isn't very much.

The phone rings one last time before she logs out of the Call Center. She's interrupted half-way through her speech.

"What the hell are you doing?" Even on the phone Winter's voice is all echoes.

"Hi," Jane says. "Three o'clock already?"

"You're supposed to be solving a murder," he says.

Jane twists the mint-colored phone cord between her fingers. "I'm not a detective. You have to give me something to work with."

"Why haven't you found the books? Or talked to Ruby?"

"Because she doesn't know anything. How could she?"

Winter's sigh sounds like a death knell, a choking sound no mortal throat could make. "Maybe I'd remember something if you found my eye."

"Do you know where it is?"

"Ruby has a gift for finding things. She'll know where it is."

Jane goes back to playing cards. "I think you chose the wrong person to

haunt. You should've gone to Ruby."

"But I came to you," he says. "Just try talking to her, okay?"

Jane wants him to understand that she *can't*, not when she's afraid to even leave the attic, but the line goes dead.

Under the neon glow of chili pepper porch lights and a flickering sign that reads "Psychic," Jane breaks into her mother's home with a screw-driver and credit card.

Jane's mother's new house is only a block away. She bought it with Winter's life insurance, or so Jane strongly suspects. She would think her mother capable of murder if she were more competent and ever followed through with anything.

Once her fingers are numbed and Jane is on the verge of giving up, the lock pops. She puts her tools into her jacket pocket and enters the house.

The house is dark except for the electric flicker of a TV propped up on milk crates. A talk show filmed before a live studio audience. A woman wearing thick red glasses interviews a man who swears he is the love-slave of Bigfoot's sister. He's visibly sweating. The audience collectively gasps as he describes making love to the creature. They're captivated now, but once the host brings out the monster, likely someone in a patchy costume, they'll turn on him. They'll boo and hiss. They'll laugh. They'll hate him and the sad lie he crafted for fifteen minutes on the TV and a free trip to the city.

Jane's mother is asleep in a recliner. Jane moves close to check her breathing,

hovering only a few inches from her face. She snores softly. She smells like gin.

Jane's mother doesn't have a bookshelf. She only has one room, and there are no boxes in it marked "WINTER" on the side in marker. Jane feels lost in this new house. She recognizes haunted porcelain dolls purchased from eBay and a broken crystal ball, a toy Ouija board and chunks of quartz, all the baubles of a phony psychic. The only books she can find are a dream dictionary and a stack of her mother's unsold manuscripts.

She begins to tear the house apart. She finds dead mice and white bread and potion bottles, but nothing that belongs to her brother. It isn't until she begins pulling up loose floorboards that she finds Winter's things. A broken electric toothbrush. A half-melted candle. Stained flannel shirts. Jars of hair gel. Winter's wallet, water-logged and ruined.

Jane pulls everything out of the wallet, a few credit cards, expired coupons for eye examinations and pizzas, crumbled dollar bills. A lock of faded blue hair, sold to him as once belonging to David Bowie. The driver's license remains intact, a newly 30 Winter smiling at the camera. Years before he would drown in the lake. Hair: BRO Eyes: GRN Height: 5'10". Winter reduced. Still, Jane likes looking at this Winter much more than the rendered image from her Nintendo. She pockets the ID.

Jane finds the books last. There's an entire library lodged underneath the floorboards. Books about sculpting and teeth. Murder mysteries and real crime books. Ruby's name is written neatly in pencil on the front page of dog-eared book about Midwestern serial killers.

"What're you doing?" Jane's mother says. She stands up slowly, looking sleep

tousled, her beehive collapsed one side..

Jane stands up, clutching the book close to her chest. "I didn't think you'd wake up."

"Ah, Jesus, you almost gave me a heart attack," her mother says.. "Do you want a sandwich or something?"

"No," Jane says.

"I'll make you a sandwich," she says, shuffling around the books and the floorboards. She doesn't seem to notice.

The lights flicker in the kitchen. Jane's mother shoves aside a stack of dirty dishes and pulls sandwich parts from the fridge. "You should of called," Jane's mother says, scraping butter along two pieces of bleached bread. "I haven't heard from you since your brother went and killed himself."

"I've been busy," Jane says. She finds a place among the dirty dishes on the counter, legs dangling a few inches above the linoleum floor.

She places pink bologna and American cheese on one slice of bread, butter side up. "You could come visit sometime, you know. You live close enough."

She wraps the sandwich up in a paper towel and drops it next to Jane. The first bite tastes exactly the way she remembers, all chemicals and refined sugar. Like plastic lunchboxes and school cafeterias. Jane's sure the only kind of sandwich her mother knows how to make is butter and bologna.

"What would you do if you were being haunted?" Jane asks.

"I'm haunted all the time," her mother says. She takes a cigarette out of the pocket of her bathrobe and lights it over the stove.

"What if it was someone you knew?"

"You got a ghost problem?" she asks. "You wanna get rid of it?"

"I don't know," Jane says. "Probably not."

"Would've been real nice if you started seeing ghosts when you were still a kid," her mother says. "No one takes me seriously any more. I gotta waitress on the side just to keep the lights on."

Jane eats the sandwich, barely chewing before swallowing.

"One of these days I'm gonna sell all that junk and move away," her mother says, blowing smoke toward the ceiling. Her face is wrinkled, and her teeth have darkened to brown near the gummy base. She expels a phlegmy cough into a bandana stuffed in her robe. Had she always been this rough around the edges? Jane can't remember.

"I've got dreams too, you know," her mother says. "I'm gonna buy a ticket for a cruise and I'm gonna tell fortunes and talk to drowned sailors and tell them exactly where the Titanic is. I'm gonna be famous, just you watch."

Jane leaves after a stiff hug and a half-hearted promise to visit more. She stands on the porch and watches the sun rise in slow motion, the guilt or the sandwich sitting at the pit of her stomach like a hardened plastic. She isn't sure which. In the blooming half-light she remembers Winter's hand in hers as they walked to school, only children then. Jane would sing the songs she'd heard on the radio and Winter would whistle along.

Jane clutches the book to her chest and she makes her way back to the attic.

Ruby isn't listed in the phone book, but she's worked for the same funeral home since Jane can remember. Jane walks over during the day, drinking coffee from a thermos and wearing dark sunglasses. She can't remember the last time she's been out this early. There are cars and children and people. God, so many people. Jane's head hurts from the noise alone.

The Block Brothers Funeral Home is a grey Victorian. The big sign in Comic Sans stuck to the front of the building feels inappropriate. There shrubs are shaped like toy poodles balancing on their back legs. Pink fliers advertising a funeral for Mrs. Muriel Johnson in the windows.

A bell rings when Jane opens the door. Everything smells like old soup. A man in a suit, one of the Block brothers she guesses, greets her with a sharp smile and handshake.

"Are you here for the Johnson funeral at 4?" he asks, pumping Jane's arm up and down until the bones feel like jell-o.

"I'm here for Ruby," Jane says. "She works here, right?"

"She'll be taking her lunch soon," he says, still smiling big. "She's down the stairs."

Jane follows his pointed arm to a steep set of narrow stairs. The room below is lit in fluorescent light. It smells medical, antiseptic. Ruby leans over a coffin on a gurney, humming to herself. Her pixie cut is blue-black and Jane catches the glint of a gold ring pierced through her septum. She wears bulky headphones. Jane tries to make enough noise to alert Ruby to her presence, but nothing seems to work. Eventually she places her fingers on Ruby's shoulder. The other girl jumps up,

stabbing a make-up brush in Jane's direction.

"Oh man," she says, peeling away her headphones. "I thought you were a fucking zombie or something."

Jane cranes her neck to see over Ruby's head. There's definitely a body in the coffin, some old woman Jane doesn't recognize. Her hair is colorless and rolled up into foam curlers, dabs of different colored foundations are painted onto her chin.

"Is that Mrs. Johnson?" Jane asks.

"Yeah," Ruby says. "Are you here for--" She stops herself, giving Jane a once over, lingering on her ratty t-shirt and thin coat. "Oh. Jane. I didn't even recognize you. I haven't seen you since the funeral."

"Hi," Jane says, examining her hands.

"You here to buy a tombstone or something?" Ruby asks.

Jane pulls the book out of a cloth satchel, thrusting it toward Ruby. "This is yours, right?"

Ruby takes the book and laughs, flipping open the cover, running her fingers over the crumpled pages. "I'll be damned. Where the hell did you find this?"

"Winter had it."

"Oh."

Mrs. Johnson lets out a lengthy moan. If she were on the phone with a client, Jane could think of something to fill the budding silence. She would console the grieving caller, or ask them about the deceased. But she doesn't know how to approach their mutual loss.

"They do that sometimes," Ruby says, shrugging to the body. "I was just going

to make some coffee. Want some?"

Jane sits at the card table next to Mrs. Johnson's body. Ruby brushes aside tubes of concealer and a set of paintbrushes, pulls out mugs and a coffee pot from a counter piled with wigs and sequined pant suits.

Jane wills herself to see another ghost--Mrs. Johnson's ghost--if only to prove to herself she can. She closes her eyes and tries opening her mind, counting backward, breathing steady.

"What're you doing?" Ruby asks.

"Communicating with her spirit," Jane lies. Mrs. Johnson only proves that Winter's ghost is an anomaly. Jane isn't any more psychic than she's ever been.

Ruby pours the coffee into two mugs. Jane's mug is all canary yellow with a smiley face printed on one side. She turns the face away from her.

"Nice of you to bring that book," Ruby says. She sips from her mug. "It's still so weird that he's dead."

The coffee is bitter and burns her tongue. She doesn't know how to bring up Winter's ghost or the missing eyeball. She tries to find an opening--*yeah, it was rough until he came back*--but the moment passes. Mrs. Johnson groans again. A clock ticks on a wall.

If she can distract Ruby, she can write "BOO" in the coffee rings on the table and say a ghost did it.

If she can distract Ruby, she can run back upstairs and pretend none of this ever happened.

"Still communicating with Mrs. Johnson?" Ruby asks. She stirs her coffee with

the handle of a make-up brush.

"You know a lot about murders?" Jane asks, finally.

Ruby shrugs. "As much as anyone who's watched a few episodes of *CSI*."

"I think Winter was murdered," Jane says. She waits for Ruby to laugh or sneer.

"What makes you think that?" Ruby asks. Their eyes meet for the first time. Jane looks back at the table, makes designs in the coffee rings.

"His eye was missing when they found the body," she says, "and his pockets were filled with teeth."

"Can I tell you something?" Ruby asks, and she doesn't wait for Jane to confirm. "I got a hold of the coroner's report when he died. He drowned. There was no sign of a struggle or anything that would suggest someone else was involved."

"But you're his best friend," Jane says, "you have to know he wouldn't just go and kill himself."

"Listen," Ruby stops stirring her coffee and sits back in her chair. "I don't think you're a bad person for the whole Cami Hart fiasco. Kids say dumb things. But you're too old to keep making stories up for attention, right?"

"I just need you to help me find his eye," Jane says. Her hands are shaking.

Ruby shakes her head. "No one's gonna find that eye. A fish probably ate it." She stands up and stretches. "I've got to get Mrs. Johnson ready."

Jane doesn't get up. "What'm I supposed to do?"

"Maybe go on a vacation," Ruby says, "you look like you need it." She placed a hand on Jane's arm, not unkindly.

Jane doesn't move. "What if I told you he isn't gone? What if I could show you?"

Ruby says, "Mr. Block'll help you find your way out." She goes back to painting Mrs. Johnson's face, leaving Jane alone at the table.

Winter appears in the game as a child that night. He is all big, crooked teeth and watery eyes. He is maybe nine.

"What're you supposed to be?" Jane asks.

"I don't have a body," Winter says. "I can look like Pamela Anderson if I want."

"I don't want to talk to you as a kid," Jane says. "It's creepy."

"Dead kids are creepy," Winter agrees. "What'd Ruby say?"

"She doesn't think you were murdered," Jane says. "She called me a liar."

"Well," Winter says, "we knew this would happen."

Jane throws her spoon at the screen, splashing milk on the taupe carpet.

"Why the hell are you even here? To torture me?"

"Not everything's about you, Janie," he says. "You'll just have to try again."

"No."

"You give up too easy," he says. "Remember when you wanted to be in a band? You bought a synthesizer and everything, but you couldn't figure out how to play it right away and now you're using it as a table." On the other side of the room, the synthesizer makes a low electronic bellow. "That's why your life is so shitty."

"You don't get to tell me about my life when you're dead."

"When you're dead," he says, "you can do whatever you want."

"Maybe Ruby was the one who killed you," Jane says. "Maybe it was me."

Winter laughs. "Nice one." The picture of Winter blinks in and out. "Once you figure out who killed me, I'll leave you alone forever."

Jane isn't sure she wants her brother to stop haunting her, but she wants things to go back to normal. She wants to sit on the roof and smoke cigarettes and talk about their mother. She wants to be small, walking to school, Winter's mittened hand in hers.

A ghost brother is worse than a dead brother, she decides.

Jane writes a list of possible suspects. It's not a very good list. She writes the name of everyone she's ever met. It's hard to narrow it down. Her mother is on it twice. She writes her own name once, but then crosses it out.

It's the only thing she's sure of.

When she wakes up in the evening, the names are scratched out.

"TRY HARDER" is written in red ink.

Jane goes back to work. She calls into the Call Center. Her phone calls average two and a half minutes.

"Is this your first time?" one caller asks, midst a reading. Jane explains that, no, she has done this for years. "New script, maybe?"

"Look, man, I'm giving you the god damn reading," she says. "Will you just let

me do my job?"

He hangs up. Jane does not make a commission.

Jane logs out of the Call Center and lies on her bed. She is wide awake, staring at the curves and dips in the plaster of the ceiling.

She calls Ruby. Her desperation feels like a grainy pill in her throat. She doesn't even know what she will say.

"Look," Ruby says, when she picks up the phone. "It was kind of cute when you came to visit, but I don't have time for this."

"Winter's ghost is haunting me," Jane says, twirling the cord between her fingers. She tries to sound casual, like this is normal. "He wants me to find his eye. He thinks you know where it is."

"Jesus," Ruby says. "I get you're in mourning or whatever, but this is getting fucked up."

"Don't you believe in ghosts?"

"Yes," she says, "but you can't expect me to believe you're being haunted by him."

"Why not?"

"Because," Ruby says, careful to announce slowly, "he wouldn't come to you of all people."

Jane slides her tongue along her teeth, lingering in the uneven groove of a molar chipped in childhood. Ruby sounds more hurt than malicious. It hasn't occurred to Jane before that Ruby might be jealous.

Jane clears her throat. "Do you want to hang out sometime?"

"What?"

"Get coffee or something," Jane says. "I'll pay."

"I don't know."

"Is that a yes?"

"It's a maybe. I'm hanging up now. And Jane?"

"Yeah?"

"Try to get it together, okay?"

The man from the Call Center sounds like he's been gargling bourbon and glass. He's impatient with Jane on the phone. He doesn't like her pauses, or the way she avoids his questions. He reads a long list of numbers from the last week, all pitiful single digits.

Jane holds the mint-colored rotary phone in one hand, and a pen from the Block Brother's Funeral Home in the other. It's neon yellow.

"Well," she says, "my brother died."

"Nice try," the man says. "I have your file right here. You took two weeks off in January because your brother died. You have a second brother?"

"No," Jane admits.

"Look, normally we do this by letter, but you've been with the company too long," he says. "We wanted to see if you had a valid excuse. But these numbers are shit, and you can't even put together a convincing lie." He clears his throat. "We're going to have to terminate your position with the company."

Jane chews on the tip of the pen. "But I'm a *senior* consultant. Don't I get a second chance?"

"You want my advice?"

"Not really."

"You should find a new job," he says. "We got this other company, an erotic chat line. I could--"

Jane hangs up. She should be more upset about this. This job was her only source of income, and it isn't like psychic gigs are easy to find. She feels relieved more than anything. One less thing to worry about. Now she can really concentrate on finding the eye and solving the murder.

Jane watches detective movies and thrillers, tries to figure out how the pros do it. She watches *Seven* and *Clue* and *Chinatown*. She tapes post it notes onto a cardboard box to try and recreate Winter's last day. She makes a list of everything she knows, that Winter went to work that day and made dentures from plaster molds. He left at 5, the usual time, but cancelled dinner with their mother. He told her he had a headache. He fell into the lake around 10 p.m., when the sky was filled with burning stars, with teeth in his pocket and a letter pinned to his lapel. A fisherman found him.

She can't fill in the gaps. No one had seen him between work and his falling into the ice.

Not for the first time, Jane feels like Winter came to the wrong person. She doesn't know how to solve a murder. She can't think of a single person who might want to kill Winter. For all she knows it might have been a passing drifter. Or maybe

he hadn't been murdered at all.

Did ghosts lie? Jane pulls the sticky notes off the box and scribbles the question with a pen. She sticks it on the TV screen, certain she'll remember to ask someone.

The phone rings. Jane, palms sweaty from playing the Nintendo for hours, picks up the receiver like it might bite her. She expects to be fired from her job. She expects to get yelled at by dead Winter. Instead, it's Ruby, chewing something crunchy like cereal while she speaks.

"I can't believe I'm saying this," she says, "but I want to meet."

"No way. What changed your mind?"

"You were right," she says, "Winter wouldn't have killed himself. He never took life seriously enough to kill himself."

"Oh." Jane chews on her lip.

"And I had a dream," Ruby says, "except I don't think I was asleep. I think it was Winter asking me to find his eye."

"Shit."

"This doesn't mean I don't think this is all some stunt," she says, her mouth full, "but it's my job to respect the wishes of the dead."

They agree to meet at the diner the next day. Jane wants to invite Ruby up to the attic, to *show* her Winter's ghost, but she's sure it wouldn't work. Ruby would think it was some computer simulation, or Winter would just not show.

Jane eats cold Spaghetti-Os from a can. On the TV, Winter is now a skeleton with thin skin like parchment pulled over it. His hair looks long and unruly. It looks like someone sucked all his guts out with a straw. Little white things fall out of his eye socket, and Jane thinks it's supposed to be maggots. It's all cheap thrills, all B-horror film.

"Once you find the eye," Winter says, "you'll have to come find me."

"Can't you just show up here?" Jane says.

"Are you kidding? Do you have any idea how much energy it takes just to show up on the TV?" His remaining eye is wide and luminous. like a cat's eye, reflecting light back at Jane. "We'll have to meet somewhere in between worlds."

"Like a cemetery?"

"You remember the bowling alley by the Holiday Inn?" he asks.

Jane pauses, spoon in hand. "The one that closed down a million years ago?"

"Bingo."

Jane wonders if Winter's skeleton is grinning. He sounds amused, or like he's trying to sound amused. She wonders if this might all be a game. Something to keep his ghost from getting bored.

"Anyway, once a month it opens as a portal to the underworld," he says.

"You're fucking with me."

"I'm dead serious," he says, and then laughs, his grainy jawbone unhinging.

"You get it? Because I'm dead."

"But why the bowling alley? Why here?"

"They're all over," he says. "They crop up wherever there's been a lot of energy. When you're dead, everything's energy."

Jane considers her own energy, which she's sure is incredibly low. She can't imagine producing enough to come back as an apparition or orb of light. When she dies, she thinks she'll fade away until there isn't anything left.

Jane has five false starts before she is brave enough to cross the two blocks to the diner. She has her hair wrapped in a black headscarf and wears dark sunglasses. She wants to blend in, look invisible. Everyone knows who she is right away. Children point at her. Parents pull their kids close and say, "See what'll happen if you drop out of school?"

Jane wants to run back. She wants to scream that she totally did graduate from high school. Instead she walks a little faster, practically knocks an old lady over making her way into the diner. Ruby's already sitting in a booth, a plate of pancakes half-demolished.

"You're late," Ruby says, not looking up. She's filling in a crossword puzzle.

She slides in the scummy vinyl seat across from her. The waitress walks past them without so much as looking at Jane.

"What're you going to do if we do find a killer?" Ruby asks, cutting her remaining pancakes into perfect triangles. "The police here won't believe you."

"No one believes me," Jane says. She takes off her sunglasses. "I could be a vigilante."

"It won't bring Winter back," Ruby says.

"He'll stop haunting me, though," Jane says.

"Ghosts never really go away," she says. "You should know that. It's your job, isn't it?"

The waitress passes the table by again. Jane would kill for coffee or a cigarette. She grinds her teeth instead. She doesn't know why Ruby would expect her to know anything. Her job is to do cold-readings of desperate people calling from all over the country. She can pick up the sort of things they want to hear from their tone of voice and the way they form their syntax. She doesn't know a single thing about mysticism that's real.

"What makes you such an expert?" Jane asks.

Ruby lowers her voice to a conspirator's whisper. "I made a bad deal when I was a kid, okay? So now I run errands for the dead. It's not something I'm particularly proud of."

Jane takes that as a cue not to ask any more questions. "Fine. But I thought you were going to help me."

"I just want to be clear," she says, "this isn't going to solve any of your problems. It might make things worse."

"I don't care." Jane sighs and places her head in her hands. "I just want this all to be over."

"Why don't you leave?"

Jane lets her hands fall to the table. "And go where?"

"Anywhere," Ruby says. "I don't understand why you stay here. You don't

have any friends. Everyone thinks you're a liar."

"Because Winter was here," Jane says. She doesn't tell Ruby it's because the world terrifies her, or that it's the only thing she's ever known. Ruby raises her eyebrows, like she knows all of that, anyway.

"If I were you I would go," she says. "I'd start over and forget about Winter's killer and this whole sorry place."

Jane shakes her head. "Just tell me about his eye. Doesn't it seem most likely that the killer took it?"

"Maybe," Ruby says. "But if it's anywhere we can find, it'll be in the arcade."

Jane almost laughs. "There hasn't been an arcade here since..."

Ruby holds up her hand. "The junkyard arcade. Don't tell me you haven't heard of it."

Jane *has* heard of the arcade in the junkyard. Not a real arcade, but rather the broken down machines dumped by pizza parlors and movie theaters.

"I still don't get it," Jane says. "Why would it be there?"

"When people around here and no one ever finds the body, they show up in the game. Same thing goes for missing body parts. It all gets sucked in together," she says, chewing. "I don't know why. Electromagnetic fields or something."

"Everything's about energy when you're dead," Jane says, repeating Winter's words. "What'll I have to give it for the eye?"

"However much a game of *Street Fighter* costs."

The junkyard's in between towns, located on a lonesome stretch of county road.

It's too far away to walk, so Ruby agrees to drive. Her two-door Concord is more rust than blue paint now, and the radio only picks up AM stations. Ruby keeps it on anyway, switching between static and religious sermons while they drive.

"Silence makes me uncomfortable," she says, twisting the metal knobs.

Jane is quiet most of the ride, watching the road unwind and give way to dirt and gravel. How long had it been since Winter had sat in her seat, talking to Ruby about dental molds and David Bowie and god knows what else? Jane pulls a cigarette from her pocket.

"I only ever let Winter smoke in here," Ruby says.

Jane puts the cigarette back for later. Ruby doesn't have a ghost, only memory to rely on. Jane wouldn't want to do anything to disturb that.

The junkyard is looming piles of scrap metal, old technology mixed in with hubcaps and tin cans. There's no gate or barking dogs, only the occasional "KEEP OUT" sign to dissuade intruders. Their message disappears when Ruby turns off her headlights, and it's easy to pretend they aren't trespassing. The stars are bright in the sky, and Jane tries to pick out constellations she knows while Ruby slides batteries into a bulky flashlight. She thinks she can see Orion's Belt. Ruby flashes the light in her eyes, making her vision fuzzy.

"This way," she says.

They follow a path through the junk. There are bisected buses and rusting cars, bicycle parts and computer towers. The walls of junk are so high, Jane forgets

she's outside. She feels like she's entered some labyrinth.

The broken game machines are clustered toward the heart of the junkyard. Ruby flashes her light on them. A decade of pizza parlors and movie theaters dumping their broken machines with all the variety of a functioning arcade: skee-ball, pinball, claw machines, and game cabinets.

"These things are probably worth some money," Ruby says.

Jane can't imagine they are. The machines that remain are shells and nothing more. Most of them have been gutted of lingering quarters and valuable wiring. Their screens are cracked, and the bodies are rusted through. Every single one has been stripped of its faded paint, and Jane can only guess which games they once advertised. Maybe *Bubble Bobble* or *Virtua Fighter*.

"Which one should I play?" Jane asks. She pulls two quarters from her pocket, and looks for the least damaged of the consoles.

"I don't think it matters," Ruby says. She examines the oxidized mouth of a cabinet without a screen, like she's examining teeth. "They're all haunted."

She slips the coins into the slot of the least ravaged of the machines. If Ruby believes that Jane's Super Nintendo is haunted, it seems only fair to try to believe in this. But wouldn't a ghost in charge of missing things choose a more traditional venue? A cemetery or Ouija board or abandoned asylum. Anything but an arcade graveyard in the middle of nowhere.

She's ready to fish the quarters out of the change slot when the screen begins to flash. The lights are magnificently vivid and move at a seizure-inducing rate. It's nearly blinding. Jane presses the "START" button, but nothing happens.

"Let it know why you're here," Ruby says.

"My name's Jane," she says. She uses the red joystick like a microphone, putting her mouth close to the cool metal. "My brother Winter died in the lake a few months ago, and I need to find his eyeball. Please."

The machine makes a sound like a hundred voices talking all at once. One voice booms above the others. "We can get you the eye, girl, but what can you offer us?"

Jane looks to Ruby, who only shrugs. They weren't prepared for this. "More quarters?"

"We do not desire mortal money," the ghost says. "We desire a body."

"I don't really carry spare bodies with me," she says. "Are you sure you don't want my soul or something?"

The ghost seems to consider this. A chorus of the other voices, now easier to distinguish, began chirping "Flesh! Flesh! Flesh!" over and over. Jane recoils from the machine.

"You know what? Keep the eye," she says.

"Wait," the first, loudest voice cuts through the others. "What if we made a wager? If you beat us in the game, you can have the eyeball. If not, we get your body."

"Not the whole thing," Jane says, "Maybe just part of it. Like my liver. I don't think I *need* my liver."

"The whole thing." The ghost's voice raises to screeching levels.

"Fine," Jane says, gritting her teeth. She hopes the game is something she's

good at. A platformer or scrolling game. *Pac-Man*, maybe. She turns to Ruby.

“Thanks for warning me.”

“You’ll be fine,” Ruby says. “Just, you know, don’t fuck it up.”

The screen changes and A NEW CHALLENGER APEARS scrolls in red text. A fighting game. Jane feels her heart sink to somewhere around her lower intestine. She has never been good at fighting games. She never moves fast enough to mash buttons and she can never memorize the right combos. There’s no way she can win.

Two avatars move up and down in front of an eerily similar junkyard. At the top of the screen are two health bars in yellow, one that reads JANE and the other BOSS. The Boss is a turquoise ball of ectoplasmic goop dripping all over the screen. There are arms and legs and faces sticking out, all looking like they’re trying to escape. Will she become a part of the goop if she loses? Jane grips the joystick with a shaking hand.

“Shit,” Ruby says over her shoulder.

Jane loses Round One so quickly she doesn’t even realize what’s happening. The joystick is rusted at the base, and some of the buttons don’t work at all. The Boss breathes blue fire. It punches with sixteen arms. Jane’s avatar falls before even getting the first hit in.

“Fuck,” Jane says, pounding the console with her fists.

“Try getting really angry,” Ruby says. Her fingers graze the curve of Jane’s shoulder, and then retreat back to her side. “It always helps me play.”

Jane *is* angry. She never wanted to do any of this. She liked her life just fine before Winter began showing up on her TV screen. When Winter was alive, and she

hadn't felt so alone. Now, everything is a mess. She might get sucked into ghost goop. And it's Winter's fault, not for dying, but for leaving without preparing her for life without him. He didn't teach her how to beat fighting games, or how to handle their mother. He never told her how to silence the voice in her head that insisted she should've drowned in the lake instead. He left, and she doesn't know a single god damn thing that matters.

When the next round begins, Jane smashes the buttons with a ferocity she didn't think herself capable of. She discovers a combo—A-B-left-B-X sends purple light from her avatar's chest, which knocks out half of the Boss' life points. She does two of these and wins the round. Ruby screams in her ear. Jane doesn't get too excited. One round doesn't mean anything.

The third round begins. Jane tries the move again, but the Boss has caught on. It evades her attack, and breaks her combo, kicking her avatar with all six of its legs. Her health bar is depleting. She tries to smash more buttons, but nothing is effective. She's losing.

"I have a crazy idea," Ruby says.

"I'm desperate," Jane says, blocking as many attacks as she can. The timer is running low. Even if she manages to keep herself in the game, she'll lose by default.

"You have to stop mashing buttons," she says, "and try doing Ryu's special combo from *Street Fighter II*."

Jane almost laughs. Time is running out. "What good is that going to do? This isn't *Street Fighter*."

"Look, it might not work, but you need to try something different," she says.

“Do a quarter-circle forward and then punch really fast so it can’t break your combo.”

There isn’t anything else to try. Time is running out, and she’d rather go down fighting. She moves the joystick a quarter forward and presses the button she hopes is punch as quickly as she can. Jane’s avatar radiates purple energy. Purple pixels rain down on the screen. The Boss’ health bar is a sliver, and the game blinks FINISH IT.

“You’ll never solve the murder,” the Boss says, just as Jane delivers the final death blow. She hits all the buttons at once, a move that leaves her palm red and stinging.

The screen explodes into sparks. Victory music plays. Ruby punches at the sky. Something plunks into the coin return slot. Jane reaches into the slot and feels something slimy. A dead fish. It smells like it’s been out of the water for a week, and the skin sloughs off between her fingers. She retches, but notices something glimmering between the exposed ribs. An eyeball, crystallized. She holds it up to Ruby’s flashlight. She’s certain it’s Winter’s, even though the green is now a glimmering emerald. His eyeball transformed to something precious.

“Gross,” Ruby says. She pokes the hard shell of it with a finger. “I can’t believe you won.”

Jane can’t either. Her heart is still racing in her chest. She feels better than she has in a long time. “Should we celebrate?”

“Pizza and beer,” Ruby says. “The pizza parlor has a *Street Fighter* game, still. I can show you how to do all the special attacks.”

Jane pauses. "I don't know. I don't really feel like being in public."

"Can I be honest?" Ruby asks, "No one thinks you're nearly as weird as you think they do."

Jane shrugs. "Fine. Fuck it. Let's go."

Jane stuffs Winter's eye into her coat pocket, among lint and old receipts. She thinks she should put it somewhere safer, but she's feeling invincible. For once in her life, nothing can touch her.

Jane invites Ruby back to her place after pizza, when she's a little drunk on cheap beer. Ruby hesitates.

"I don't want to see Winter's ghost," she says, chewing on pizza crust. "Not really, anyway."

"We don't even have to go in," Jane suggests. "We can sit on the roof or something."

Jane finds a ladder in the garage, and they climb onto the flattest part of the roof. The sky is mostly clear, and the stars are dizzyingly bright. She brings beers from the fridge.

"It's weird being here without him," Ruby says, taking the glass bottle Jane offers her. "Sometimes I forget. I expect him to stop by with coffee during work, or I start dialing his number when something weird happens."

Jane can hear moths beat themselves to death against the porch light below. "I wish it had been me."

"Don't say that," Ruby snaps. She pops off the top of her beer and takes a long drink. "Fuck, Jane, you don't have to be so miserable all the time."

"Easy for you to say."

Ruby wipes beer foam from her lips, smearing her lipstick just enough to feather outside the lines of her lips. "So what's next?"

"I got to get him the eye," Jane says. She reaches into her pocket. The eyeball is still there, cold and smooth as a pearl. "I guess the old bowling alley is a portal to the underworld on Saturdays or something. But you already knew that." Jane takes a drink, the lip of the bottle clinking against her teeth. "You never told me how you got mixed up with the dead."

Ruby tilts her head to the sky. She looks like she might howl. "My mom died in a car crash when I was pretty young. I didn't take it well." She finishes her beer and throws the empty bottle down onto the street. The glass explodes when it hits the sidewalk. "She started haunting the phonograph at my grandma's house. I thought I could get her back if I ran errands for her. So one night, I left Gram's house and met up with Mom's spirit at some dumpy amusement park, and she's wearing some weird mask. But it's my mom, and I have a great time. We eat cotton candy and go on rides. Everything's hunky dory. Except, I don't know any of the rules about spirits, and I go with her into this funhouse. She takes off her mask and shows me her face. You can't look at their faces, not directly. It's like that myth, about the guy with the ukulele or whatever."

"Orpheus," Jane says.

"Right, whatever." Ruby smiles, in a sad way. "You can never really leave the

underworld after that. So now I see ghosts everywhere and run their final errands. I take care of them and it sucks. Not that I can blame Mom. She wasn't herself, just an imprint. The only thing she felt was lonely, maybe a little scared."

Jane stares at her hands. "Is this the part where you try to talk me out of helping Winter?"

"I wish I could," Ruby says. "It's not your job to take care of him anymore, you know."

"I've never really done anything for him before," she says, staring at the amber bottle. "This is my only chance."

Ruby smiles. Her teeth are small and even. "You know, you're not as bad as everyone says."

"Thanks, I guess."

"We'll go to the bowling alley Saturday," Ruby says. "You can give him the eye. Solve the murder. Whatever. Just do yourself a favor and get the hell out of here afterward."

"Maybe if you came with," Jane says, half-joking. "We could go to Toronto or something."

"There're way more dead people in the city," Ruby groans. "I'd end up hanging myself or something."

The last time Jane went to the bowling alley, she was ten. Her girl scout troop was hosting a father-daughter bowl event. When their father never showed, Winter

taught her how to bowl. He used his lunch money to buy them each a slice of greasy pizza and a round of *Frogger*. The bowling alley shut down not long after that, except for on weekends, when they hosted private parties.

The neon BOWL sign spills ominous red light onto the dashboard of Ruby's car. A preacher on the radio rattles on about the end of the world. Pressed against the leather seat, Jane feels unshakably doomed. She will enter the underworld through a bowling alley. She feels like she might not return.

"What if I eat some of the food?" she asks. "Or don't have enough for the shoe rental?"

"You counted your change like eight times," Ruby says. "And no one's going to make you eat the food or look at their face. But if you *do* you're going to get stuck between worlds. And it sucks, let me tell you."

Jane sinks further into her seat. "Can't you come with me?"

"No way," Ruby says. "Too many dead people. Besides, this is something you need to do by yourself." She turns the radio off and stares straight ahead. "I loved Winter a lot, you know. But I've already accepted he's gone. I think that's probably why you're involved with this now instead of me."

"I don't want to see him," Jane says. "Not here. Not like this. It's easier when he's on a screen. Like it's all a game."

"Well, whatever happens, just remember whatever's in there is just a memory, just a piece of him that got stuck here. He's still dead." She turns the radio back on. "He's always going to be dead." Jane reaches across the car and grabs Ruby's hand. It's the first time she's been willing to touch someone in a long time.

Ruby hesitates and then smiles. "Good luck, kiddo."

The parking lot is all upturned gravel and tall weeds. Jane feels like she might puke as she makes her way to the front door. She rehearses her plan in her head—she'll give Winter the eye, and then he'll remember who killed him. She'll confront the murderer or give him to the police. And then it'll be over, and she'll move on with her life. She repeats this plan to herself as she pushes through the glass doors. Inside, candy-colored lights in blues and pinks and purples stream across the alley. Everything smells like rubber and popcorn and cheap booze.

"Fifty cent shoe rental," a man at the counter says. He's wearing a pig mask and an orange bowling shirt. From the corner of her eye, his out-stretched hand looks like a claw, but when she turns around his hand is pink and stubby and human. She exchanges two quarters for red and white bowling shoes, and sits on a plastic seat to slip them on. The jukebox is playing David Bowie. She hums along while she ties her shoes.

"You know, David Bowie used to think witches wanted to steal his sperm," someone says. "He lit black candles to keep them out of his head."

Jane swivels around in her seat. The man standing behind her is unmistakably Winter. He's wearing ripped jeans and an old flannel and a plastic fox mask. His hair is wavy and damp. He is missing an eye, and the empty space is like staring into a void. The darkness goes on forever, and Jane wonders if ghosts have skulls or brains made of ectoplasm, or if they are just shapes.

"What did they want his junk for?" Jane asks, unable to blink.

"He thought they'd sacrifice his babies to Satan," Winter says. "I got us a

lane.”

Jane pulls the eye from out of his pocket. She holds her closed hand out to him. “Don’t you want this?”

“We have time for that later,” he says. “Come on.”

Their lane is furthest from the exit. The other lanes are occupied by masked people in bowling shirts. Some of them are visibly maimed, and Jane tries to guess how they died. It’s hard to tell when she can’t see their faces.

Winter puts their names up on the scoreboard. Janie and Win. He tells her to choose a ball from the rack, but they all feel too heavy or too light. She settles on a lime green ball for its color, but it’s too heavy and she can’t get it to roll down the lane with enough speed to hit anything. She gets gutter ball after gutter ball. Winter is all strikes.

“Just like when we were kids,” he says, laughing. She does feel like she’s twelve. At the end of the first game, Winter has scored a nearly perfect score and Jane has a lousy 35. Winter buys fries from the counter and places them on the table.

“You just have to practice,” he says. He doesn’t eat anything. Jane eyes the fries warily.

“Are you trying to keep me here?”

“You don’t have to stay,” he says. “It’s pretty lonely, though. Being dead is so depressing. Everyone here takes me too seriously.”

“I don’t want to stay.”

“Why not? It’s not like you have anything going on in life.”

When she doesn’t say anything he sits across from her on a plastic chair. “You

don't have to do anything you don't want to, I guess."

She puts his eyeball on the sticky table. He laughs when he sees it, but she can hear how hollow the sound is. All mimicry, an attempt to resemble his living self, who never took anything seriously. He snatches the eyeball up and holds it up to examine in the cyber lights.

"I knew you'd find it," he says. He wipes the eye off on the bottom of his shirt and pops it into his empty eye-socket. It rolls around in his head, until the pupil is fixed on Jane.

"Do you remember now?" Jane asks.

"No," he says, "but I can see."

Jane wasn't sure why she'd ever expected anything else. Winter's ghost wasn't interested in becoming whole or finding his killer. He wanted to live. He wanted to keep his memory from fading by staying with Jane. She didn't know why she hadn't seen it before.

"I don't think I can help you anymore," she says. "I'm never going to solve this murder."

"Typical fucking Janie," he says. There's hostility in his voice, but it's feigned too. "You've never followed through with a single thing in your life."

"I'm going to leave town," she says. "Go somewhere with Ruby, I think. Maybe a little city, just for a while. I can waitress and do tarot for cash."

He stares at her with blank eyes. His calcified eye shimmers. "You can't leave."

"I have to."

"I didn't want to die," he says.

"I know."

"It isn't fair," Winter says.

"Nothing ever is," she says. "Seeya around, Winter."

She doesn't look back as she leaves. The warm air outside hits her face, and she feels unburdened for the first time in forever. Ruby is lying on the hood of her car. Jane joins her, the metal cool against her skin.

"I want to drive," Jane says. "It's been a while."

"Right now?" Ruby doesn't open her eyes.

"Right now," Jane says. "Do you wanna go north or south?"

"South," Ruby says. "I'm sick of being cold all the time." She sits up and rubs her eyes. "Are you sure you want to leave? It's sort of irresponsible. There's probably a serial killer hanging around that no one knows about."

"Not my problem," she says. "There isn't anything here for me."

"Yeah, me neither." Ruby hops off the roof of the car. "Let's go find a place with a Denny's or something."

They leave in early morning, when the sky has faded to lavender, and there is just a suggestion of moon in the sky. Jane watches her house grow small in the rear view mirror. From the attic window, she thinks she sees a figure leaning against the glass, but when she blinks the ghost is gone.