

Jessica believed in ghosts. The sixth time she saw a ghost was on her 17th birthday. She had gone into the kitchen for a drink when she saw her grandfather sitting on the steps of the back porch. This was strange because Grandpa died three years ago. For all of Grandma's blustering that she was going to go first, that she could feel Death's hand on her shoulder as she said her nightly prayers, it was ironic that she was still alive in the front room having cake while Grandpa had already drug his arthritic knees up the marble steps to his pearly gates before her.

Jessica stepped out onto the porch, marveling that her grandfather was there, not looking a day over 72. He had a piece of wood in his hands and his pocketknife with the chink in the blade. He was always whittling, leaving little curls of wood everywhere and little figurines of rabbits and bears in his grandchildren's beds for them to find when they woke up. Jessica's mother used to complain bitterly about the shavings, being the proactive, modern, working woman she was who brought home the bacon, cooked the bacon, and cleaned the whole house of any leftover bacon grease. Mom could never understand why Grandma didn't care about the wood chips. Grandma always said that they had been together for 53 years, it'd be hard to start complaining now. Old dog, new trick and all that.

So Grandpa was always nagged onto the back porch until it became his spot. And now he was back in his spot when he should be six feet under in Lot 26 at the Cherrystone Cemetery. He didn't look any different. He wasn't see through. There were no sparks, no shimmering aura. Jessica was hard pressed to say he was a ghost, except for the whole being there when he died of a heart attack thing. Then Marky-dog ran straight through him and sat at Jessica's feet, so happy to see her after being kicked out of the house when company arrived. The black Lab barely sat with his tail dragging his butt back and forth, with a big doggy grin, twitching his eyebrows and ears at Jessica, waiting to be petted. He paid no attention to Grandpa, though Grandpa had been his favorite after Jessica. Her grandfather always carried treats in his pockets, sometimes eating them himself. He was always a strange guy. Apparently that whole idea of animals being able to detect ghosts was entirely crap, or maybe Marky-dog was just special. Jessica's father certainly though so. He said as much every time he picked up Jessica for his designated weekends. Even his name was special. Jessica named him when she was little. She used to draw on the walls with a black permanent marker to her parents' eternal joy. She never could say the name of the marker correctly, just combined the name with the word marker, calling it a Marky. When they got the dog from the

shelter, he was so jet black, Jessica had to name him Marky-dog after her favorite color to draw in. Marky-dog was still jet black, just with a few splashes of grey around his nose and ears. He was still just as special though with a boundless energy. And no ESP, apparently.

Tap, Tap.

Jessica looked up from her dazed moment with Marky-dog to see Grandpa tapping the step next to him just as he used to do when Jessica had to escape her mother and grandmother. She sat. Grandpa turned to her with this soothing expression on his face. There was no doubt this was her grandfather. The same thin mouth in a round face. Like a cue ball with white fuzz on top. Scratchy gray whiskers on wrinkled jowls. The skin gone soft with age. Bushy caterpillar eyebrows over clear brown eyes that had been passed down to Jessica.

He turned back to his carving, taking away a little to form a beak. Jessica turned to Marky-dog who was breathing heavily on her neck. She grabbed a handful of treats from her pocket, and threw one out into the grass on the backyard. Marky ran after it, sniffing it out of the slightly too long grass. Since Grandpa passed, no one really got the hang of mowing the lawn. Grandma simply refused, and neither Jessica or her mother could bring themselves to ask her to do something that her husband had done for 53 years. Jessica's mother had a hard time fitting it into her busy schedule, often leaving it unfinished as she was swept up in phone calls and making dinner. Jessica tried to take up the job, but it seemed that the lawnmower just had to be in her presence to break. So, Jessica's mother hired a gardener, but he never cut it the right length. It was like that for many things since Grandpa passed. He always got the mail, leaving it in the kitchen for anyone to go through. Now Jessica had to remember to do it when she came home from school. She often had to go back and forth down the sidewalk as she forgot to get the mail. Then, it would get lost as she placed it on the dinner table or the side table by the front door on her way up to her room. It was little things like that which brought attention to his passing. Even Grandma sometimes forgot, and set out four plates for dinner, instead of three.

Jessica felt chilled, but that was the spring breeze. Grandpa felt rather warm as if he were really sitting there. She could see his face out of the corner of her eye as she threw out treats for Marky to find. But though she could feel the heat, Jessica knew there was no shoulder for her to lean against. She tried to surreptitiously run her fingers through her hair, and her elbow passed right through Grandpa's shoulder. The heat stuck to her elbow for a minute causing Jessica to rub and

scratch at the area. Grandpa's eyes slid to her and the smile appeared again. This time the smile had an added nod which was Grandpa's version of a laugh. Jessica turned to glare at him until Marky nudged her arm. They continued on as they were; Grandpa carving his bird figurine and Jessica playing with the dog. Both of them taking in the calm of the afternoon.

"There you are, Jessica. We were looking for you. What are you doing out here?" Jessica's mother said from the door.

"Mom!" Jessica turned, surprised her mother wasn't screaming over seeing the ghost of her dead father, but Grandpa was gone. Nothing was left, no clue or lingering presence, not even wood shavings.

"Jessica, what's wrong?" her mother said.

"Nothing." Jessica shook her head in confusion, then got up, and followed her mother back into the house.

"Everyone's been waiting for you," her mother said disapprovingly.

"Sorry," said Jessica as she carefully shut the door keeping Marky outside.

"We thought we would open presents now," said Jessica's grandmother as she shuffled into the kitchen.

"That sounds fun," said Jessica as she finally got that drink she wanted from the fridge. Grandma placed a small present on the kitchen table. It was a small box wrapped in sparkly, green paper.

"Here," Grandma said. Jessica looked up at her quizzically. "I found it in the table by your grandfather's side of the bed the other day. It had your name on the tag attached to it."

Jessica pulled apart the wrapping, her hands shaking. She opened the box, and nestled in blue fabric was the bird figurine, finished. It looked like a small version of the bird statue from *The Maltese Falcon*, Jessica's favorite book and movie. A tear dropped on the wooden bird. Jessica rubbed at the itchiness in her eyes.

"Thank you," she said.