

the
Ghosts
we
Keep

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PUSH

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-59334-1

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

21 22 23 24 25

Printed in the U.S.A. 23
First edition, June 2021

Book design by Maeve Norton

wednesday, july 3, 2019

after

The summer after my brother was killed, my parents made me get a job at a frozen yogurt shop.

It wasn't that hard to learn how to work things. The hard part was dealing with the customers. Put too few sprinkles on, they complained you were ripping them off. Give them too many, though, and they complained you were only making the froyo heavier to up the price when it was weighed.

Nobody, it seemed, felt they ever had just the right amount of sprinkles.

The shop was downtown, right near the heart of Kinston, and it also happened to be one of the hottest summers on record, so we were never not busy. Sometimes the shop would stay open until eleven, which Mom wasn't in love with.

I didn't mind the job, truly. The uniform was fine; my

coworkers were mostly cool. I liked Julie, who usually shared my shifts. But she was balanced out by one of the managers, Henry, who took frozen yogurt way too seriously. I, however, did not take frozen yogurt seriously at all. The job did what it was meant to do, though. It got me out of the house, and it made me stop thinking about Ethan.

Except when it didn't.

Mom would pick me up after my shift ended. Tonight she'd been waiting in the parking lot for the last twenty minutes, reading her book.

"Bye, Liam!" Julie waved to me as she walked to her car.

I waved back.

"How was your day?" Mom asked me as soon as I got in the car and buckled my seat belt. This question always arrived like clockwork.

She tried to hide the book by throwing it in the back seat, but I knew it was one of those grief counseling books.

"Busy," I told her, handing over a cup of yogurt. We got a free cup once a shift. I always went with basic vanilla, some hot fudge, and those crispy-rice M&M's.

Exactly what Ethan ordered every time we came here.

"Oh yeah?" Mom took a spoonful. She eats the free cups for me because I got tired of eating them two weeks into the job.

"That means good tips, though."

"Not always. But tonight was good. Thirty dollars."

“Well, look at that.” Mom put the car into reverse and backed out of her spot, frozen yogurt in the cup holder. The drive home was mostly quiet, just the voice of the weatherman talking about a storm coming up this weekend, May showers apparently stretching into the first weeks of July.

Things weren’t always this quiet with us. They were getting a little better after our family therapy appointments, but we still hadn’t eased back into a routine. Or at least it didn’t feel like we had.

Mom didn’t really like music anymore. She and Dad used to always have it on, dancing while they cooked, her feet bouncing while she read, his fingers tapping the wheel of the car while we drove.

Now it was the weather on loop.

When we got home, I walked to my bedroom, throwing my froyo-mandatory hat to the back of my closet. I knew that I should shower—I smelled like a cow that had been bathed in vanilla.

I *should’ve* showered, but now that I was lying in bed, I didn’t want to move. My feet hurt, and my hands still felt cold. I stretched my fingers, in and out, trying to get some of the blood flowing through them again.

Then I found my phone.

For a moment I considered texting Joel or Vanessa, telling them how my day had gone; it was muscle memory.

I rolled out of bed, fidgeting to get my shirt off because all of a sudden, the clothes that I was wearing felt too heavy. Even underneath, my skin felt like it was crawling, like it was pressed too tight against my muscles and no matter how I moved my body, everything was too close together.

I wanted to crawl away, to scratch until I didn't feel the itch anymore.

There was a knocking on my door. Dad. "Hey. We're going to bed."

"Night." I threw my shirt toward the hamper in my open closet. I didn't work the next day, so I'd have time to wash it. Hopefully it'd get the vanilla stench out.

I moved out of bed and walked down the hallway to the bathroom, setting the water on the hottest temperature it'd go before I turned on some music and stood in the shower for a bit. Then I took a washcloth and tried to wash the scent of vanilla off my skin. The body wash smelled like coconut and I debated whether or not that was an improvement as I bounced to the beat of the song, humming along to the mess of synths.

I was surprised Mom or Dad didn't knock on the door, telling me to turn down the noise.

I sniffed my wrist and smelled more coconut than vanilla, so I figured that I was clean enough.

Also, I just wanted to go to sleep.

I walked slowly back down the hallway, staring at the door to Ethan's room. Mom and Dad hadn't been in there for a while. They'd begun their summer cleaning out bits and pieces, washing some of the leftover clothes and donating them to Goodwill, but everything else had remained untouched.

Or at least that's what they thought. There were other things missing now, things they'd never known existed.

Back in my room, I turned off the lamp on my nightstand and crawled between my sheets. Every time I closed my eyes, I thought about the yogurt shop. I still smelled the vanilla.

I probably should've been thinking about more important things, like how I was going to get into a good college when I started submitting applications this fall. With everything that had happened, my junior year had fallen apart toward the end. My summer had started with a month of classes.

I'd failed.

The sympathy my teachers felt for me only went so far. Come August, I'd be joining my classmates in our senior year, but all my do-over cards had been forfeited. I was angry with how school had made me handle the entire situation, and even angrier with myself for almost letting everything slip away.

Or perhaps I should have been worried about how I didn't have my oldest friends anymore, and that I didn't know how to get them back.

Or I should've been worried about Mom and Dad. I remembered reading somewhere that 75 percent of marriages end after the death of a child.

But instead of all that, I wanted to worry about the frozen yogurt shop. I wanted to worry about getting my work done before I clocked out, making sure that I got the floors mopped. I wanted to stress out about whether I'd remembered to lay out the toppings for the morning crew. I wanted to be worried about pushing the pumpkin spice flavor because for some reason a dumbass executive had decided that the prime time to sell pumpkin-spice-flavored froyo was July.

I was trying to fool myself, and if the last few months had taught me anything, it was that I was incredibly good at fooling myself. The truth would always find me. No matter how hard I pushed down its ugly head, it would find a way back in.

Always.

And it didn't smell like vanilla.

I still found it so much easier to discuss frozen yogurt instead of my dead brother.