



# FATHER, FATHER, HOLY GHOST

by Victoria Fryer

IN the heavy darkness of a fifth grade sleepover, my best friend Crystal turned to me.

“My cousin sees demons,” she whispered.

We were lying next to each other in my bedroom, blankets pulled up to our chins, her foot rubbing in circles against the mattress.

“Nu-uh,” I answered, my voice rising and cracking.

“Yuh-huh, for real.” Her voice carried with it all the authority that came with being the elder friend. “Sometimes, when she can’t sleep, she looks up and sees a head staring at her from the corner of her bedroom.”

I pulled the covers up tighter around my neck and closed my eyes.

As a child, I was consumed with the ideas of ghosts and monsters. Crystal and I worked together on my first novel: a hefty ten-page tome detailing the Bloody Mary legend of the elementary school little girls' room. "If you turn the lights out and say Bloody Mary three times in the mirror, she'll come out and grab you."

At night, I'd watch Unsolved Mysteries with my grandmother. Listening to the soothing but disconcerting tone of Robert Stack's voice, we'd wait for the sound of an update, a mystery solved, an answer finally granted.



"They were too young to take care of you. They wanted a better life for you," my mother's mother would say to me as she tucked me into bed. All the shiny narratives we lay over the bare truth of abandonment.

I asked questions like, "Where's my dad now? Where did my dad go?" I wonder how I knew the word "dad."

“We adopted you. We’re your mom and dad now.” She would ask me if I understood, and I would nod. That was the right answer.

After I learned to read, I would spend many bored only-child hours roaming our large house in south Texas, pulling interesting artifacts off of shelves and out of cupboards. One item I returned to again and again was my baby book, filled out by my biological mother.

I would flip the pages over and over again, reading the same words, seeing the same pictures. I kept thinking I would find something different: a clue, a new piece of the puzzle. Always, I’d land on the family tree, my father’s side so barren—no names of parents or grandparents. No extra pieces. No buried clues. Like he landed there for an instant and then broke apart into dust.



In the last evening service at the weeklong church camp I attended with Crystal the summer after fifth grade, we stood at our seats, swaying and singing. “*Jesus, hold me close.*” Some of the girls raised their hands to the air, palms up, eyes closed and brows furrowed.

A group of camp leaders lined the front of the open-air chapel, and the salty, wet breeze from the Gulf of Mexico blew in over us. “If any of you feel called to give your life to Christ right now,” they asked, over the soft soundtrack of a minor key, “answer His call. Walk down this aisle. Ask Him to come into your heart.”

Girls began trickling down the aisles to be saved, some wiping tears from their faces. As they reached a counselor, the two would exchange words at close range, and then—a smile. A warm embrace. It was like watching them be initiated into a secret club. One by one, a couple of words, and—*voilà!*—they belonged.

My group leader must have noticed me staring. “Do you want to be saved?” she asked.

Who could say no to that?



“I found Rick,” my mother told me, as we sat across from each other on the patio of a bar in upstate New York. We were having dinner, and the

sun had set; her disembodied voice floated over our pasta plates. “I wasn’t sure whether to tell you.”

Hope is a foolish but persistent thing; I calculated how far away we were from his last known hometown of Rochester. How long it would take us to get there. “What do you mean, *found him?*”

“I was on a message board for people who were in the Navy to reconnect, and there he was.” She took a long drag from her beer bottle. “Wasn’t sure it was him at first, but I sent him an email and told him you’d really like to see a picture of him.”

My heart thumped hard, a prisoner beating on the bars of her cell. “Did he respond?”

She sighed. “The asshole. He said that he was sorry. That he wished he could do it over. I wanted to say *don’t bother being sorry, just send the fucking picture.*” She was rambling. She does that when she has to say things people don’t want to hear. So do I.

“Did he send the picture?” I could feel the hope leaking out of me, like the air from a pinprick in a bicycle tire.

I could see the slight glint from her silver earrings as she shook her head.

“You all done your plate there, hon?” The waitress had appeared, a specter in the darkness, startling me.

I nodded and ordered another beer.



The highlight of my grandfather’s career in hospital administration was building a new facility in the small south Texas town where I grew up. The old structure, formerly associated with the Catholic diocese, had opened in 1922 and, like most structures of that age, had seen better days.

Partly because of its age and partly because of its association with the Catholic Church, the place had been a thing of legends even when it was in use. One story, about the Blue Nun, claimed an apparition of a sister who’d worked there years ago would roam the third floor halls. Some said she could be seen standing in the window, looking out into town.

Speculation that the building was haunted only increased when it was abandoned in the late 1990s. It still stands today—too old and worn down to be used for anything else, too expensive to tear down.

A paranormal research group now conducts tours of the place and posts photographic evidence of its spooky inhabitants on a dedicated ‘Old Yoakum Hospital’ Facebook page. When I watch the videos or click through the photo galleries—all lens flares and reflections off the flaking paint—the ghosts I see are faded memories of the places where I used to play, when living nuns still roamed the hallways and patients still lived and died in the rooms above. The memories of my grandfather walking the hallways in his suit and tie, shaking hands and sucking his teeth and smiling.

Other people say that they see something more, hear disembodied laughter, voices from beyond. I guess some people see what they want to see, hear what they want to hear. And some people aren’t that lucky.



I tested God one summer. Crystal and I were back at church camp, this time with the older kids, and boys. It was the end of the week, and everyone was swapping stories about hearing God speak to them, feeling led to do one thing or another: be kinder to their siblings, perhaps, or witness to the other kids at school.



Though I was sure that God was there, I could not hear His voice, had received no divine revelation. *Am I doing this right?* I wondered. I needed something more solid. *Show me a sign*, I sent up silently. *Make the wind blow.*

I felt nothing.

“The end days are coming,” the preachers would say in an eerily soothing voice. “Don’t you want to be one of the faithful whom Jesus raises up? Or do you want to be left behind?”

Crystal and I would fret late into the night. Were we worthy? Had we loved Him enough? Had we witnessed?

At night I continued to pray fervently, straining harder to listen for some kind of message that I believed all the faithful received. *I must try to be better*, I thought. *More worthy.*

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Sometimes in the early morning, after I’ve trudged into the bathroom, bleary-eyed, I find myself studying my reflection in the mirror, trying to discern which parts of me are his. Is it my full lips, my crooked nose, or the

epicanthic fold of my inner eye? I compare photos of myself to my mother to detect the missing integer of a genetic mathematical problem.

Maybe it's my prominent eyebrows, dark and thick, always furrowed in the middle. "Stop scowling," my grandmother would say.

I am a coin with all the markings on one side worn off. He is invisible to me, despite being integral to me. I am two things at once, lost in transition: one concrete and fully fleshed, the other just a tinge of possibility, something of which to catch a glimpse out of the corner of my eye.



The tavern my husband and I frequent is a dark dive that sits directly across the river from our home. It's one of the few places in town that offers the option of escaping the summer heat or wallowing in it on the overgrown patio out back. So that's where we went in May of 2011, the day that Christian radio host Harold Camping predicted the rapture would come—a prediction that sparked mocking "rapture parties" across the country.

Along with the other customers enjoying the patio that afternoon, we joked that we wanted a front row seat, wanted to be ready when the horsemen came, or whatever. “All I know is,” said a fellow patron, a biker in a black leather vest and do-rag, “if He’s coming back, he ain’t taking me.” *Amen*, I thought. There was a certainty among us that none of us had been “good” enough. That we’d somehow been lacking.

Sometime in college—it’s hard to say exactly when—I’d stopped believing. It was, as the poem goes, “not with a bang but a whimper.” But as the predicted rapture hour passed, I realized that some part of me, however small, had almost believed some great ball of light would descend into the valley and root up all the believers like iron to a magnet. Some part of me still believed He was coming back.



I’ve always wanted to believe in ghosts, hungry to prove consciousness more permanent than the body. But how to reconcile this with the lack of an afterlife? If I believe there is no God to float to and no heaven, that

there is no punishment for which to stay behind; if we're just mortal cells, does anything live on?

Maybe ghosts are just electric waves that pulse from our brains, products of our thoughts and feelings. The electric echo of a life bounding out of its biological prison cell. The reverberation of a scream. The scraping of feet on a floor, desperate for purchase.



In a survey from the Pew Research Center on American religious faith, eighteen percent of those surveyed claimed they'd seen or been in the presence of a ghost. Perhaps some people are comforted by the belief that all the pain we feel in life lives on somehow, personified into energetic memories in the shape of a shadow.

*This hasn't been for nothing. I am more than a three-quarter century blip on an infinite radar. I am ongoing. I am not alone.*

I want to think they're right, that we're not alone. That ghostly energies bounce off the walls of my home, exist in the translucent specks of air I breathe. Maybe they even see the ghost of him in me.



In the autumn months, it is still warm enough to jog along the Susquehanna River in the rural Pennsylvania town where I live now. I try to notice the way the seasons change, the way they never did in south Texas. In July, the trees are bushy and green, almost opaque in their fullness, solid like a city skyline, but by mid-October they've begun to look like ghosts. Leaves litter the ground, leaving skeleton branches and a translucent look into the sky beyond.

Even so, they stand so tall and sturdy, their hulking root systems supporting their heavy wooden weight. I wonder what that's like. As I jog, my mind wanders—often, to my father. He is half-formed, a word on the tip of my tongue that I am trying to spit out. A fact once read but long forgotten. He is my imagination laid over the structure of a man; I build him up, cell by false cell, a tree with imaginary buds stuck just on the verge of blooming.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Victoria Fryer is a Texas-raised writer with a degree in writing from St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas, and a day job in marketing. Previous work can be found in *Split Lip Magazine*, *Epigraph Magazine*, Akashic Books' *Thursdaze* flash fiction series, and *Gravel*. Find her on Twitter: [@extoria](#).

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BT #018

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Published by **LITTLE FICTION** | **BIG TRUTHS**, May 2016. Edited by Amanda Leduc. Cover design by Troy Palmer.

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