The Ghost Collector

By Kathryn

I've been dreaming of daylight for twenty years.

That's when it happened, I think. Twenty years ago. We don't get much light here, so it's difficult to tell. The sun still rises and sets like clockwork, and sometimes I can even see it through the clouds. Or perhaps that's just my imagination.

Listen to me rambling. I guess I never lost the habit of talking about the weather. Go ahead and sit down. Would you like a drink? You can see for yourself that I have enough bottles to share. Pick whichever one you like. They were all top-shelf labels, back when that meant something.

There's no need to flash your gun at me, son. I don't mean any harm.

I haven't seen your face in these parts before, but I think I can guess why you're here. This is a dangerous part of town. No one would brave the trip if they weren't looking for something special. You seem like a man who knows what he wants. Perhaps I can help you find what you're searching for. I've been keeping company with these ghosts for twenty years, after all. I hear all sorts of stories, and I don't mind sharing.

Have another drink, it's on me. Don't worry, you'll be safe enough. I'm the only other living soul here, and I can't imagine that anyone followed you. Not to a place like this.

Maybe you'd like to tell me what sort of ghost you're looking for… No? Well, finish your drink. We have time. We have all the time in the world.

This used to be a bank. We're sitting right in the middle of the lobby. It doesn't look that different than it did when people still cared about money, does it? It's one

of the few buildings that's still intact in this part of the city. None of the office towers survived the explosion. I guess the place's marble floors and iron doors weren't just for show. Not that there's anything worth protecting here, but I won't turn down a solid roof over my head. It's always dark inside, but it's always dark outside too. It doesn't bother me too much.

I used to be on the security staff, can you imagine? I had a uniform, but the badge was just for show. I wasn't much more than a glorified receptionist, but that was fine with me. I went through a good dozen jobs after I dropped out of college. I worked in the stockrooms at a few of the all-night big box stores, and then at a couple of warehouses for an online retailer, you know the one. I never stayed in one job for too long. Even working the graveyard shift, I still had to interact with coworkers, and I've never been good with people.

Being a night watchman was perfect for someone like me. Nobody cared that I didn't have a degree, and things were quiet. I think I would have preferred to work in a museum. Sometimes I pretended like I did. During the long hours of the night I would entertain myself with fantasies about patrolling corridors lined with pots that someone dug up from the dirt of a different time. Just like one day somebody's going to be digging our phones out of the pavement. The hours pass slowly when you can't see the sun, and you do what you have to in order to make it through the night.

Don't get me wrong; I was happy with what I had, and what I had a nice routine. I ate breakfast at the diner down the block when I went off shift, and I slept through the part of the day when everyone else was busy. Like I said, it was quiet. Peaceful. I was just starting to wish things would get a little more interesting when war broke out over some damn fool thing someone said on the internet. Now there are no banks, and no diners. No internet, either. This place is as close to a museum as it gets.

I was the only person here when the bomb hit, and here I stayed. The ghosts came gradually, joining me in the darkness. It didn't take long for them to start talking, and now they won't stop. I keep them in empty bottles to block the sound, but you can still hear them whispering. It's unsettling, isn't it? Imagine my surprise when someone offered to buy one.

I know what you're thinking. Why would anyone want anything to do with a ghost that won't shut up, especially in a world like this? But people need the stories they tell. It's not as if there's much of anything else to do. The gas for the generators ran out years ago, and the ghosts are good for the endless nights. Sometimes you'll get

a dud, but a lot of them are surprisingly eloquent. Most don't know anything about what the world is like now. They'll talk about cars and planes and computers as if they took them for granted. I guess we all did, back then.

So I'm not too concerned with the people who come here to buy ghosts. I understand the impulse. I listen to the ghosts myself – the good, the bad, and the boring. Like I said, I've been dreaming of daylight for twenty long years, and I enjoy their stories as much as anyone. It's good to remember what we lost.

Let me tell you the truth. It's the people who bring in ghosts to sell that put me off. I've always been awkward, always rambling on until I say the wrong thing, not knowing how to read a room, but these people, the ghost hunters…

What's that? Is there a ghost hunter who stands out in my mind? Someone unusual?

Well. Now that you mention it. There's a girl. A young woman, I suppose you'd call her, although she must have been a child when it happened. She's grown up in all of this, but she looks healthy enough. She always shows up alone, but that's not uncommon, is it? This isn't the sort of place people bring their friends. Not that I imagine the people in the business of buying and selling ghosts have friends. Present company excluded, of course.

What's remarkable about this girl is that she's managed to find herself a horse. Can you believe that? A horse, right in the middle of the city, and it's just as healthy as she is.

I don't know where she finds them, but this girl always brings in at least half a dozen ghosts, always neatly bottled. Now most people, they stick to their territory. Safer that way. And they might encounter one or two ghosts, especially if they know how to look for them. No one knows where the ghosts come from, but they're not rare. Though I hear they tend to stay away from the settlements…

You want to know more about the girl? I see the shine in your eyes, don't try to hide it. Looks like we're finally getting down to business.

I have to admit that I'm curious about her too. Where does she get all those ghosts, I wonder? She must be exploring some lonely places. What is she out there doing, on that horse of hers? What is she hoping to find?

She doesn't say much, but she's an optimistic sort. That's dangerous thinking, especially in these times. That sort of optimism will get you killed. Men like you and me understand this. No doubt the ghosts understand it too. More than a few met their end after the explosion, poking their noses into places most people would have the good sense to stay away from.

What's that? You want to know the last time she sold a ghost to me? I can't seem to recall. Time is strange these days, now that there's no sunlight…

Oh, put that gun away. There's no need to threaten me. Don't think I don't know who you are. I hear rumors, and I know you're looking for that girl. You've already killed enough people to try to get to her, and shooting me won't help.

The way the world is now, it benefits you. It benefits me too, truth be told. I do all right for myself, me and my ghosts. All things considered, my life is much more comfortable now. I'm sure yours is as well. Don't try to deny it. You wouldn't be hunting that girl otherwise. And that's a shame, because you'll never catch her. If you're not lucky, she'll catch you.

In all these years of darkness, the one thing I've learned is that we all become ghosts in the end, but you know as well as I do that the world can't continue like this forever. Not everyone spends their time in the company of ghosts, you know. There are still some people who dream of daylight. ☠


ALL
SPIRITS'
NIGHT