

June 23, 2014 • 2 Comments

## Tomorrow I'll Miss You

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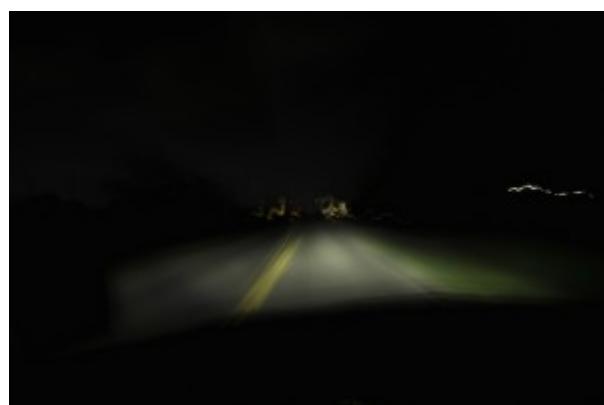
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By Catey Miller

Joshua, Texas is officially a Ghost Town. We exceeded the legal limit for the ghost-to-people ratio last night. It's not a big deal—it's not like you can do much to drive a ghost out, or threaten one; no one's doing violence to them, obviously. But in most cases the local governments get a little weird about it. They think the town economies will crash because people would rather go to more ghost-free places, so they start treating the ghosts with what I think is a gross lack of respect, kind of a get-outta-my-city vibe. But it's not like the ghosts need anything, or bother anyone, really.

I mean, they're still people. The ghosts. Just not in a corporeal sense, or in an able-to-have-jobs-and-contribute-to-society sense. They can think, and talk. They still feel. They're still people.

It's not bad in Joshua yet, but it could get that way. We've heard that they're ghost-friendly in California, and that's not so far, a few days of driving. And we always said we would do this—our epic road trip, Beth and Charlie's Excellent Adventure. Graduation was just this morning. And we're out of time.



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It was a horrible accident. Charlie was at my house late, for a sort of pre-graduation party. Everyone else had gone, and I'd half expected Charlie to ask to stay—he'd had one of my dad's beers, or two maybe, and there was a guest room in our house that he must have known was open to him. But he said he should get home, that his foster parents would worry. I didn't insist that he stay. And I guess there were other pre-graduation parties, and I guess people at them had had more than one or two Bud Lights, and the driver of the hatchback didn't see the stop sign and Charlie didn't see the hatchback. No one knew what had happened until Charlie showed up to graduation with a pearl blue sheen and an already-fading scalp that couldn't support a mortar board.

They still gave him his diploma, and they let him sit by me even though it was out of alphabetical order. They didn't mention him in any of the speeches. I didn't cry.

It just seems so basic, so stupid. Hit by a drunk driver the day before high school graduation. Charlie is so much better than that. We're so much better than that.

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I hang my tassel from the rearview mirror and lay our diplomas out on the dashboard. Charlie skims his blue-tinted fingers over the papers. I know he can't feel them. But he smiles at the corny school emblem, like he's proud. We check the backseat for ghost hitchhikers, don't see any, and decide that's good enough.

As I drive, I fiddle with the car's radio presets, turning my nose up at country and talk radio, both too sad. I stop on a station playing "Highway to Hell" because Charlie starts to shout along. He bobs his head along with the song and his sheer curls swish against his forehead. It's hard to look at the road instead of him.

"Think we'll make it in three days?" he asks over the DJ when the song ends.

I rev the engine and we roar past the "Now leaving Joshua—y'all come back!" sign. "I think we can make it in two, if you want to try."

"I don't."

"Three sounds good."

Last year, in preparation for our long-discussed road trip, Charlie burned the Beatles' entire discography, all chopped up and rearranged in mixtape style. The CDs have been sitting in my car's center console for the last year, and he smiles as I reach for one when the classic rock station gets staticky. I told him when we were freshmen that the Beatles were my favorite band, all whispers and self-consciousness, like it was some big secret, like it made me special. Charlie, who had so much that

made him special, didn't even laugh or point out that everyone loves the Beatles—he just went about collecting and committing to memory their whole music library. It was one of the first things we shared.

We drive until dusk, which is when it gets harder to see the ghosts, at least the ones who've been hanging around longer. Sometimes it takes a while for them to go really translucent; sometimes they don't want to finish their unfinished business, if it means they can just stay indefinitely. Charlie says those ghosts are cowards. I agree, I guess. On the road I mostly worry about the wanderer ghosts, the ones who are still here because they have some kind of journey to complete. When they're getting close to finishing, all that's left of them is a pair of blue-ish, see-through feet. Swerving to avoid them is an option, assuming you can spot them, but I'm better at seeing them in the daylight. It doesn't hurt the ghosts when cars go through them—at least, none of them have ever let on that it does, to my knowledge—but it seems impolite. It occurs to me that Charlie might know, and I open my mouth to ask him about it, but when I glance sideways at him he looks impossibly sad. I don't know about what, in particular. I ask him about his pick for most underrated Beatles album, instead, and he brightens, and we talk about "Magical Mystery Tour" for the next half hour.

Charlie suggests we stop at a little motel, nowhere *too* rundown, but somewhere small and bland. The meaner ghosts don't touch the shabby places; I guess they tend to be the kind who feel like they deserved better pre-afterlife, so they prefer to haunt the richer places, Hiltons and Four Seasons. They're still harmless, but they say some pretty nasty things to guests and it makes people angry. We don't want to stay with angry people.

We stop at a Motel 6. I hand the man behind the counter a chunk of the cash I've brought with me, and he hands me a battered plastic key.

"Thank you," I say. "When's checkout?"

He grunts and points to a graying sign to the right of his computer. Checkout is by 10 a.m., it tells me in dirty lettering. I am glad Charlie is waiting in the car, or he would be tempted to find a cloth and wipe away the grime. Or—maybe he wouldn't be, now.

"Thank you," I say again.

The ghost in the lobby, an old man, waves to me on my way out the door. He looks surprised when I wave back, but it's just common courtesy. Places like this are only haunted by friendly ghosts, or demure ones at the very least. Harmless. Those who want to savor their time, or hide from it. Like Charlie and me. I'm not sure which we're doing here, really. I'm not sure how much time there is to savor.

"Where you headed, young lady?" the ghost asks me. Not in a creepy way.

"West," I say. "San Fran."

"Hear it's nice out there."

"Have you ever been?"

He doesn't answer. His hand is dangling through the arm of the rocking chair, pearl blue and wispy, but his feet are still solid enough that I can see them arching and flexing, like he's pushing himself back and forth. Only the chair isn't moving, of course. I wave to him again on my way to collect Charlie.

Our room is small and painted a murky sea green, as far as we can tell from the only working light, which is in the bathroom. There is a chest-high window and one bed. Charlie sits on the latter and grabs for the remote on the nightstand. His hand falls through to rest somewhere inside the cherry-brown wood. He makes a sort of strangled coughing noise, jerks his hand out, and stares at the bedspread, determinedly not looking at me. I walk around the foot of the bed and pick up the remote myself, tossing it into the air and catching it until he looks up at me and smiles.

"What do you want to watch?" he asks, and I tilt my head and smile back at him. He mimes patting the space beside him on the bed.

I join him, scoot close enough that our shoulders could almost touch. He puts on *The Simpsons*, which is our favorite. But I keep watching him, glancing sideways and up, following the curve of his jaw and the small but so significant amount of stubble there. I want to touch him more than I have ever wanted anything. It is a familiar ache.

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I had to ask Charlie to the prom. That was after four years of eating lunches together and sharing a black coffee addiction and cutting English classes to sit on the baseball field and talk about the books we'd been reading for fun instead. I loved him so much it made my stomach hurt constantly. And I knew he loved me. The way he looked at me, eyes kind of soft and a smile that asked a question I wanted to answer every day for the rest of my life—you don't look at a person like that if you've been having Just Friends lunches all those years.

So one day, lying in left field and listening to Charlie talk about his second *Jurassic Park* re-read, I propped myself up on my elbows and glared down at him and said, "Look, are you going to prom with someone else?"

He blinked at me with those puppy-soft eyes and said, "Who else would I go with?"

Which I thought was the dumbest response. Charlie played baseball and loved dinosaurs and had beautiful shoulders and curly blond hair and knew your coffee order after going with you to Starbucks just once, so the answer to that question was anyone, literally anyone would have gone to prom with Charlie.

But that, of course, was not what he had asked; he asked who else would *he* go with, meaning other than me, and I knew that, understood the implication. I swear to God, though, sometimes you just want to hear these things said explicitly; sometimes you know but you just want to *know*. So I waited, eyebrows raised so high I gave myself a headache, and he finally swallowed and said, "I'm going to prom with you. Right?" That was good enough for me.

Even after that, and even though I wore a scarlet red, backless dress and curled my hair, we were like stranger-lovers at prom, like two people who had connected over the internet but never met in person until that night. And I guess we weren't really together, in an official sense—I guess we're still not—but I wanted him to hold me.

So when he hadn't, at the end of the night, after a few hours of my neckline incrementally plunging and a few glasses each of probably-spiked punch, I kissed him. He had driven me home, and I had just stepped out after he'd opened his car's passenger side door for me, and I wobbled a little in my heels and he caught me and I kissed him. I was tired and maybe tipsy and full of too much aching to be anything other than sloppy, and I caught his bottom lip awkwardly between mine, and his hands gripped my elbows in what felt a lot like panic. I pulled away and he walked me to the door and touched my cheek and said goodbye. We didn't talk about it after that.

It was only two weeks ago—prom was only two weeks before graduation—but in even this small amount of hindsight, it seems so stupid. I should have kissed him again, sober, in the daylight. He should have kissed me.

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I want to kiss him now, in the sea green motel room by the light of *The Simpsons*. Instead, I give my attention to the show in time to laugh with Charlie at a Moe joke I almost hear all of.

We lie flat on our backs when it's time to sleep, still—always—too far apart. The lights of every car that pulls into the parking lot flash into our room, so it is hard to tell when or if I fall asleep, but I swear I feel his fingers in my hair. It's impossible; it almost definitely happens in a dream. I will hang onto it, either way, as long as I live.

"You look beautiful," Charlie says in the morning. The words sound practiced, but it's still nice to hear them, and I blush and tug on the sleeve of my purple blouse. His favorite color. Charlie is wearing the same outfit he was wearing—a turquoise polo and khaki shorts—like a cartoon character. He still looks damn good. Surprisingly good; I notice for the first time that there are no tears in his clothes, no bloodstains. No way to know how bad it was, really. I file it away as another thing I won't bring myself to ask about.

We check out and get back in the car, and the ghost from the lobby is in the backseat. Charlie raises his eyebrows at me, like, do you know this guy? and I nod, like, kinda, it's cool.

"Don't need to get all the way to Frisco," the ghost says, looking at me with eyes that are as solid as any I've seen on a ghost, "but I've always wanted to see Phoenix. Had a girl who used to talk about the colors in the desert."

Charlie and I look at each other. We are well practiced in the art of communicating without speech, and I can tell that he thinks we shouldn't give the hitchhiker a ride. It's out of our way, and who knows about this guy? But he's nice enough and I don't figure he could do much damage, and we want this trip to last. I shrug. Charlie sighs as he watches me reroute the GPS.

"What's your name?" I ask the ghost as I pull out of the Motel 6 parking lot.

He doesn't move his gaze from the window.

"Sir?" I try.

Nothing. I look closer and see that his ears have vanished.



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It's a six hour drive to Phoenix from our motel, and we spend the beginning of it in silence. Then the ghost starts singing to himself, louder than he probably would if he could hear himself—something that sounds like an old folk song. Charlie smiles patiently and nods to the digital read on the CD player, so I turn up the Beatles. "Help!" loosens us up, the two of us sharing the lead parts. I skip "When I'm Sixty-Four." John Lennon hits a high note in "A Day in the Life," and I see our ghost stir, but his eyes stay on the mountains.

By the time we drop the hitchhiker ghost off in Phoenix, he is a floating head. It's like that, sometimes. His ears are gone, but his eyes remain bright, and there is a hint of a mouth. Even though I imagine he

can't hear me, I tell him that I hope that what he sees won't disappoint him.

As if in response, he turns around just as I'm ready to drive away, looks me square in the eye, and says, "Good luck to you two."

Kind words, but the gravity with which he says them startles me. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Charlie slump, ducking his head to look at the floorboard. I want to look at him, maybe to put my hand over his hand, maybe even to ask what he's thinking. But I can't look away from the ghost's sharp eyes.

"It won't last," the ghost goes on. "Make it count."

And then his head bobs away, into the desert.

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Charlie asks, "What do you think will be the last to go?" while we're listening to "I'm Looking Through You." He might be trying to make me laugh, but it's not funny. I only laughed at his unfunny jokes at the very beginning of our relationship, when I didn't know yet that he loved me.

I shrug my shoulders, glancing in the rearview mirror to make sure we haven't picked up another hitchhiker, or part of one. "Probably Paul," I say. "It would just be unfair if Ringo was the last one alive."

"Ringo's probably more likely to hang around after, though, don't you think?"

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Try to throw together a few more All Star Bands."

He laughs thinly and we go back to silence. That crappy instrumental Beatles song comes on, the one off the White Album. I skip it, hoping for something more distracting, and get "Let it Be." Good enough, I guess.

"I didn't say 'who', though," Charlie says.

I wrap my fingers a little tighter around the steering wheel. "I know."

His feet are already starting to droop through the mats. For most ghosts from Joshua it's feet last, like proof that literally everyone there wanted nothing more in their whole lives than to be anywhere else. So it's a surprise that Charlie's losing his so fast. It makes me feel bad about the trip, like maybe this wasn't what he needed at all, maybe I'm doing the wrong thing. But it also makes me feel good, in a way; I always said Charlie was different.

We stop over the California border when it's still light out, barely. I'm drained, but not ready to find a hotel. I pump gas and Charlie waits in the car, which gives me a chance to study him without having to

look him in the eye. His hands are fine. His mouth is fine. His eyes are dimming and his legs are gone below the knee. It won't last. I look away and listen to the gas funneling through the hose.

When I get back in the car, he's beaming. He says, "Let's explore."

"I'm tired."

"Me, too. But let's explore anyway."

Make it count, he means. He won't say what he means.

Charlie points to the glove box and I open it obligingly and pull out my digital camera. He nods, enthusiastic, eyebrows raised. "Let's play tourist," he says.

So we do. We wander up and down the streets of Indio, California, taking pictures of palm trees and windmills and mountains. And then Charlie starts standing behind me, and I know what comes next because this is how we take all of our pictures: he'll hold his arms in front of us and we'll make awful faces and he'll take awful pictures, because he's always pointing the camera too high or too low or too far to one side. Only this time it's on me.

I hold my shorter arms out as far as I can, taking pictures of us with the palm trees and windmills and mountains. I know that the pictures will be terrible—I'm occasionally trying to mimic Charlie's usual composition, letting the camera droop this way and that, but mostly I think it's happening naturally—and I can picture the screwed-up faces he's making, and I keep laughing so my eyes will be squinty and my teeth will be bared. But I keep laughing. And even though I can't feel it, he makes sure I can see him brush my arm with his hand each time I bring the camera down. And no one glances twice at us. And how terrible will the pictures be, really, when at least we'll be in them together, even if Charlie will look blue; I've always thought ghost photography was a little insensitive, like voyeurism or dehumanization, but I suddenly know that it's not that, it's beautiful, it's a gift.

We have enough money left for a night at a nicer place, but we pick a place called the Holiday Motel because it has one of those tall, vertical signs with an arrow at the bottom pointing to the building, and it makes us laugh. Charlie comes in with me this time, and the lady behind the desk smiles at us and gives us a discount on a room with a king bed.

This room is painted a pastel purple and the lights work fine. The tops of the walls are lined with chintzy palm tree wallpaper that matches the bedspread. Charlie and I curl up in the middle of the bed, facing each other, just looking. I've had his features memorized for years, have known them by heart, but I want to memorize him more now. The pictures won't be enough. Nothing will be enough.

I wonder if he'll be able to remember my face, later. I smile, just in case. And he smiles back.

We talk. He tells me about the haircut that got him laughed at in third grade, and I tell him about the first time I heard Paul McCartney's voice. He shares secrets and gossip he heard in the baseball clubhouse and I recall some of the most memorable graffiti from the girls' bathrooms. He asks if I heard the rumors about Coach Hardee and the junior with the pink hair, and I have and they're not true, but I squeal and let him tell me anyway. There is so little new to say. We know each other. It helps anyway.

This is new: "I'm going to miss you," I let myself whisper sometime around two a.m.

Charlie's waning eyes go soft, the way I've seen them do so many times, but sadder now than I remember. I close my eyes against it; this is not the memory I want.

He says my name. He says it the way he has always said it, like it is precious, something for him to keep. It is.

He says, "I am going to miss you so much." I can feel tears threatening, but I can't let them start now, after I've kept them back so well. If I start crying for Charlie, I'm afraid I'll never stop.

Then he says, "I love you."

The dam in me breaks. The tears come and come and come. I force my eyes open and Charlie's hands are on my face, trying to wipe away the saline. Charlie's hands are on my shoulder blades, and I squirm toward him so that he's almost pulling me closer. Charlie's hands are whispers on my back, are promises in my own hands.

I love you. I love you. I love you.



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In the morning, Charlie is a pair of hands and a torso. I tell him I love him. I know that he knows, whether he hears or not.

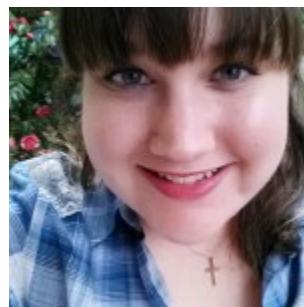
He points into the passenger door compartment when I get the door for him, and I reach down to find one of his Beatles mixes, one I haven't seen before. He spreads his hand in a gift-giving gesture. I move around to the driver's seat, start the car, and put in the CD. The first track is "In My Life," and I repeat it twice, singing along a little louder each time. Every track is a love song. He lays his left hand over his heart, then moves his hand into the space between us to hover over the emergency brake. I cover it with mine.

We make it to San Francisco just before sunset, and his chest fades away. We drive straight to the bay.

The breeze off the water caresses my face, somehow less real than when Charlie did last night. His right hand is gone. His left hand imitates nudging my right one, and I match my fingers to the spaces between his. If I close my eyes, the warmth of the setting sun is Charlie's skin touching mine. It is beautiful here.

There's no evidence, no reason to believe that people's spirits stay with us after their ghosts have gone. But there's no reason not to, either.

I press my fingers a little closer around Charlie's and imagine that he is squeezing back. I am hanging on. I am not ready to let go.



**Catey Miller** lives with her fantastic husband in Wilmington, North Carolina, where she is pursuing an MFA degree in creative writing at UNC Wilmington. Her YA fiction has previously appeared at Youth Imagination. You can find her tweeting about YA lit, makeup, Christian bands, and TV shows @beingfacetious.

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2 responses



**Ashley G.**

August 23, 2014

Very beautiful!

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