

A Boy I Know

Zulema Renee Summerfield

A BOY I know is haunted by two other boys, both of them missing limbs. One has no arm; the other has no leg. This should come as no surprise—limbs are always falling off in the spirit world. They get slammed in doorways or caught on craggy rocks, and **pop** there they go.

A BOY I know is haunted by two other boys. They're youngish, though invisible, and they depend on one another for getting things done, also for moving around. The armless one finds that he leans too much to one side. The legless one can't walk, and so must heave himself on his stomach across the floor.

THERE ARE a million ways to be haunted. You keep losing your things—keys, cell phone, left shoe—and when you find them again they're all mangled and chewed. You don't even own a puppy and all your things are mangled and chewed. Or you dream you can't breathe and when you wake up it's true. Or you celebrate the wrong birthday for most of your adult life, the toilet leaks, the smallest things stress you out. You're in a car crash that shatters your hip and you can't even walk up your own stairs. Or your brother dies in a horrible accident in a fire downtown that no one can explain. Or you can't sleep after he's gone, you keep seeing him in the halls, your heart rate changes, your eating habits, you try but you can't keep anything down. The city from your window looks like teeth, a monster you've always known showing its awful grin. Everything feels punched with holes, everything feels falling apart.

It's true that anybody can be haunted. It's true that everyone is.

A BOY I know was in an accident on Halloween. He was in the passenger seat of a car late that night, zipping around a city filled with ghosts and ghouls. The boy and his friends had been drinking, sure, and zoom, just like that, through the light and another car jackknives them, right in the side. The boy lost consciousness and there was glass everywhere. Blood and teeth and broken glass everywhere.

TIED TO a gurney in the hallway, covered in glass. Four hours went by. An orderly finally showed up, waving a catheter tube near the boy's face so he could see it.

The orderly still had his vampire teeth in. "This is going to be the worst part, by far."

The orderly was right.

THE NIGHT was long. All kinds of people came to the hospital with all kinds of injuries. One guy had been shot through the hand. Another's testicle had twisted up on itself—a rare condition, but painful nonetheless. One lady had miscarried and couldn't stop bleeding, another one was so drunk they had to pump her stomach to get out all the gin. And so on.

The boy was awake but in a morphine haze. He heard all the noises of all those people. He heard lots of screams, and many shoes squeaking across the floor.

THE BOY'S cousins went to see him in the hospital. The cousins were crazy, everybody knew that. The kind of crazy that precedes you, like a red carpet announcing your arrival. Crazy in the traditional kind of way, storybook crazy, until you listened to what they had to say. Then they didn't seem so crazy anymore.

Their names were Wow and Zow. They came in close, leaned in very close to the boy's face. "You have spirits that are following you," the cousins said. They smelled like old cigarettes. At first, the boy thought they were morphine angels, but morphine angels don't smoke. So then the boy knew that they were real.

"How many spirits?" the boy asked.

So they told him.

YOU, BOY, are haunted by two other boys, both of them missing limbs. This should come as no surprise—limbs are always falling off in the spirit world. There are arms and legs everywhere in the spirit world. Arms run like lizards down the sidewalks, fingers as feet. Legs, if they bend their knees fast enough,

discover they can fly.

Your spirit boys have always been with you. That's how they are, they just *~schlick~* and attach.

Zow grabbed the boy's arm to demonstrate *~schlick~* and attach, like velcro, like magnets, like two bandaids perfectly aligned.

Your own spirits depend on one another for getting things done, also for moving around. Their negative spaces fit together like pieces of a puzzle. They lean together, chest to chest, and waltz and tumble around.

SPIRITS HAVE no nationality. Sometimes they come from dead people and sometimes they simply are. They all move like this, whoosh, like thin branches at the bottom of the sea. Everyone has spirits—you, me, us, that nurse over there.

The boy looked to where Wow was pointing. Outside the open door, a nurse was leaning against the counter of the nurses' station, reading charts. She ran her fingers across her forehead, coughed into her hand.

"ALL RIGHT, party's over." A doctor came bursting into the room. "Visiting hours are done." Wow and Zow patted the boy gently before they left. They were the only ones that ever visited the boy while he was there. I never went. Everyone finds excuses for staying away. As for me, I was busy.

"My cousins are psychic," the boy said as soon as they'd gone.

The doctor snorted. "Sure they are. And I'm Abraham stinkin' Linc—" But then his beeper went off and the doctor went away.

THOSE MUST have been long nights. The boy's hip had been shattered into a thousand pieces, pieces so tiny they had to slice him open three times just to get all the bone bits out, like fishing around for gold with both hands tied behind your back. They made a metal hip for him out of a mould, peeled his skin back and crammed the thing inside.

At some point, the boy's brother died.

The orderly came back. "There's been a fire." His vampire teeth were gone.

That's what the boy noticed, that his vampire teeth were gone.

TWO MONTHS he was there, and then his brother died, and still he was there for two months more. To think: four months in a bed, every cell like being punched in the face, your body is your own worst enemy and there's no one else around. Nights so fucked up and dilated even your spirits get bored. Nothing new to rattle around, no one to haunt 'cause they're all dying or already dead.

To think what you must become. You *are* your own sweat. You are your own swollen pores. You are the only sound in the room, you the two pigeons on the sill outside pecking each other's eyes out day after day. You are the taste of plastic, a tube jammed in your nose for when breathing becomes too hard, a thing you almost forgot. Your habits press against you, push at you from the inside. Everything you've ever thought or taken or consumed is rising to the surface, battling for center stage.

To think: to be all alone, four months, to think. You are your own shattered nerves, you the fog of useless time. Towel in your teeth, breathing so hot it's steaming up the room, no telling how long this will be, what will become of you. And then your brother's gone and you forgot to tell him to go fuck himself, or I love you and I never meant a thing—I don't know. Everything I know about that I learned from movies, and I can't even tell you their names.

All I know is, those were long nights, the longest nights in the world.

FOUR MONTHS went by, and then they let the boy go. Gave him a cane and sent the boy home. The doctor on the case, one Dr. David Mitchell from SF General, he got some kind of award for that metal hip he made. Turns out no one had done it the way he had before. They wrote about it in the paper. His picture was there too, right in the paper. So.

RECOVERY IS a funny word, a biased word. A word of omission, really. A word that says one thing but deletes other things entirely. Like this: my aunt had cancer of the liver, which became cancer of the breast, which became, which became. They gave her lots of drugs, cut her breasts off, prayed to Jesus. Now, they say all the time, "Oh, she's recovering so nicely! She's healing so well!"

because the cancer has mostly dwindled, mostly gone away. But they never say the part about what's missing, about her breasts that are no longer there.

It was the same with my friend, the boy. His body fused with his new metal bone. Never hurts him, not even when the weather is bad, rain filling the streets and wind shaking the windows like grabbing a man by the collar. They all said it: "He's recovering so well!" We had a poolside barbecue to celebrate his recovery. Everyone was there, all kinds of meats and non-meats were cooking on the grill. We watched the boy swim and marveled at the miracle of recovery, the human body, those subtle curves, the way his scars had healed, you could hardly see the scars at all. The doctor was there. He raised his glass for a toast. "To the miracle of recovery!" Everyone huzzahed. Everyone but the boy and Wow and Zow huzzahed. And me, what the fuck do I know, so I huzzahed too.

After that, it's true, I did not see the boy for a long, long time.

PEOPLE SAY to me all the time, *Really? He's recovered? The boy you know is doing fine?* What they really mean to say is *Yes, but how did it happen? How did it really happen?* because they want the guts and the gore. People always want the guts and the gore.

The guts and the gore: A boy I know was in an accident on Halloween night. Just a few hours before the accident, the boy was at his apartment getting ready for a party. The boy was going as Peter Pan. Pointed felt hat, green shirt ripped off its sleeves, pair of green tights, brown suede belt around his tiny boy's waist. The boy has always been tiny. The boy has always been small.

The boy did two lines of coke because that's what some boys do, his hat with its feather in the center of his head. A boy I know did two lines of coke, then he walked to a party in the Castro. The Castro was a place that was about to implode. It had not imploded yet, but it would.

The party was like this: free beer until the keg ran out, and also there were cotton spider webs strung above the doors. No costume and you didn't get in, so everyone was there—David the Gnome, Alice of Wonderland, a couple of mummies, two girls tied together at the waist. A ladybug, a giant penis, Mikhail Gorbachev, Burt Reynolds, that guy from *Unsolved Mysteries*, Mary Queen of Scots, a box of crackerjacks, a ballplayer, a judge, Marge and Homer Simpson, some dude in just a bald cap and leather pants, Pippi Longstalking, a couple of joggers circa 1976, Mick Jagger, Ronald Reagan, Smurfette, two doctors covered in fake blood, a whole slew of vixens and sluts: nurses offering free exams, a couple of school girls sucking on their thumbs, the Virgin Mary, and so on. Also, Cleopatra and two Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. And me, I was there. I was at that party. I was Abraham Lincoln.

A boy I know came in around eleven. By then everyone was already completely smashed. I was at the far end of a long hallway and I saw the boy come in. I wanted to go over and say hi, I really did, I hadn't seen the boy in so long, six months or maybe more, and I'd heard things weren't going so well, the boy already was having day-long nights, and someone told me once that you can help sometimes just by doing this, just like this with one hand on a person's back and the other near their heart, if they'll let you. But I couldn't go: a pirate I knew from school had me pinned to the wall at the end of that long, long hallway, his mouth right here, right near my ear, saying *Pleeeeeease let me*, with so many *e's*, *pleeeeeease*, so I was busy letting him.

AFTER THAT everything had the calliope effect. Girls were rolling down the walls. Boys were touching themselves through their shorts. It was Halloween. Everyone's spirits had all convened in the yard. They were just waiting for the party to be over so they could go home.

Somewhere in there the boy left. I did not see him go. He was in the kitchen with Cleopatra and the two Ninja Turtles. Cleopatra had lost both of her heels. She was really a boy dressed as a girl.

"Let's go somewhere far, far away." Really she meant anywhere but there. Her hips were jutting out and her hands were flinging up over her head. She wanted to go somewhere, to touch the boy through his shorts. Vaguely, he wanted the same.

They went out to the car. The Ninja Turtles followed them because Cleopatra was their muse. Cleopatra was everyone's muse.

WITHIN AN hour the Castro would fall apart. That was the year the party ended—people just kept shooting each other until everyone had been shot or shit their pants and run away. One boy shot his friend that talked too much. Another boy slammed someone against a wall. "Keep your filthy faggot eyes off of me!" And that boy, the one with the eyes, he put his hand up to shield his face, but the first boy pulled the trigger anyways. The bullet went right through his hand. Also, through his face. That boy died, the one with the eyes.

A BOY I KNOW was Peter Pan now, and he went away with Cleopatra and two Ninja Turtles, and he fell into the car and he fumbled for his seatbelt—his legs in those tights, his hat lost somewhere in a couch—but it wasn't that kind of car. The city was boiling now like a volcano, here's brutes and villains and leatherclad monks filling it up, and Cleopatra with half a hand on half the wheel, her eyes streaming lust down her little boy's face, mascara and the reek of spoiled beer, her other hand spidering over to him, over him like sliding over sheets, like touching the softest sheets there are, and the boy, he's rigid, his spine's a million miles long, the way his feet press into the floor, the way his breathing, the way his mouth, because he wants it so bad and he doesn't want it at all—and to want

and to not want like that? That's the best feeling in the world.

Just then, they passed through the light.

WHAT FOLLOWS next I don't need to tell you because you already know. Cleopatra's teeth were knocked out of her skull when her head smashed against the glass of the driver's side door. She wasn't alive much longer after that. The two turtles managed to survive—they just rolled right out and scampered away. The night swallowed them up. But they were just a scared little boy and a scared little girl dry-fucking in the backseat, so no one really noticed and no one even cared.

Those spirit boys were there too. They escaped that crash without a scratch, fumbled themselves over to the curb. They mostly just stood there, the one's empty shoulder against the other one's arm, and so on, because what are two spirit boys going to do? But they did feel for the boy because, yes, spirits follow us and they sometimes lose their limbs, but they also do feel.

The lady who'd hit them, her airbag exploded and then she got out of her car. She wasn't dressed like anything because she didn't "do" Halloween. She was all jacked up on shock and adrenaline then. She went over to where the boy was sprawling out the car. He was all smashed up and broken and somehow just sprawling out the car.

"You fuck dumb fuck drunk fuck kids!" That lady said fuck a lot. She was screaming like it was the Fourth of July. All of her was just exploding out her head like she couldn't even see the blood and the boy and the ruined smashed up car.

THAT FUCK lady's spirit was there too. She went over to the curb to where the two spirit boys were. Her fingers had all fallen off and now they followed her like ducklings trail their mother.

Spirits don't choose us and we don't choose them. It just happens. Also, they cannot speak, or they won't, or they never learned how, so they tend to say a lot with just flutters of the eyes.

"Sorry my human's such a bitch," she said, her lids up and down like broken shades.

"Don't worry about it," those two boys blinked.

And then they all just stood there—Cleopatra by this time dead, the boy I know with two feet in this world and the rest of him out, that F word lady still screaming in the night—and waited for the ambulance to arrive.

A BOY I know spent four months in the hospital. His brother died. They sent the boy home with a cane.

A boy I know was sent home with a cane. He used it some to help with walking—also, for smashing things up.

A BOY I know was smashing things up. He kept finding and buying and taking more drugs, also was smashing things up. Pictures from their frames, dishes to the floor, that box that was always making so much noise. If the boy could smash it, he most certainly did.

Those spirit boys were there, watching the boy and all those things getting smashed. They took refuge on top of the fridge, tried to ignore the smashing and the noise.

MONTHS. FINALLY, someone called the landlord, who called someone else, who was about to call Wow and Zow when they mysteriously showed up. They came through the door and the smashed up hall. They had cancer of the eyes now but still could see.

"We've got it bad, boy, but you've got it worse."

The boy looked up from where he was smashing, also crying on the floor.

The boy had no choice but to agree.

WOW AND Zow helped the boy to pack his things. Four clean shirts, two pairs of pants, enough socks and underwear to last him for a couple of days. Toothbrush, shaving kit, deodorant, a little book for writing things down in, a small handheld mirror—

"Not that," Wow said.

"That mirror is haunted," Zow agreed.

So the boy had to throw it away.

A BOY I know went to a place where there were other boys just like him. Also, many men and spirits too.

"Put your things here," a new orderly said. He had poufy hair and yellowed hands.

The boy did as he was told. The orderly left the boy with some pamphlets to read, also some papers to sign. But the boy could not think, there were all these old spirits in the room. The boy could not see them, but he knew they were there.

A BOY I know was in that place of boys and men for many months. They did some things and they did not do others. They did: eat three meals a day,

accept that there is a God (however He may be conceived), write in their journals, cry some, have occasional fits of rage. They did not: drink, shoot, snort, smoke, watch porn, or otherwise consume. They told stories and did their best to heal.

One man said, "I'm here because my wife left me. She was tired of looking at my arms." He held his arms out for all to see. There were many track marks there.

Another one just curled up in a ball on the floor and did not move for a long, long time. The others knew exactly what it was he was trying to say.

And so on.

They said to the boy I know, "Why are you here?" and the boy said, "I have two spirits that are following me around," and they said "Yes, but why are you *really* here?" and the boy said, "I had a brother once but then he died."

"**W**HAT WAS your brother's name?" those men and boys asked.

"Daniel," said the boy I know.

Daniel, they repeated.

"Daniel," said the boy.

Daniel. *Daniel*. Daniel. *Daniel*. On and on, just like that, a call and response of the broken and shameful and sad—Daniel, *Daniel*, Daniel, *Daniel*—which did not heal him all the way, but it did heal him, it healed him some.

AND THEN, after many months of some days just like that and others not at all, the boy I know did what many boys have tried to do, though it's true that some have failed: he left that place filled with men and boys and spirits too, and he put one foot in front of the other, and the boy I know then walked away.

BY NOW I've told you all there is to know about the boy I know. I haven't seen him in a long time, though I find him all the time on Facebook. I've looked at all his photos, he's past thirty now and in school for the first time in years. The boy is planning a vacation. The boy is finished with his Christmas shopping, thank god. The boy is eating an apple and avoiding work, and so on.

But what I really want to say is this: the boy is grown, a man now. I track my thoughts to find and keep him, but the truth is, I've lost a boy I've never known. Nights, these days, are shorter than they used to be. We are no longer so tethered to the thoughts inside our heads. I do not know what keeps him, or where he stays or goes. I do not know where he keeps his grief, or even, really, if he calls it grief at all.

All I know is this: the city has recoiled some, turned back on itself like a chain or a whip. She no longer bares such fierce and shining teeth. The boy stays home and reads his books. He makes notes in the margins, has a cigarette, brews tea. He sits in a room in a house by the sea, and the only sound is his own heart beating, or a wind that moves over the house like the passing of a hand. Things have become so quiet; things have become incredibly still. And yet, most nights, all nights, the boy I know and do not know can hear them, his two spirit boys, leaning into one another, waltzing and tumbling around.□