

# —GHOSTS UNDER GLASS

*by Tracie McBride*

Corey had discovered the first ghosts in a parked car near the bridge they usually slept under. David had run back to the stash of “treasures” he kept in a pilfered shopping trolley and had returned with a huge glass jar with a screw top lid. It was the kind of jar that looked like it should have a pickled fetus floating in it. “I’m gonna catch me one of those,” he had said, patting the jar under his arm, “and keep it as a pet.” They soon found more of them, all imprisoned within buildings or vehicles, but David had yet to get brave enough to see what would happen if he opened a door and let one out.

They walked past McDonald’s, and Corey imagined he could smell fries cooking. He hesitated at the door. For no apparent reason, David started to laugh.

“What’s so funny?” asked Julia, but Corey could tell that she didn’t really care what the answer was. She was too busy eyeballing the ghosts tapping on the window.

A couple of the ghosts began to fling themselves against the door with all the strength they could muster, which was completely absent, and Corey took a step back. The ghost of a teenaged boy, his cap on backward, mouthed obscenities at Julia and gave her the finger. Julia reached out her hand and spread her fingertips against the glass. The ghosts flew into a frenzy, swarming across the window in a futile attempt to break through.

“Cool,” said Julia. “Like one of those lightning plasma ball thingies.” Her eyes shone in the light from the crackling ectoplasm. Corey couldn’t stand to look at them for more than a few seconds at a time; they made him feel nauseous. He slapped her hand away.

“Don’t tease them,” he said.

“Why not?” said David. “We know they can’t get out. It’s the only thing we do know. That, and the fact that we’d better figure out where we’re gonna find some food without having to tangle with those.” He nodded in the direction of the ghosts and hefted his jar nervously from side to side.

“There’s always vending machines. . .” said Corey.

“Glass,” said Julia abruptly. “They’re all behind glass. Could be the vending machines are haunted too.”

“Nope,” said David authoritatively. “I’ve got it all figured out. Wherever there were people inside last night—and that was just about everybody—they were wasted.

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Wiped out. Nuked. Ghostified. Whatever you want to call it. We were safe, see, 'cos we were sleeping outside." He nodded, obviously pleased with himself.

Julia leant closer to the window and pressed her swollen belly against it. The ghosts froze for a moment, their phantom eyes stretched improbably wide, then renewed their assault on the glass, moving so fast they turned into a blur. David and Corey simultaneously yelled and pulled her away, one on each arm. The blur slowly resolved back into distinct shapes.

"For fuck's sake, Julia!" said David. "You don't know what effect those things might have on the baby." Julia pouted and looked away. Her gaze stopped on a small stuffed toy left lying in the gutter, and she wandered over to retrieve it, David's reprimand already forgotten. David and Corey looked at each other and sighed. Julia's baby might have been Corey's, or it might have been David's, or for all they knew its father might be floating behind glass somewhere. But they had taken responsibility for her. Julia was special, a genuine, free-spirited innocent, or at least that was how Corey saw her. The way her mind was wired up, she alone needed full-time attention. He didn't want to think about how they would cope with her baby as well. The boys trailed after her. It had started to rain again, and they scuttled between shop awnings.

"Look!" said Julia. "There's somebody else! A live person!"

David looked up, swore, and pulled her into a doorway.

"Sssh!" he whispered, clamping his hand over her mouth. "It's a cop!"

"Yeah, but it's a *live* cop," Corey whispered back. "He's the first real human being we've seen all day. Maybe we should all stick together—you know, safety in numbers and all that."

David gave him a withering look. "If you really believe that, then how come you're not rushing out there to greet him with open arms? Betchya it was some government conspiracy or fucked-up military experiment that did this, anyway."

Corey peeped around the doorway at the cop, silently conceding that David had a point. The cop crept down the street away from them, holding his gun outstretched in shaking hands. As he turned the corner, Corey caught a glimpse of his wide, manic eyes. He ducked back into the doorway until they could no longer hear the cop's footsteps. They stepped out of hiding and headed off in the opposite direction.

"So if we're not going to look for other survivors, what do you suggest we do instead?"

"Maybe we could hotwire a car and head out to the coast," David said. "There's bound to be plenty of those million dollar beach houses sitting empty in the off season."

"And if they're empty, fuckwit," said Corey, "their pantries will be empty as well."

David scowled and kicked viciously at an empty Coke can.

"Or we could go to my folks' place," said Julia. Corey started; he hadn't thought she was listening.

"They went on holiday in Europe three weeks ago," she continued. She cradled a small purple teddy bear in her arms and stroked it as if it were alive. "They were supposed to be coming home on Sunday. . . anyway, Mum had a Natural Disaster kit, so there'll be plenty of tinned food in that."