

# Visitation

A Yoopernatural Short

Tales of Life in Deathe

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RON BLANK FELT A PSYCHIC TWINGE as he passed through the twin stone pillars of the lane that led to his house. It manifested itself as an icy finger drawn down the back of his neck.

*Manifested itself.* Ha. Not the first time something had *manifested itself* just for him. His shoulders flinched with the sudden chill.

But this was unusual, he thought. Unfamiliar manifestations happened *elsewhere*, at work and throughout the village of Deathe. Sure, Cavendish House was haunted. He knew that far better than anyone, but the hair on the back of his neck had not stood up like this since his first week sleeping there alone, engulfed by fog and nearly two centuries of history, surrounded by the creaks and groans of the old house, an occasional breath of cold air, the random shrill scream in the dead of night (a screech owl? screech owls did not live this far north, and not in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan). And of course there was the ghost of Miss Catherine Cavendish, forever unfairly known in local legend as Cathy Cadaver.

But she was a friendly ghost. A benign and genteel ghost, often even helpful. Tidy. Fastidious, even to the point of cleaning up his little messes whenever he wasn't looking.

He herded his present ride—a battered old Ford Bronco II borrowed from Chief Woody—into and through the boxcar that now spanned Stony Creek Ravine, careful not to peel off another side mirror. The boxcar was a perfectly adequate and picturesque covered bridge, a recent installation made necessary by the collapse of the hundred-year-old original... and the bombing of its replacement a few months later, on *the same freaking day* that Ron and a small cadre of disinterested students from Cavendish Junior College had rebuilt it. The boxcar was long, dark, and very narrow. And hell on the side mirrors if he wasn't careful.

His apprehension grew with every rotation of the bald tires. By the time he'd parked the Bronco in the carriage house, unlocked the back door of his ancient mansion and stepped into the kitchen, he found himself creeping more cautiously than a cat burglar in a house full of heavily-armed insomniacs.

Slipping off his shoes, he tried to stretch out his senses, to let them go on ahead of him and probe the house for the Uninvited, whoever or whatever that might be. Nothing returned to him. Disappointing, but not unexpected. His psychic senses had been failing him a lot lately. They'd never been very reliable, if in fact they'd ever worked at all.

He was used to *his* ghosts, the ones he'd known and loved, like Miss Catherine, and the ones he'd merely endured, like Pud, the former *unhandyman* at Cavendish Junior College, who had died before Ron's time, and then stuck around for five insufferable years after Ron had taken on

the job as campus electrician. Five years of Ron rewiring all the fire- and electrocution hazards Pud had scattered around like little time bombs. Five years of Pud sitting on the workbench in the maintenance shop, telling and retelling all his lame stories for an audience of one: Ron Blank, the only person on campus who could see him, and, worse yet, hear him. At least until the arrival of Michigan State Police Trooper Alice Louise Dubose, dropping in to investigate a suspected murder on campus, and Erin Coe, a CJC coed who had soon signed on as Ron's intern. Both were able to see and hear Pud—much to Ron's surprise, and their displeasure. No surprise *there* at all.

They were special somehow, Alice and Erin. Like Ron. Sensitive to a world beyond the usual senses, whether they could admit it—even to themselves—or not.

Ron edged through the old house, peering into the watery afternoon light that filtered through heavy drapes, and listening, ears straining to hear anything at all unusual in the heavy silence. He was about to give it up, to shake it off as a false psychic alarm, when he heard the whisper of cloth and the squeak of chair springs behind him. He froze.

“Oh. There you are,” a sleepy voice said.

A familiar voice, although it took him a second to place it. A voice he hadn't heard even once in five years, except on the telephone, since he'd moved back to Deathe. He turned slowly toward the sound and saw a shadow deeper than the rest move within the darkness that cloaked that distant corner of the living room. The figure leaned forward until a dusty shaft of light from a window illuminated a narrow, pale face.

Ron's breath caught in his throat.

“Dad?”

“Well, it's about time you got home. I don't have a lot of time left here, you know.”

“Um, no. I don't know. What?” Ron tried to remain calm. He hadn't seen his father in person since he'd quit the family business, Blankenship Engineering, and moved back to Deathe from the suburbs of Chicago.

There had been hard feelings, and no attempts by either side at reconciliation.

Not a word was spoken, the church bells are were broken.

Confused, at a loss for words, Ron padded to the front door and rattled the big brass knobs. Locked.

“How did you get in?” he asked in a pained voice. “And... how did you get here?” There'd been no vehicle parked outside the house, no fresh tire tracks in the soft, damp dirt between the cobblestones of the driveway.

“Well, you know, I'm not really sure.” Jim Blankenship levered himself up and out of the enormous chair—all the furniture in the old house was enormous, especially in the living room—and tottered toward Ron, slowly, pausing to touch or steady himself on the occasional chair or sofa. The better to maintain his balance, Ron realized.

He looked so old. Faded. He wore shapeless khakis and a rumpled, colorless Oxford shirt.

“I don't really remember,” Dad said, blinking. “I was thinking about you... a lot, lately. And now, well...” He shrugged, befuddled. “Here I am.”

“Yes. Yes, you are.” Ron found himself nodding vacantly.

“Can’t stick around for long.” Dad straightened up his insubstantial frame and gave his back a twist. Ron heard his spine crackle like old parchment. “Got things to do. Places to be.”

Familiar words, the words Ron had heard almost every day of his life. Dad was always in a hurry, always busy, always had important things to do. More important things than mere family. Mom had left him four years ago, not long after Ron had moved away, looking elsewhere for more attention. (And more money, and a more extravagant lifestyle of exotic travel and five-star hotels, if Ron were to allow himself to think unkind thoughts of his mother. He tried not to. But it was true. Last he knew she was staying somewhere on the Riviera with her new husband, a securities trader.)

“Is your car here somewhere?” Ron couldn’t let it go. “Did someone drop you off here?”

Dad shook his head. “I guess I don’t remember. I thought, well, you know.” He looked down at his shoes. “I thought, ‘I need to see my son once more before I’m gone.’” He looked up, his gray eyes boring into Ron’s. “So.” He shrugged again, at a loss for words.

*Typical engineer*, Ron thought. Dad had always been a bit socially inept. *And so have I*. Asocial, if not antisocial, happy to live all alone in a home roughly the size of a dreadnought battleship, and work through a long day without ever interacting with any coworkers—whenever at all possible. *I guess I come by it honestly*.

“You, um, want to come out into the kitchen? I can fix us something to eat.”

“Sure. Sure. That would be good.” He started to follow as Ron turned toward the kitchen. “But I guess I’m not really hungry. I don’t eat much anymore. I don’t think.” He shrugged.

Ron nodded. “I can see that.”

Dad was a bit less than average height and had always had a slight build, but he was thinner now than Ron ever remembered. Probably not eating well, not since Mom left. Not that Mom ever cooked.

“Have you been sick?”

“Well, now, that’s a good question. Not that I remember, I guess.” He shrugged again. “Maybe?”

Odd.

Or not so odd. A thought began to take form in Ron’s mind.

He flipped on the lights as they entered the kitchen. Dad slumped down at the small dinette table, looking tired. Exhausted. A shell of a man.

“How’d you like a sandwich? Maybe egg salad? I think I have some ham.” He pulled open the doors of the big stainless Subzero and surveyed his choices. *I don’t even know how to relate to this man*, he thought. *I never did*. “Ham and cheese? Grilled? You want a beer?”

“No. No, I think I’ll pass.” Gazing vacantly at the floor, he shook his head, as if feeling a profound sense of loss. “Food just doesn’t interest me for some reason.”

Ron sighed, a deep heavy sigh. *I think I know why.* He knew now that his Dad's time here really was short. Just passing through, on his way to... wherever. Hopefully not where Pud went, and not hanging around Ron's house with Miss Catherine for all eternity.

Biting his lip, Ron hoped there would be enough time for reconciliation before Dad had to go. A mutual understanding. Peace and harmony.

*Rapprochement*, he thought, putting a French accent on it. And then?

The final parting of their ways.

"You know," Dad said, "we've had our ups and downs."

Ron forced a pained smile. And so it begins. "Yes we have. Like when you lifted me up into that treehouse you built, and it fell down."

"And you with it. Well, I was an electrical engineer, not a civil engineer, and I was certainly never a carpenter." He chuckled. "Did I ever apologize for that?"

Was.

"Once or twice." Or maybe it was never. Ron couldn't remember his father ever apologizing for anything, even the broken arm he'd sustained that day, crashing to the ground and howling with pain.

But now was not the time to rehash old wounds.

"I meant to come to your graduation at MIT," Dad said with a sigh. "But you know. Business."

"That was a long time ago. And it was Michigan Tech, not MIT." Dad should have known. He'd written enough tuition checks over the years.

"That's what I said," Dad snapped, his usual, defensive self again, for just an instant. And Ron bristled, stiffening in his chair, but then reprimanded himself and forced himself to relax. He was not his father. He didn't have to be right all the time. Or at least he didn't have to insist on it. Dad shrugged. "Whatever. I can't seem to remember much now. Everything is getting fuzzy."

"It's okay. It's a common misconception here in Deathe, for some reason. Everyone seems to think I went to MIT."

Dad lifted his head and squinted at Ron. "You didn't?"

"Um, no, Dad. I went to Michigan Tech. Up in Houghton? You came and visited me that one year. During the Winter Carnival. The Ice Festival."

Dad fell silent for a moment, then nodded slowly. "It was cold."

"Yes it was." Ron shivered. "And it still is, every winter." Now that he was living in Deathe, barely an hour away, he suddenly wondered why he'd never gone back since his college years. Because it was so damned bitterly cold among all those glittering ice sculptures, he decided.

Dad sat in silence, his eyes wandering around the room.

"Have you been okay?" Ron asked.

"Getting old," Dad said with a weary sigh. "I knew I was going to get old, but I thought it would take longer." He smiled to himself. "I just made that up."

“Um, pretty sure you didn’t,” Ron muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Dad looked around. Lost. “I followed the light.”

“What?”

“How I got here. I saw the light, and I followed it. Them. There were many lights. Beautiful lights.”

*But you didn’t follow the right light, Ron thought. See the light. Follow the light.*

“I followed, and here I am.”

Ron thought of all the reading he’d done about NDEs—Near Death Experiences—that he done in the long, dark, quiet nights at Cavendish House. The commonality was a tunnel that led to a light, a bright, warm, welcoming light. He’d never given these things much thought before moving in with a ghost, and getting haunted by Pud. Among the other strange things he’d seen in Deathe over the years.

“The sky was full of light. It led me here.”

“Oh.” Ron remembered. “Oh. The, um, *Northern Lights?*” There had been a solar flare a few days earlier. The northern lights, the Aurora Borealis, had been projected to reach as far south as Ohio. Could that be what Dad was talking about? *Wrong light. Keep trying, Dad.*

Dad offered a feeble shrug. “I’m gonna miss me when I’m gone.”

*I will too.* Ron pulled two beers out of the fridge, twisted off the caps and set them on the table between them as he eased down into a chair. “To us. Last of the U.P. Blankenships.” He tipped his bottle to his father, who ignored his own, gazing down at the table, unaware. “Do you know why you’re here, Dad?”

The elder Blankenship looked up, his eyes cloudy. “I came to see you?”

“Good. I’m glad.” He almost reached out to take his father’s hand, something he hadn’t done in more years than he could remember, but held back, not sure if he should, or if he could—even if he really wanted to. “Listen, I know we’ve had our differences over the years...”

“Yes. Yes, we have.” Dad looked down into his lap. His face was pale, drawn, his prematurely gray hair thinning. And despite the five intervening years, Ron couldn’t imagine life without him.

*So this is it, he thought. Our final visit before Dad moves on. Forever.*

And what would life be like after? Pretending? He could *here* live as if Dad was still *there*, in that tony Chicago suburb, running his business, cajoling his employees (none so much as he had cajoled Ron), always pushing, always busy. Always *there*. Isn’t that what people do? *Dad isn’t dead. That’s not possible. He’s just away on business. He’ll walk back in the door at any moment. The lie people tell themselves to avoid the pain of loss.*

Any moment now.

“I always thought you would take over the business,” Dad said, his voice heavy with sadness.

Not gonna happen, Ron thought. “You have good people there. The firm will go on.” He wondered if it really would.

Deep within the old house Ron’s old candlestick telephone rang a discordant jangle. Once. Twice. It continued to ring. There are no answering machines in Deathe. They just don’t work with the ancient, obsolete and obstinate telephone exchange system, and Ron probably would not have had one if he could; it wasn’t a good fit with the house. Or the phone. Which continued to jangle insistently with no sign of giving up.

“I’d better get that,” Ron said. Not that he ever wanted to. Telephones never brought good news. It might be his boss, Ed Posen, demanding that he come in to work and change a light bulb, or some other such critical emergency. Off the clock, of course.

The phone continued to nag. Any normal caller would have given up by now.

Ron sighed. He pushed back the chair and stood and was startled when his father reached out and touched his hand with cold fingertips. *So there’s that.*

“If that’s your mother,” he said, concern in his eyes, “don’t tell her I’m here.”

“Nope. Furthest thing from my mind.” Wasn’t that the truth? How does one explain things like this? Especially to Ron’s mother, a woman who was locked relentlessly into the physical world, the here and now, a world of status and money, good food, first class travel, expensive clothes and luxury hotels, and of course the eternal morbid fear of What Will the Neighbors Think.

Ron eased his hand from the light pressure of his father’s touch. “I’ll be right back. Don’t go... anywhere.” *Just yet.*

He wound his way through the kitchen and the butler’s pantry and a couple of foyers and anterooms, the living room, past the massive oak doors of the front entry, to the tiny round table at the foot of the grand staircase which held the appropriately archaic phone. He picked it up on what must have been the twentieth ring, unhooked the earpiece and pressed it to his ear.

“Hello?” he said into the mouthpiece.

“Orion?” came his mother’s voice, as if from a million miles away. *O-ree-yun.* She was likely the only one who ever called him that anymore, especially here in Deathe, where everyone knew him only as Ron Blank after he’d legally changed his name from Orion Clemens Blankenship years before. That was the name he’d been saddled with when his father had brought them to Deathe, and when he’d graduated from Deathe Consolidated Schools, before they’d retreated back to Chicago and Ron had gone to work for his father, Jim Blankenship and Blankenship Engineering, and saved all his money, and finally fled back to Deathe under his new name... unrecognized and blissfully forgotten by all his classmates... save for Beth Atkins, his best friend in town.

He swallowed hard.

“Hi, Mom.”

“I’m... I’m calling you about your father...”

“Yah. Yes, yes, I know.” Ron glanced up to see his father standing close by now, alarm popping his pale gray eyes, shaking his head and making shushing motions.

“*You know?*” Mom sounded shocked. Which was not all that unusual. “How—”

“It’s just... well, it’s a long story. But. Yes. I know.”

Jim Blankenship slumped, as if his bones had all gone soft. Ron pressed the earpiece tighter and turned his back on his father.

“Well that’s a relief,” Mom said with a sigh. “You know how I hate giving bad news to anyone.”

*Not really*, Ron thought. Whenever there was horrible news, a grisly car crash or some celebrity found dead, Mom was always first to grab the phone and gleefully spread the news to one and all, and irritated whenever she was late to that particular party. “I know there’s nothing you can do about it, not *Up There* where you are now—” she always said that like he was living under a death penalty in a Siberian gulag or something— “but I thought you should know, just so you don’t, you know, worry or anything. Well, I’m sure you’d worry anyway.”

“I’m not worried, Mom.” *Really and truly*, he thought. Not worried. Dad would soon be in good hands. He turned back to his father, but Dad was not there. Gone. Wandered back to the kitchen maybe. Or? Followed the light?

“Well,” Mom said, her voice light years away, carried on primordial electrons. “You know there’s nothing *I* can do about it now.”

True enough, Ron thought. It would not be like Mom to take on all the complicated arrangements. But, knowing his father, Ron assumed all the technical details had been *prearranged*: the funeral service prepaid, the casket and the vault probably selected from a glossy catalog—only the finest—and of course the final resting place on a hill in a prestigious cemetery—at least that was what Mom would have insisted on before she’d left after the separation. Wills, deeds, heirs, corporate estate planning, lawyers, all was probably thoroughly covered and well in hand.

He’d probably written his own obituary, contacted the minister and specified the hymns.

“I’m still stuck in Monaco,” Mom continued, sounding not very bereft, and not very stuck. “Stefan is here for an international peace conference, I just can’t leave him with all that responsibility.” Stefan was Mom’s new husband. After pushing Dad for years to work harder and longer and make more and more money, she’d finally left him for a sleek and tailored trust fund millionaire who would spend more quality time with her—the one thing Dad couldn’t give her because he was working too hard paying the bills. Probably killing himself, paying those bills. “There’s just nothing I can do from here. You... you’ll have to take care of it for me. All the, um, arrangements. There’s the good boy.”

He imagined her pouting into a platinum Tonino Lamborghini smartphone. She might even manage to force a tear.

Craning his neck, Ron strained to hear any noises from the kitchen, which was too far away, beyond too many walls and rooms and anterooms to see from the foot of the staircase. Was this it? Was he really gone? Already? The sudden sense of loss overwhelmed him. Unanswered questions, things left unsaid. He heaved a sigh.

“Don’t worry, Mom. I will be happy to take care of everything.” Anything that Dad hasn’t already seen to, anyway. He would have to drive back to the college, log onto a computer, do

some research. Make some calls. Then there was the scheduling. Would Mom even bother to make time to come home for the funeral? Maybe just a memorial? “When could you make it back for a service?”

“A service? What service?”

Ron paused, his mind stumbling over this question.

“The, um, funeral service.”

“Funeral service? Oh, no, dear. Your father isn’t dead. Where on earth did you get that idea? He just... He wandered away from his nursing home. He’s gotten senile. They’ve been looking for him since yesterday. Did no one tell you?”

Ron stared at the earpiece for a long moment. *Did no one tell me? Like, maybe, you, for instance? Even that he has dementia?* “I have to go, Mom. I’ll talk to you later.” He slammed the earpiece on the hook and dropped the phone onto the table.

After a quick search of the parlor, living room, den and kitchen, he found the back door ajar, open to the gathering dusk. Considering the time and the vastness of the forests surrounding Cavendish House, he dashed back to the telephone and spun the dial, hoping the old exchange could handle one more call before packing it in for the night.

“Deathe Police Department,” said the familiar voice on the other end.

“This is Ron. Ron Blank. Is there a chance you could come out here with a few volunteers? And flashlights? I think my father has wandered off into the woods. Apparently,” he heard himself saying, “he has dementia.”