

Ghosts

Creative Nonfiction • Anonymous

Two weeks before Nate's dad died, Nate died too. This time, on stage. After Romeo stormed away, and the audience blinked back new tears, he quietly folded his legs, stood up from the floor, and exited in the dark. He sat on a prop bench in the wings afterwards, where I had hid myself in the black drapes, waiting for my cue. Before it was my turn to fling myself over Romeo's still and softly breathing body, Nate reached for my wrist and pulled me to stand in between his legs, hands resting on my waist like I might bolt, in this jittery, newness way, that I hoped, at the time, would one day become familiar, like the easy pull of a venetian blind, like opening a familiar book, how the worn spine creases the same way each time. Covering his mic with one hand, Nate spoke softly, *You know, when I'm sort of twitching out there, it's not entirely accurate. When someone is killed, their whole body releases and they die covered in their own shit.* He paused, looking up at me, our faces and costumes like a secret, the only bright things not consumed in darkness, then whispered, *It's awful, but I think I would laugh.*

When Ava texted to tell me what happened, I knew that Nate had been praying the rosary since Monday. Which is not to say that I saw it coming, just that Nate might have, in the back of his heart, understood that his father was a smoker, and that he struggled with his weight in a Mississippi, in love, try Atkins, way. That with those risk factors, Covid might mean something more than just the house settling in the night. That when Nate clutched his crucifix, he only felt the gold leafing, not his father's

hand, or the hand of his savior. The hospital was on lockdown, so when word of his death reached the town, rumor has it, no one had the chance to say goodbye.

All I know of Nate's father I learned after he died- whispers from mothers and teachers, the obituary printed in the Meridian Star. I learned that Nate's father taught history and coached football at the community college. That he was proud of his son and was *affectionately known by most all who knew him*. Which means I didn't know much about him at all.

Every obituary sounds the same. I kept imagining Nate reading it and getting angry. It occurred to me that I had actually never seen him angry before, so I wasn't sure what this looked like. The closest I had ever seen him to experiencing negative emotion was when he talked about Anna, his first girlfriend, who *doesn't deserve to walk around like she's better than everyone* and even that was a brief admission. He lived only a half mile walk from where I laid in the backyard hammock swing imagining how he was doing, trying to understand him differently now.

Over the summer our irritation had turned semi-serious, but it was all new. I just liked how I felt when he leaned down to look in my eyes, trying to decide if they were more blue or gray in front of the whole cast. The way he reached for my necklace to study the inscription on my locket, pulling me closer to him. It was the first time I really felt chosen, like there was something special about me, and I twirled into my room each night absolutely floating, trying to stay up as long as he would keep texting. But now I was left with just memories, staring at blue fractals of sky between branches from my hammock and wondering if he would ever call me to come over and sit with him when he wanted to talk.

Before Nate graduated high school in May, he had signed on with Belhaven to play football like his dad did, but dropped out after the first summer practices. He told me he didn't want to just go out there and get beat up all day. Once, thinking I was going to seem very deep and caring, I asked if he ever felt pressure from his dad to play in college. He said that his dad didn't really care that much what he did, as long as he didn't make him sit through ninety minutes of singing and dancing and boys in makeup; that he never told his father about the time he had to dress up like a mermaid. I said I thought it was very brave of him to do what was best for him, transferring

to community college, taking all the leads in local productions and passing time flirting with all the high schoolers. The last part I said with a smile, leaning over to bump his shoulder with mine.

I wanted to prove I would stay by his side when it wasn't all teenage dream, when he needed me most. I thought he needed me most. When I left a Tupperware container of casserole on his doorstep, he did not meet me outside or respond to the note. The letter was co-signed at the last minute by Ava, in hopes to dilute what I considered to be a brazen confession of love. The stationary was from third grade and I wrote a little joke at the end about not making fun of the magenta swirls and peace signs. Ava said it might not be the time, but all I wanted to do was make him smile, even more than I wanted him to love me.

Of course, there was nothing I could have proven to him. This was about Nate, who did not love me. Who made a quiet exit. Who did not ask me to stay.

I spent the rest of the summer in mourning. I didn't go to the funeral, but sometimes I still mourn, for that secret buzz of something more. When I saw him again, three months later, I did not recognize his face. Grief slid his fingers down Nate's jaw and held on, sunken cheekbones and eyes that once held and searched and warmed me, now shallow, a wall that stops. Only identified by the teal t-shirt he used to wear all the time, one that now devoured him. Ava called it a glow up and the hot lava inside me began to bubble over. I liked him first. Shouldn't that count for something? His laugh and smirk were now combative, a new distance that suffocated.

I only know him as he was. He is nineteen and has never been on a plane. Never dressed up for Halloween, or believed me when I said I had two spades- he always read my face well. I guess it was naive of me to hope that nothing would change, that his world would stand still in grief and then resume where we left off. What can be more teenager than to curse the ghosts who haunt your would-be boyfriend when they no longer text you back?

After that summer, we would still hang out occasionally. He would pick me up when I got off work at my summer job to browse a library or watch a movie but it was never the same. He left for Auburn and every so often I'll get a text from him, how I was *the most precious person ever* and he

hopes I'm *doing so, so well*. Now, he has a job in DC and an apartment he shares with his girlfriend. Yet somewhere, in the deepest, most pathetic and selfish sixteen-year-old inner self, I still pine for an earlier time, when Nate's dad was just a shadowy figure I never met, who refused to watch a play where his son wore makeup.