

## Ten Dollars

By Kelly Shi

Nobody knows that my new neighbor is a ghost. I am about to find out, but right now, my friend Bryan is sitting next to me and screaming at the TV screen while I click my controller dangerously hard.

“Oh my, bro, doesn’t that zombie look like the homeless guy down by Kmart? They’re both tall, hairy, and creepy!” Bryan guffaws. He accidentally presses a button, and the game returns to the home screen.

“What are you doing? Hurry! There are only two more zombies to go!” My left eye twitches from gaming for 4 hours. My bedroom is the perfect room for gaming; it is the closest room to the router and the closest to the snack shelf. Inside my room hangs a goldfish painting I drew in third grade, which gives me good luck. A few inches to the right is a scuff made by my nerf gun. On my shelf is a display of Hot Wheel cars in their original boxes. I wonder how much they’re worth now. I have collected them since I was six, hoping one day to sell them for a million dollars so I’ll never be homeless and disgusting. I can’t imagine not having a house to live in and just wandering the streets like one of those gross zombies in the game.

We finish our second bag of Pirate’s Booty while our oily hands click uncontrollably, fighting for the last diamond to build our pickaxes. I like hanging out with Bryan. He’s fun, and he has his weird clothing choices and his goose-like laugh always cracks me up. Once he starts laughing, he can’t stop, and that makes me laugh.

A flash of light shines through my bedroom window. Bryan pauses mid-screch and drops the controller on the potato chip-strewn carpet. The chips break into smaller pieces as he walks to the window.

“Man, have you ever seen your neighbor before?” Bryan takes a peek through the inch-wide gap between the two curtains.

“What are you talking about? They just put the house up for sale, like two weeks ago. No one lives there now.” My feet uncoil from a weird position I don’t know I’ve been sitting in. I stand up, and my water bottle rolls and hits my chair.

I open the maroon-colored curtains wide enough for both Bryan and me to see. I peer down at a shadow moving across the ground. What is that? I assure myself that, by the expression on Bryan's face, he is wondering the same thing.

"Uh, I think it might be a shadow from the trees. It's fine," I say. Whatever it is, I hope it isn't alive and at least doesn't hurt me. Bryan seems convinced that all is fine.

We are about to sit back down and game when I suddenly feel hot air on the back of my neck. Bryan and I both jump at the same time. My brother bites into a peeled orange sideways.

"What are you looking at?"

Bryan says, "A ghost, I think."

"You guys know about that? Everybody's talking about the ghost being Mr. Sullivan, our history teacher who died in that house. He was the one that made everyone stand up and salute when we heard the word 'war' in a film in class. This way, he could make sure that nobody was sleeping."

"Why would he be haunting that house?" I ask.

"I don't know. But did you know that people also say that if you look directly at the ghost's eyes, you will get possessed? Everyone thinks that Mary-Ann is possessed. People saw Mary-Ann bring food to the ghost's house and leave it on the doorstep. 'Cause everyone knows that ghosts like food, ya know. The food was gone the next morning."

Brian shudders, eyes wide open. Everyone knows Mary-Ann is weird. It's not something new. Personally, I don't think Mary-Ann is possessed. She's just the only person in seventh grade with braided pigtails.

"Ha ha," I laugh unconvincingly. "There's no way. You're lying."

"Oh yeah? How about those clanking and thumping noises you've been hearing at night that come out of that house? Do you think I am also making that up?"

Meanwhile, Bryan pretends not to listen. He stares, overly focused on the TV, ready to resume our game.

"I dare you guys to go to that house!" exclaims my brother. "Also, ten bucks from my own allowance."

I hated for my brother to see that I am a coward. My mom always used to say that I was too "*impulsive*." I never really knew what that meant, but I knew it wasn't something good.

“All right, sure,” I say, trying to sound brave. “Ten dollars each?”

“Sure.”

“Bryan, let’s go. We’ve got money to make.” Bryan hesitates for a second, but at the thought of money, he rises from the chair.

As we walk down the stairs, thoughts flood my brain. *What if my brother is right? If he is, will we also get possessed? How do you stop a ghost from possessing you?* Bryan seems to be thinking something similar to me since neither of us exchanges a word.

The sky is already half dark as the sun slowly goes down. Birds fly back to their nests, while a slight wind breezes our way. The trees tower over us as if telling us to go home.

“Do we want to do this? I mean, it’s only ten dollars each. That’s only enough to buy three bags of Sour Patch Kids.”

I ignore Bryan and keep on walking. Duh, of course, we’re doing this, not for the money, but to prove to my brother we’re not cowards.

I arrive at the front door a lot faster than I am expecting. A ring of white paint shows against the maroon door, surrounding the golden doorknob. Cracked wood shows along the bottom of the door, which is ajar. Blackness fills the opening.

“Dude, we should just go in, get out, get it over with, and get our ten dollars,” says Bryan.

“Yeah,” I agree, “we should.”

I see my brother staring at us from our second-floor window. An eager smile spreads across his face, nodding as if to say go in.

“Hello?” I say. I stretch the last *o* to make sure anyone inside can hear me. Sure, I worry we are breaking the law, but technically, this house does not belong to anybody yet. The darkness ahead of us seems to welcome us with a ghastly purpose. Even though I am impulsive, I always envision the worst-case scenario for everything I do. If I’m holding a knife, I think I will cut myself accidentally. If I’m on a plane, I envision the dive and the screams. I step in first, and Bryan steps in after me. Here, I blink quickly, hoping my eyes will adjust to the light. Bryan reaches for the light switch.

“Where is the light switch?” Bryan whispers in a strained voice. “I can’t find it. Can you look for it on your side?”

I grope around the cold, bumpy wall. I expect to find a smooth light switch. The house

smells of spoiled paint and sawdust. Slivers of light illuminate the room just enough to make it dark gray, air particles now floating in the air. I hear a whimper and take a step backward. I take a step forward. *Thump*, a noise comes from further in the house. I wet my lips and feel dumb talking to the dark.

“Anybody here?” I call out once more. Silence. My heart beats a steady 130. I hold my breath until my head hurts against my temples.

“Whatcha need, boy?” blurts out a raspy voice.

I stand paralyzed, and so does Bryan. Time stops. *Click*. My hands shoot up instinctively to my face to protect the yellowish lights that momentarily blind my eyes. After a good five seconds, I relax my arms and let them down as my vision comes into focus. A tall man around age 50, wearing a shaggy brown beard with a slightly balding head, approaches us. He wears a green shirt with a cartoon pickle saying, “I’m kind of a big dill,” and a pair of ripped khaki pants. The shirt is too small for him, and his stomach shows.

He holds out a red box to us. “Want some Ritz?” he asks in a gentlemanly voice that completely disagrees with his disheveled appearance.

“I mean, uh,” Bryan stares.

“We’re good. We just wanted to check out if you were . . . er . . . a ghost.”

He has a booming laugh. When he stops laughing, he says, “I know I’m not supposed to be here. It’s been tough out here. No one’s willing to give me a job.” The man sighs. “So I find houses that are up for sale, and I occupy them briefly. I’m like free security. I clean up the house and wash the windows.”

I glance around, but the house doesn’t seem very clean. I don’t point that out.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“They call me Pat.”

“Nice to meet you,” I say.

“Where’d you get that shirt? I like it!” exclaims Bryan.

Pat tells us that he found it in a trash can. He then proceeds to tell us all the funny and useful things he finds. Pat once found an outdated but working Nokia phone, a nose-hair trimmer, a guitar with a broken string, a barely worn pair of shoes, and a Philadelphia Eagles sweatshirt. We learn that Pat was laid off because his tech company got rid of all the older workers and hired new younger ones.

As Bryan and I walk back to the house, he says, “He was cool, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah, definitely. I wonder if all homeless people are that cool.”

I think about what ten dollars could buy for Pat, and I’m sure Bryan is thinking the same.