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Category: Short Story

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## **Ghost Girl**

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Robin knew that she had not actually been invited to Elaine Rothko's birthday party. She had not received, as all the real guests had, an invitation with the heading, "Elaine's Sweet Sixteen Birthday Bash!!!" with three exclamation points and a border of watercolor seashells. Instead, her mother had gotten a phone call during breakfast and announced, "Elaine wanted to invite you to her party," which meant that Elaine's mother, who was friends with Robin's mother, wanted to invite Robin to Elaine's party.

"I don't really think she did," Robin said, but she was ushered, protesting, into the car and dropped off at Elaine's house. Elaine's mother was, or said she was, glad to see her. No one else even attempted to make the claim.

It became immediately clear to Robin that she had done everything wrong. She had not brought a present, and, though she had been indirectly connected to Elaine for years, she could not have begun to fathom what she would want. Elaine and the other girls all wore tee-shirts in varying colors that said, "Maybe, Baby," and had arranged their hair into two neat plaits. Robin felt like a soldier out of uniform. She wondered if these things had been established in the invitation, or if they had been discussed in a series of phone calls that Robin, of course, had not been privy to. It would be too obvious if she went to the bathroom now and attempted to copy the braids. She tried anyway, undid them, and returned to find only Elaine's mother left in the kitchen.

"All the girls went on to the den," said Elaine's mother. The unspoken implication was that Robin was not one of 'the girls'. She did not really want to be, but it was somewhat uncomfortable to discover that this otherness was as visible to everyone else as it was to herself.

She went into the den. There was only one girl, sprawled out on the rug, surrounded by books and papers. The girl looked up, smiled, and leaned back against the couch.

"Don't tell me you got roped into this," Thea said.

Thea was like Elaine in the same way that a wolf was like a Pomeranian. They were members of the same species and, at moments, the resemblance could be spotted, but it was obvious that one was a beast and the other was a house pet. Robin knew Thea a little better than Elaine, but not much. She was surprised that Thea knew her. It was strange; Elaine felt more like a real person, someone you could know. Thea was— Robin didn't know what Thea was.

"I wasn't invited," Robin said quickly, suddenly desperate to show Thea that she wasn't a part of Elaine's crowd.

"Neither was I," Thea laughed.

"But isn't it your birthday, too? Aren't you twins?" The open books on the floor around Thea seemed to form a force field. Robin stayed outside it, careful not to step on any pages.

"Yeah," said Thea. "Well— No to the first question, yes to the second. She was born a few minutes before midnight on November eleventh, and I was born a few minutes after midnight on November twelfth. Or something like that. Personally, my working theory is that she just wants her own party." She winked, and Robin was forcibly reminded of the time Thea had tricked their entire grade into thinking their assistant principal was a Russian mob boss. In the days before the assistant principal had been forced to confirm, ridiculously, that he was not a mob boss and had, in fact, lived in their town his entire life, there had been a moment when Robin had looked at Thea across the lunchroom, and she had winked at her in exactly the same way. She hadn't understood at the time, but afterwards, she got it— Thea had been saying, "You and I are different."

There were people who still believed what Thea said about the assistant principal. Thea knew a lot about the Russian mob, knew a lot about a lot of things, and she lied like she believed it. No one could be angry at her for

long, or doubt her when she came up with a new story, however inaccurate the previous ones had been— there was a holiday to celebrate the first bumblebee of spring, on which schools were closed; in the original *Dracula* story, vampires had bitten the veins in their victims' fingertips instead of their necks; her great-grandfather had been mummified; she was licensed to operate a train, despite the fact that she had failed her driver's test three times; Houdini was still alive and his death was a publicity stunt.

"You're not invited?" Robin repeated.

"Nope," said Thea. She piled her books onto the couch and stood up, grinning wickedly. "But I'm coming."

"Actually," Robin said, "I think I lost the party. Your mom said the den?"

"Oh, right," said Thea. "You see, this—" She gestured around herself. "This is the living room, where people live. Down that hall and to the right is the den, where we keep our wax statues disguised as people. There's a vast difference between a den and a living room. Did you not get that?"

Robin giggled. "Nobody explained that."

"It's a fine distinction," Thea said, walking out of the room. Robin followed. Over her shoulder, Thea said, "Studies have been done, but, much like the Theory of Relativity, there are few who understand the Theory of Living Rooms. In fact, recent experiments have proven—"

They had passed into the den. A girl with blonde plaits looked over the back of the couch and gleefully shouted, "Ghost girl!" All heads turned to the doorway. Elaine, who was in the middle of telling an involved story to a huddle of girls, groaned audibly.

"Ghost girl?" Robin asked.

"Yeah," Thea said, unembarrassed. "I've gotten really into ghosts recently." She pointed to her sweater, which was grey and embroidered with white teardrop shapes that resolved themselves, upon closer inspection, into cartoon ghosts with round black eyes, gaping mouths, and outstretched arms. The bottom of each shape ended in a wavering, tapering squiggle, like ash blowing away in the wind. "It's not just an aesthetic appreciation," said Thea. "Although they do look cool." She raised her voice, to the delight of all the girls nearby, who were already straining to overhear, and announced, "Did you know that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was a spiritualist? He and his wife held séances. She was a medium." To Robin, she whispered, "That's true." Speaking normally again, she continued, "He actually helped solve the Rahway murder of 1887 by communicating with the murdered woman's spirit. There was speculation at the time that she told him the identity of Jack the Ripper, but he didn't reveal it for political reasons." She whispered, "That's not."

"Please don't be like this," said Elaine irritably. "It's my birthday." Everyone had congregated around Thea and Robin. Robin thought, not for the first time, that Thea could be more popular than Elaine, if she wanted to be. By the look on Elaine's face, she seemed to know this.

"There are ghosts in the woods behind this house," Thea said, openly addressing the group for the first time as if she was unaware that they had been listening.

"Really?" said the blonde girl. The phrase "Maybe, Baby," on her shirt was comprised of hundreds of tiny cartoon ladybugs.

"Yeah, definitely," said Thea. "I've seen them. There was a hippie commune there in the sixties, but one day, they stopped coming into town to buy groceries. By the time the sheriff's department checked on them—" She shrugged, and the girls shuddered, all likely imagining different scenarios.

"That's not true," said Elaine. "I've been in those woods loads of times, and I've never seen anything weird." This seemed to be a point against Elaine rather than a point against Thea's story.

"Could you take us to see the ghosts?" said another girl. This one's shirt said, "Maybe, Baby," in flowering vines.

"Sure," said Thea.

"No one wants to do that," Elaine said. When a survey of her friends' faces suggested that this was inaccurate, she added, "No one wants to look for ghosts in broad daylight. It's not even noon."

"You watch too many horror movies," Thea laughed. "Don't you know that dead people are still dead during the day?"

This point proved to be inarguable, so they all filed out the back door and into the woods. Elaine lagged behind the rest of the group, making annoyed faces and chatting with a few members of her inner circle, who seemed equally unenthusiastic about traipsing through the woods on a cold Saturday morning. Robin stuck close to the front of the pack beside Thea, who stopped every few minutes to toss out facts that Robin would be hard-pressed to confirm or deny— the commune had been the site of a money-laundering ring, leading detectives to question if the deaths had not been caused by town politicians, law enforcement, or rival criminals; it had included women and children, and many people had reported hearing the cries of a mysterious baby emanating from the woods; if you held hands in a circle and sang 'Kumbaya', the ghosts of the hippies would appear.

“Don’t you think if there had been a mass murder behind our house, someone besides you would have heard about it?” Elaine shouted from the back of the line. Everyone ignored her.

Robin inched closer to Thea and mumbled, “Have you ever noticed that all of Elaine’s friends look sort of—”

“Exactly the same?” Thea said, raising her eyebrows. “It’s freaky. She says she hates having a twin, but she surrounds herself with them.” She shrugged. “The crazy thing is, they’re not all like that. Phoebe speaks three languages, and Nancy plays in professional poker tournaments. They’re not sycophants, or sheep, or anything like that, but you’d never know it. When people hang out with Elaine, it’s like she steals their life force, the things that make them real people, and makes them just like her.”

“What do you think it is about her?”

“Maybe no one wants to be the first person who disagrees with her,” said Thea. “Or they all just put up with her so they can come over to our house and swim in our pool.” She stopped walking and bared her teeth in a jack-o-lantern grin, and said, “Or she’s a monster from outer space who needs to eat human souls in order to live.”

Robin smiled back. “Yeah,” she said. “One of those things.”

“Is this the place?” yelled a girl that Robin thought might be Phoebe. Thea nodded, and a shaky circle began to form. There was a long silence, and someone said, “Does anyone know the words to ‘Kumbaya’?”

“For the sun, that rises in the sky,” Thea began. “For the rhythm of the falling rain.” Her singing voice was as raspy and soft as her speaking voice; it was more like chanting than singing, and Robin could tell by the girls’ expressions that Thea unsettled and excited them just as much as the prospect of ghosts.

“For all life, great or small,” Thea rumbled along. A few people were starting to look around, and one girl shrieked, “I see them!”

The girl on Robin’s left side pulled her hand free and pointed into a clump of bushes. “There’s one,” she shouted. “A woman with a baby.” Choruses of screams went up from the girls as they indicated invisible ghosts in all directions: in the trees, floating above piles of leaves, in the middle of their circle.

Robin looked at Thea, who was staring serenely into the distance. She tugged on her hand. Thea glanced at her out of the corner of her eye, smiled, and winked.