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VOICES

TO MOST OF US, DEATH WAITS DARK AND MYSTERIOUS IN THE FUTURE, BUT IF YOU
COULD
TALK TO SPIRITS, YOU MIGHT FIND DEATH IS NOT SO SCARY AFTER ALL

I was carefully papering the balsa-wood wing struts of my scale-model Gotha G V bomber when Crocker asked me if I ever spoke to dead people.

Although Crocker is a member of the Susquehanna River Modelmakers and Sex Fiends Association (which doesn't say much because all you have to do to become a member is hang out in the shack by the river and make models), everybody thinks he's right off his nut. On of the guys nicknamed him Crock-a-shit because of all the stupid stories he told-- and the stupid questions he asked-- and the name stuck. Hell, he seemed to like it. But nobody broke his arms or his legs or smashed up his models, and so he stayed on, sort of like a mascot. He was fat, freckled, and wore his whie-blonde hair in a brush cut. But he was also smart, in his way. He was twelve, a year younger than me, and was in seventh-grade honors.

"Steve, you hear me or what?" he asked me, turning down the volume on the club's battery-powered radio. It was playing the Big Bopper's "Chantilly Lace." Since Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and the Big Bopper had died in a plane crash back in February, the radio stations were still playing their stuff all the time--and here it was June! "You ever talk to a dead person or not?"

"No, Crocker," I said. I was trying to work the air bubbles out of the paper: This Gotha was the only model of its kind and would have a wingspan of over six feet. My stepfather had given me the kit for my birthday. "I never talked to anybody who's dead...except maybe you. Now turn the volume back up." But the song was over and the disc jockey was saying something about Lou Costello, who died back in March. I could never remember if he was the fat comedian or the skinny one; but I only liked the fat one and hoped it wasn't him.

Anyway, this was frustrating work, and Crock-a-shit was, as usual, fouling everything up. I have to admit, though, that he had made me curious; but just thinking about dead people made me feel jittery, and sad, too. It made me think of my dad, my real dad, who died in the hospital when I was seven. Funny, the things you remember. I used to play a game with him when he came home from the office every night. We had a leather couch in the den--Dad called it "The Library"--and I would slide my hand back and forth on the cushion while he would try to catch it. And then when he did, he would hold it tight and we'd laugh. Dad had gray hair, and everybody said he was handsome. But when he was in the hospital, he didn't even know who Mom and I were. He thought Mom was 'his' mother! She cried when he got mixed up, and I just felt weird about it. Especially when he had an attack and then talked in a language that sounded like

Op-talk. Mom said it was because his brain wasn't working right. I knew that if I could only understand it, everything would be all right. It was like he was trying to tell me what to do in some secret language; and if I could only figure out the words, I'd be able to help him get well. But then he died, and I never got to say goodbye in a way he could understand because his brain never did get right again.

Crocker didn't say anything more for a while, which was unusual for him.

When I had finished the wings, which weren't right and would have to be redone again, I looked up and said, "Crock-a-shit, what are you looking at?"

"Nothing'."

"What's with all this dead people stuff?" I asked, trying to treat him like a human being.

"I just wanted to know if you have ever done it, that's all."

"Done what?"

"I just told you! Talk to dead people."

"Have you?" I asked, knowing for sure I would get one of his bullshit answers.

"Yeah, I do it a few times a week. When I don't come down here."

"Oh, sure, and where do you do that?"

"Every day I check the paper to see if there's anything going on at the funeral home on the corner of Allen and Main. If there is, I just sort of walk in and talk to the corpse in the casket. If not, I come over here."

"And nobody says nothing to you? They just let you walk in and talk to dead people?"

"They ain't bothered me yet." After a pause, he said, "You wanna go with me today? They got somebody in there," and he showed me the obituary column from the Sun-Bulletin. I glanced at what he was trying to show me and shook out the sports section. Patterson was fighting Ingemar Johansson on Friday. I was rooting for Patterson, who had KO'd Archie Moore in '56.

"You wanna go with me and see for yourself or not?" Crocker asked, indignantly ripping the paper out of my hands. "Or are you afraid?"

"Screw you!"

"You probably never been to a funeral in your life."

"I've been to funerals before," I said. "Everybody has."

"But did you ever see a dead person?"

I had to say no to that. "I never even saw my own father after he died."

That certainly shut him up, but he had such a sorrowful look on his face that I felt sorry for him.

"I'm Jewish," I said, "and Jews can't have open caskets. Of course, there must be a reason for that, but I don't know what it is."

"How'd he die?" Crocker asked, fumbling around with his hands as if he wasn't used to having them.

"Something wrong with his liver."

"Like from drinking?" he asked.

"No, it was nothing like that," I said. But I had heard my mother talking to the doctor; maybe he did get sick from drinking, although I swear I can't remember seeing him drunk or anything. And I had just about had it with Crocker's questions; he was acting like Jack Webb on Dragnet. You'd think he would have to shut up after I told him about my father. But not Crocker. He was a nosy little bastard. After a pause, he asked, "Did you ever talk to him after he died?"

"You're out of your freaking gourd, Crocker. Nobody but an a-hole thinks he can talk to people after they're dead."

"If you come with me today, I'll prove it to you." "No way, sucker. I got better things to do than act like a nimblenarm." "With your father being dead and all, I can't blame you for being afraid," Crocker said. "I'd be, too." "Crocker, get the hell out of my life," I said. I guess I shouted at him, because he looked real nervous. But I didn't need him spreading it all over the place that I was afraid to look at a dead person. Christ, Crock-a-shit had a bigger mouth than my mother.

"Okay," I said, "but if I don't hear this dead person talk like you say, I'm going to break your head." I said it as if I meant it.

I guess I did.

But that only seemed to make Crocker happy, for he nodded and helped me put away my Gotha bomber.

The worst part of it was that I had to sneak into my house and put on a suit and tie, because Crocker said you can't just walk in with jeans and a T-shirt.

But a deal was a deal.

I met him at the back of the clubhouse, and we walked to the funeral home. It was a hot, humid summer, and boring as hell. There was never anything to do, and even going down to the club and smoking and working on models was boring. And to make matters worse, I thought about Marie Dickson all the time. She was so ... beautiful! I would see her around once in a while, but I never said anything to her. I was waiting for the right time.

Not a good way to get through a summer. Anyway, she was always with a girlfriend, and I was most times by myself. No way was I going to walk up to her and make a complete asshole of myself in front of her and her girlfriend. She hung around with a fat girl, probably because it made her look even better; it seemed all the good-looking girls did that.

"Okay, you ready?" Crocker asked as we approached the front stairs to the building, which was gray and white, with lots of gingerbread like my parents' house.

"I was born ready. Let's go."

I hated this place already.

"We'll go in right after these people," Crocker said, nodding in the direction of a crowd waiting to get past the door into the parlor. "Pretend like you're with them." So we followed them inside. I was all sweaty and the sharp blast of the air-conditioning felt good.

The old people ahead of us all stopped to write in a book that rested on what looked like a music stand; but Crocker really knew his way around here and led me right into a large, dimly lit, carpeted room with high windows covered with heavy blue drapes. People were standing around and talking, soft organ music was playing, and there was a line of people filing past an ornate casket that was surrounded with great bushes of flowers.

"Let's go see it and get the hell out of here," I said, feeling uncomfortable. I looked around. Even though this room was certainly big enough, I felt as if I was being closed up in a closet. And I figured it had to be just a matter of time before someone would see we weren't supposed to be here and kick us out.

"Wait till the line gets through," Crocker said. But a woman wearing a silky black dress and one of those round pillbox hats with a veil put her hand on my shoulder and asked, "Did you go to school with Matt?"

I looked at her, and I've got to say I was scared, although I don't really know why I should have been. "Uh, yes, ma'am," I said, looking to Crocker-who was supposed to be the professional-to pull us out of this.

"I'm his aunt Leona. You should meet his mom and dad, they're right there." She pointed to a tall balding man and a skinny woman who made me think of some sort of bird. "Stay right here and I'll get them," Aunt Leona said. "I'm sure they'll want to talk to you."

I could only nod. When the woman walked away, I said, "What the hell did you get us into?"

Crocker looked nervous, too, but he said, "Didn't you read the obituary?"

"Piss off, Crocker."

"Well, it was a kid who lived in Endicott. His family moved to Virginia. I can't remember the rest."

"You should have told me it was a kid. Christ Almighty!"

"You shoulda read what I gave you," he said in a singsong voice that made me want to crown him.

"How'd he die?" I asked.

"I dunno," Crocker said. "They don't tell you that kind of stuff in the paper."

"Well, did he go to our school?"

"I can't remember," Crocker said, but it was too late anyway, because Aunt Leona brought a whole crowd to talk to us. I was really nervous now.

What were we supposed to say to the dead kid's parents?

Although it surprised the living hell right out of me, Crocker and I managed to hold our own. We said how sorry we were and what a nice guy he was, how he played a mean stickball and was a regular nut for Bill Haley and the Comets and Jackie Wilson- you know, "Lonely Teardrops"-and it was the craziest damn thing because it was almost as if we did know this kid. With all the crying and hugging going on around us, I started to get that thunder sound in my ears, which I always used to hear before I was going to cry.

I hadn't heard that sound in a long time.

I didn't even hear it at my dad's funeral, or at the house when everyone stood around and told me I had to be a big boy and all that crap. It wasn't until months later that I heard the thunder sound, when I was in the house alone and practicing the piano. I looked up and saw Dad's photograph on the piano; and suddenly, like I was crazy all of a sudden, I heard the thunder and then I started to cry. It made me feel sick. But after that, I didn't cry again.

Until now.

Everybody was crying, including me, and Crock-a-shit excused both of us so we could pay our respects to the departed (that's just what he said). As soon as we were out of their reach, he said, "Steve, you're good at this."

"So are you," I said, pretending that it was all an act. "Now let's get it over with."

"Okay," Crocker said, and we stood right before the casket and looked into it. I could smell the flowers—the ones with the long wormy things inside them—but they didn't smell bad. The kid in the casket was wearing a suit and tie ... just like us. He looked like Pug Flanders, who lived down the block from me: The corpse had black hair, which was greased back; he had probably worn it in a DA with an elephant's trunk in the front, but whoever did him up probably thought a flattop was the height of coolness. It looked like he had had pimples, too, but his face was coated with makeup; and it looked too white, like someone had gone crazy with the powder or something. The expression on his face was kind of snarly: I guess they couldn't wipe it off. I had a strong feeling that I would have liked this guy.

But looking down at this corpse made me feel sort of weird. Not that I was scared anymore, but this kid didn't really seem to be dead. It was like this was some sort of a play, and everybody was acting, just as we were. This guy just couldn't be dead.

He looked like he was going to sit up any second.

I blinked then because it was almost as if he was glowing like one of those religious paintings I've seen in churches. It was as if I could see the stuff of his soul, or something like that. Christ, I almost fell backward.

I knew that was all bullshit, but I saw it just the same.

Crocker didn't seem to see it; at least he didn't say anything. So it must have just been me.

And then I remembered something about my father that scared me. It just sort of came out of nowhere!

I remembered the nurse taking my arm and trying to pull me out of the hospital room. Mom was crying and screaming, and she fell right on top of Dad on the bed. But I got one last look at Dad; and he looked like he was made up of light, sort of like a halo was around him and all over him.

How could I have forgotten something like that?

But I did. I must have just pushed it right out of my mind.

"How d'you think he died?" I asked Crocker. Hearing my own voice made me feel normal again. And that was important right now.

"Who knows? Probably some sort of accident."

"Nah, he looks too good." "That don't mean nothin'," Crocker said. "They can make anybody look good as new .. almost. He could have even had cancer."

Crocker looked up in the air.

I called his name, but he ignored me. It was as if he was listening to something. He had his head cocked like the RCA dog.

"Crocker, come on," I said after a while. I was starting to get worried. "Hey, you ... Crock-a-shit."

"Shut up!" Crocker snapped. "Can't you hear him?"

"Hear what?"

"Just listen."

I listened, I really did, but I couldn't hear a damn thing. Crocker was probably off his nut, plain and simple. But I wasn't much better, not after I had just seen the corpse glowing like the hands on a watch.

Who knows, maybe the dead guy could talk. And maybe Crocker could hear him.

But I just wanted to get out of there.

I was already feeling like the walls and everything were going to close in on me.

"He's leaving," Crocker said. "He's saying good-bye to everybody. Cool! "

"Okay, then let's go," I said, but I couldn't help looking at the spot where Crocker seemed to be staring, and I got the strangest feeling. Then I saw it: a pool of light like a cloud that seemed to be connected to the body that was now glowing softly again.

And the light was bleeding out of the corpse like it was the guy's spirit or something.

A few seconds later the light just blinked out, as if someone had thrown a switch; and the body looked different, too, as if something vital had just drained out of it. Now it was nothing more than a shell; it looked like it was made of plastic. It was dull, lifeless.

We left then. Crocker and I just left at the same time, as if we both knew something.

And I heard thunder and remembered my father talking in the language only he could understand; and I felt as if I was drowning in something as deep and as big as the ocean.

When we got out of the funeral home, and past all the men standing around and smoking cigarettes, Crocker said, "You heard him, didn't you? I could tell."

"I didn't hear nothin'," I said, protecting my ass.

"Bullshit," Crocker said.

"Bullshit on you," I said.

"Well, you were acting ... different," Crocker said.

I admitted that maybe I saw something that was a little weird, but it was probably just in my head. That bent Crocker all out of shape; he seemed happier than a kid with a box of Ju Ju Bees, and I got worried that he'd shoot off his mouth to everyone he saw.

I warned him about that.

"Give me a break," he said. "It's enough that the guys in the club think of me as some sort of asshole as it is. You're the only one I feel I can talk to and I don't even really know you."

"Okay," I said, worried that maybe there was something wrong with me. Why else would Crocker feel that way? It also worried me that first I saw the dead guy glowing like my aunt's Sylvania Halolight TV, and then I saw his soul (or whatever it was) pass right out of him, leaving nothing but a body that was more like a statue or something made of plaster of Paris. But I put those thoughts away and asked, "What did the guy say?"

"His name is Matt ... remember? He said he was scared out of his gourd until he found his grandmother."

"What?"

"His grandmother's dead. She'll show him around."

"Around where?"

"How the hell should I know?" Crocker said. "Heaven, probably."

"You gotta be kidding." I couldn't help but laugh. "You're making that stuff up." But somehow I really wanted to believe it.

"I thought you said you saw something," Crocker said, hanging his head. "And I believed you.... I wanted to know what you saw-"

"I said I thought I saw something." I punched him hard on the arm to make him feel better. "And it wasn't nothing but a glowing like a TV tube when you turn it off."

"I never saw that."

"Now tell me, what else did Matt say?" I asked.

"He hates Bill Haley, but we got Jackie Wilson right."

"Uh-huh," I said.

"Well, that's what I thought I heard," Crocker said.

"Why'd you say, 'Cool'?" I asked.

"Whaddyamean?"

"When you were looking up in the air, you said, 'Cool.' Don't you remember?"

"Yeah.

"Well?"

And Crocker started laughing. It was like he couldn't stop. He kept leaning forward and stumbling and then laughing even louder. I couldn't help but smile, and I kept knuckling his arm until he told me.

"He said he was going to visit the Big Bopper."

"What?"

"That's what he said. And Ritchie Valens."

"You're so full of crap," I said. But now I couldn't stop laughing either.

"Then maybe dying's not so bad," I said, and we fell down right there on the sidewalk on Ackley Avenue in, front of a brown shingled house that belonged to Mrs. Campbell, my third-grade teacher. I don't know what it was, but I just couldn't stop laughing and crying.

Neither could Crocker.

And who knows, maybe I really did see something flickering in the air above Matt's dead body while he was floating around in Heaven somewhere meeting his grandmother.

And maybe he did get to see the Big Bopper.

Just like the Big Bopper probably got to see Valens and Holly ... and probably Mozart and Beethoven, too.

And maybe the Big Bopper also got to meet my dad.

Why not? Dad would be there, standing right on line; he always liked to play the piano, all that bebop and boogie-woogie stuff. So maybe he became a musician,

just like all the others.

Now, that would be something....