

## GHOST TOWN

by Catherine Wells

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A shiver slid over Kaye when she saw the bright yellow house on the edge of town. It looked the same. What right did it have to look the same? The trees had grown taller, of course, and the hedge had filled in, but the toolshed still squatted by the garden patch, and the second-floor deck clung like a scaffold to the eastern side. A person would never know her parents no longer lived there, and hadn't for nearly ten years. How could it be that her home was no longer her home?

Her rental car glided silently over the pockmarked pavement, ignoring the defects caused by freezing winters and melting snow. Cars had not been this quiet, nor this smooth, when she had left to join the first crewed expedition to leave the solar system. Lowering her window, she listened for the sounds she remembered: the call of a meadowlark, the creaking of crickets, the crunch of tires on the gravel that spilled from dirt shoulders onto the street. But the birds and insects were silent, and her rental car rode on a plasma stream, not wheels. That had been new technology when she left, fourteen years ago. Fourteen years for everyone she'd left behind.

Only two years for her.

The yellow house passed out of view, and she slowed to make the turn into town. With less wind noise, she finally heard other sounds: a bird call at last, a katydid's dry trill, the rustle of carrigana leaves as she passed a large hedge. Yet it all seemed off somehow, as though the orchestra were missing its woodwinds or its first violins. Where was the ambient noise of a small community? The buzz of a lawn tractor? The slam of a screen door? The voices of children at play?

Rounding the corner, she glanced at the quiet house there, a house where she used to play with her friend Jocelyn. The willow tree wept as

profusely as ever, but the tree swing was long gone, the sandbox vanished. Maybe there were no children here anymore. The local school had closed while Kaye was still a child, and it was either home schooling or—as her parents had chosen—a two-hour bus ride to a larger town. This wasn't the place to raise children now. Not enough socialization. Not enough kids for a softball game. Who still lived in this tiny village called Jubilee? Even her family had gone, though the Halstads had settled here before it had a name. *I shouldn't have come*, she thought for the hundredth time. *There's nothing here for me.*

Her sister Rita had insisted they meet here. "I've got a surprise for you! Meet me in front of the old post office," she had instructed. Though Kaye had suspected it was a bad idea, she didn't know how to tell Rita that. Rita had been twenty-one when Kaye shipped out, just finishing her bachelor's degree and crying because Kaye wouldn't be there for her graduation. But it was only supposed to be two years. She wasn't supposed to miss Rita's wedding, too, and the birth of her twins, and her divorce, and her promotion to VP of Human Resources. The Razavi stabilizer was supposed to negate the Doppler effect on the revolutionary faster-than-light spacecraft. It had been tested time and again before they sent humans outside the solar system.

The house at the end of the block looked odd to her eye. The Moores' place had always been white and unkempt, a working man's house. Now the lawn had been trimmed up, the rambling foliage neatly pruned, and the house painted a fashionable shade of cinnamon. She wondered if the Moores had moved away, and who lived there now. Someone must—the place looked so tidy. Too tidy. She tried not to shudder as she turned another corner.

Around a bend and up a short hill sat the yellow house. An ache filled her as she approached; she wanted to walk through it once more, to see the familiar furniture in the living room, to have one final look at all the dishes and curios in the hutch. She wanted to help her mother with the packing, to load the linens into cartons, to box up the files from Dad's office, to sort through the cartons of games and toys, the detritus of her childhood. She wanted to put it all to rest. But a strange vehicle was parked in the driveway and she glided past, knowing it was too late. Her parents had closed the family store ten years ago and moved to Jamestown, where they could still make a living. Someone else lived in the yellow house now. Someone she had never met.

Taking a deep breath, she left the house behind and drove slowly up the three blocks to the old post office. The absence of cars on the streets

felt spooky. True, there had never been many even when she was growing up here, but shouldn't there be some parked somewhere, at least? She craved the scenes of her youth: A stakebed truck at the lone gas pump. A pickup parked outside Mort's Bar. Two cars stopped in the middle of the street, their windows rolled down as the drivers talked to each other and spit the shells of sunflower seeds out onto the road. This was eerie, as if aliens had abducted the inhabitants, or the Rapture had taken them all away to Glory.

*But it's not the town, it's me, she realized. I'm the alien. I'm the ghost, a shade from the past. Maybe I'm not really here, just a restless spirit wandering back to haunt the places where I grew up—*

Then she spotted Rita's cheery little Upstart coupe just up the street, parked in front of the tiny building that had once been Jubilee's post office. The car gleamed in the afternoon sun, not a speck of dust on it. Why was there no dust on it? This was farmland, and the wind whistling over the fields should have put a fine layer of Dakota dirt on everything that passed through. But some new technology gave cars the ability to shed dust the way a duck shed water. As Kaye climbed out of her rental car, she realized it, too, was clean and sparkling.

*I'm the one with the dust,* she thought, and had an image of herself emerging from some overgrown tomb. She felt as if cobwebs clung to her, slowing her movements, slowing her wits.

The old post office building had been a subdued cream color when Kaye was growing up, worthy of a government office. Now it was a vibrant chartreuse and sported a holographic sign that read "Lacey's Gifts." As she stared at it, the door flew open, setting off a tinkling of shop bells, and out bounced Rita. Blond like Kaye, she sported a short haircut and artful makeup. Fashionable clothes hugged a body that was fit-looking without losing its softness, designed for the boardroom and not a spacecraft's grav-deck. Kaye's own muscles were toughened by physical labor and rigorous conditioning, granting her an economy of movement that was more efficient than graceful. Even now, with no reason to stay in shape, she kept at it. Her career was as stunted as her emotions: who would put her on another spacecraft, with her outmoded skills and archaic knowledge? But using her muscles kept her grounded, made her feel she was connected to something. To her own body, at least.

"Lovesy!" Rita squealed, rushing to give Kaye a hug. It was a term that had come into fashion recently, and it made Kaye want to vomit. But

she smiled wanly and returned her sister's embrace, if with less enthusiasm. This was supposed to be her younger sister, the one she had tutored in math and warned against the dangers of letting a boy put his hand on your knee. The one she had yelled at for losing her favorite hairbrush and sworn to secrecy when she slipped out to meet Dusty Watson. Rita was now thirty-five years old with two kids and an MBA; Kaye was just twenty-six.

"Isn't this cute, what Lacey has done with the old Post Office?" Rita gushed.

Kaye glanced at the building again and her stomach did a slow roll. "Yeah, cute. What's this surprise you have for me?" *And why couldn't you have given it to me at Mom and Dad's condo in Jamestown, where I didn't have to see all of this?*

"It's this way. Come on!" Rita took her hand and led Kaye up the street a dozen yards to a small stuccoed building that fronted directly on the sidewalk.

Kaye blinked as she tried to recall it. "Grandma Olsen's house, right?" She remembered the stack of old board games her friend's grandmother had kept in a closet, and how they had played those old games for hours on lazy summer afternoons. "I don't suppose she still lives here."

"No," Rita said smugly. "I do."

Kaye blinked again and tried to make sense of the information. "You live here? In Jubilee?"

"No, silly! This is my vacation house, my private retreat. When the twins go to visit their dad, or when I get loaded down at work, I pop out here to relax." Her smile turned a bit wistful. "I sleep better out here."

Kaye was trying to imagine relaxing in a town that felt so empty.

"Come on inside," Rita urged, opening the door.

But Kaye balked, staring at another piece of her childhood now twisted out of shape. Its doorway gaped like the maw of some beast that would devour her, trapping her in an alien place from which she could never return—

*Fool! You are already there. Your world is gone, changed, and you can never return to it. This is the only reality that's left.*

“Kaye? Honey, are you all right?” Rita asked anxiously.

Kaye looked up into her sister's face, a face that looked too much like her mother's and not enough like the teenager she remembered. “I—I just need a minute,” she stammered. “This whole time-warp thing is just—” Turning, she staggered to a nearby lightpole, catching it with both hands.

“Oh—” Distress colored Rita's voice. “I thought you'd like to see it again. You know, a chance to—”

Kaye waved her off. “It's okay, it's fine. I just need a little time.” *I need the fourteen years I was robbed of.*

As she sucked in deep breaths of fresh, prairie air, a soft whine sounded in the distance. In the east, a small aircraft sliced through the cloud-flecked skies, and she supposed it was headed for the airstrip at Meyers' farm. Or did they even have an airstrip anymore, now that hover-landers were so prevalent? As she watched, it bore down on the town, the whine changing pitch as it drew closer. For a moment she thought it would pass by to the north, but then it banked left and started a steep, swift descent. Definitely a hover-lander.

The pilot was good, dropping gracefully on jets of air into the area Kaye remembered as the city park. A postage stamp of a park that had never had a picnic table, let alone restrooms—just a couple of swingsets and a big grassy area for throwing a Frisbee or a football around. Was there a hoverpad there now? Who would use it? Relatives, visiting someone in town? Someone like Rita, maybe, who had a “private retreat” here, someone from Chicago, or Winnipeg. Mom had told her half the houses in town had been bought by people who liked to hunt and fish. A town of pioneers, of tradesmen and farmers who wrestled a living from the stingy land, reduced now to the sometime-population of sportsmen on vacation.

“I wonder who that is?” Rita echoed her thoughts. Then, like any small-town busybody, she raised her com-bracelet and asked it to check the registration. “It's a commercial aircraft out of White Sands,” she reported as the answer danced in the air above the bracelet. “ExSol?” She shot her sister a worried look.

Kaye sighed heavily. “Most likely. They like to check up on me.”

Rita’s face tightened. “Since when?”

“Since Chip Grayson went to a family reunion and burned down thirty-odd people.”

Repatriation had not gone well for the nine astronauts who suffered the unexpected time distortion. When the mission had not returned in the allotted time, ExSol—the Extra Solar division of the International Space Alliance—had stalled for eighteen months while it sent follow-up probes, trying to locate its missing spacecraft. But finally it had declared the vessel lost with all hands. Funerals were held, families and friends grieved, and then they moved on. Children grew up, spouses remarried. Six months ago, when Kaye and her crewmates suddenly reappeared, what they came back to had been enough to overtax even healthy psyches. Not only had their families aged and their world changed, but their legal status had been terminated and their assets disbursed. Coming back from the dead was a bureaucratic nightmare that still had not been resolved. Two of the crew had sought refuge under the headstones erected for them in their absence. Grayson had put most of his extended family there instead.

“But you don’t have that kind of problem!” Rita protested. “You’re adjusting well. I mean, really well, considering everything.”

*Considering I feel like a wraith.* “Doesn’t mean they don’t worry about me,” Kaye said. *And maybe they should.* She kept dreaming she could reverse her trip and everything would be all right, that she would come home and find nothing changed. What if she woke up one morning and believed it? What if she tried to come home to the yellow house on the edge of Jubilee and, finding strangers there, thought they were intruders and did them some harm?

“How did they even know you were here, though?” Rita asked.

“Implant.” Kaye tapped her wrist where a slight bulge showed the location of a subcutaneous transmitter. For two years, the ship’s computer had monitored her vital functions, her whereabouts on the vessel; now the same implant continued to transmit her bio-readings, her location, her communications, her entertainment choices, every transaction she made. *Just like a small town,* she thought wryly. *There are no secrets.*

Rita’s eyes narrowed, and Kaye could almost smell her corporate HR training rising to the surface. “How much longer do you have to have that

in?”

“Till hell freezes over, I imagine.”

“Kaye, they can’t do that. There are privacy laws.”

Kaye knew that, knew she could protest, file a complaint, but what did it matter? Having the chip removed, would she be any less an alien in her own world? And what if she *did* snap one day? “It’s okay,” she told Rita. “It makes Mom feel better, knowing someone’s looking out for me. Making sure I don’t walk on the tracks when the bullet train is due.”

Rita’s blue eyes clouded over, and Kaye knew her sister was on the verge of tears. Sometimes she thought this was harder on her family than on her. It was one thing to have believed her dead; it was something else to have her returned to them so wounded. She saw the pain in her parents’ eyes every time they looked at her. They wanted her to recover, to be better, and she just couldn’t be. She didn’t know how.

Turning back to the open door of the house, Kaye knew she should go in, knew she should pretend for Rita’s sake that she was still the bright, self-assured, enthusiastic woman who had joined ExSol, eager for adventure, confident life was an array of possibilities. For Rita’s sake, she would try. “Come on, let’s go in,” she said, forcing herself to move toward the door. “Show me what you’ve done.”

“Kaye Halstad?”

She stopped with her foot on the threshold, quietly relieved she did not have to cross it. Looking up, she saw a man striding down the sidewalk toward them wearing, not an ExSol jumpsuit or even an ExSol pullover, but blue jeans and a plaid shirt open at the collar, sleeves rolled up. He was young, perhaps in his late twenties, with dark hair just long enough to curl a bit, giving it an unruly appearance. For a moment she wondered if this was just a local who had wandered by, and she tried to see in his face someone she might have grown up with. One of the Schultz boys? A Berger? How old would they be now?

“Can we help you?” Rita asked archly, taking a protective step in front of Kaye. *Like a mother protecting her child*, Kaye thought. *Only this is my kid sister*. The wrongness of it chilled her.

“Dan Leighton-Schmidt,” the stranger introduced himself, offering his hand. “You must be Rita.” His face was narrow with a slightly pointed chin,

and his smile made creases around his mouth and eyes. Ignoring the open suspicion on Rita's face, he turned to Kaye, and his smile faded inexplicably. For a long moment he just looked at her.

It took her that long to remember her manners. Mechanically, she stretched out a hand. "I'm Kaye. But you probably knew that."

He hesitated before taking her hand, and she thought irrationally, *I am a ghost*. But her palm did not pass through his as she shook it, and his grip felt firm and confident. "Yeah, I knew," he said. "I stopped by your parents' house—they told me you were out here. I have to be back at White Sands tonight, so I took the liberty of hunting you down. I hope you don't mind."

"Since when does ExSol apologize for tracking me down?"

He looked startled. "ExSol? Oh, no, I'm not— God, no. I'm—" He gave an exasperated sigh, thrust his hands into his pockets, and looked away. Then, turning back, he said, "I'm an astronaut. Like you. But I don't work for ExSol."

Curious, she cocked an eyebrow and eyed him more carefully. "Commercial outfit?"

"KRJ. I'm part of the *Odyssey* crew."

The name thudded like a brick on her psyche. The *Odyssey* was a colony ship, headed for the very extrasolar planet Kaye and her crewmates had reached. They had spent three months in a base camp there as they started terraforming projects to run independently after they left. Now the *Odyssey* planned to return and see if it had worked, see if a settlement there could be self-sustaining. She wondered what they would find. Would her sacrifice have been for nothing?

"Good luck," she told him. "I hope we accomplished something, at least."

"Accomp—" His hands came out of his pockets. "Of course, you accomplished something!"

She snorted. "You'll hardly know that till you get there."

"You made a safe landing," he insisted. "You proved the atmosphere was breathable, the gravity tolerable. You set up the power station, got the



terraforming started—I wouldn't be going if it weren't for you. None of us would."

She sighed. "Once you get there, you may not thank me."

For a moment he stared at her. Then his jaw twisted and he thrust his hands back in his pockets. "Yeah, you're probably right. It probably won't occur to us. We forget. We forget how much we owe to the ones who came before us." He nodded toward the empty streets of Jubilee. "Like the people who homesteaded here. Did we ever thank them? Do we even think about it, a hundred years and more removed? Naaa. We just grumble about—" He shrugged. "Having to drive sixty-five miles to a doctor. Riding a school bus for two hours. Waiting days for spare parts to be shipped out to us. All the inconveniences of being out in the sticks. But where would we be, I wonder, if they hadn't built these little towns? Who would we be, if we hadn't grown up in places like this?"

*Who would we be...* "Are you from Jubilee?" Kaye asked in confusion, searching his face again, trying to see something familiar there. Such pale blue eyes, with curling lashes that looked like they belonged on a girl...

But he shook his head. "Not Jubilee," he said. "Another town just like it. A little bigger, maybe, but dying just the same. Like hundreds of other little towns all over this country."

"It's not dying!" Rita snapped. "It's changing, that's all."

He made a mock bow in her direction. "*Mea culpa*. Changing, you're right. Still places worth living in; just harder to make a living in."

"Like it was ever easy."

His laugh was tinged with bitterness. "*Touché*." He shuffled his feet. "Look, I didn't come here to argue. I just wanted—" He hesitated. "I just wanted to shake your hand, I guess. Let you know that at least one of your fellow North Dakotans appreciates what you did."

"A lot of us appreciate—" Rita began, but Kaye put a restraining hand on her arm.

"Rita, he's trying to be nice." She studied his face again, finding it familiar in a way, yet no name or place came to her, no image of him as a boy. "When do you leave?" she asked.

“Eleven months, in theory. They’re still trying to fill a couple of berths.”

Berths. The single word triggered a flood of memories: webbed cocoons slung between alloy frames; a metallic odor overlaid with the pungent scent of unwashed bodies; the hum of the electrical systems. How exciting it had been on the way out! And then, how dull. Endless days of nothing but exercise, study, and monotonous chores. Reading schematics, checking instruments. The same people, the same games, and never enough to keep them occupied. “You’ll be at each other’s throats,” she warned.

“We’ve been told.”

The days at the base station had been the best. With so much work to do, grievances had been forgotten. Fresh air and enough room to swing your arms helped. She had bathed in a pond, stark naked and warmed by an alien sun. Setting up the water purification station had been her project, the pond its fruit. She wondered if it was still clean and clear and blue—“We were sorry to leave,” she said. “Mostly, we were sorry to climb back into that sardine can for the return trip. If we had known what we were coming back to...” What? What would they have done? Stayed there?

That’s what the crew of the *Odyssey* would do, if the planet could sustain them. “Do you have family?” she asked.

“Mom and dad, one brother. Grandparents.”

“You know you’ll never see them again.”

“Maybe.” He forced a grin and shrugged. “The way technology is advancing, maybe not. Maybe we’ll be making routine trips back and forth by the time my kids are born.”

“Not likely.”

“No.” He shrugged again. “No different than the people who settled this prairie.”

That was true. They’d left homes, families behind—but that was a choice they had made. Kaye hadn’t made that choice. Oh, she had known there was a risk of mission failure, of being stranded on an alien world, of dying—but she hadn’t expected to lose fourteen years. If only it weren’t there in her face every day, if only she didn’t have to see the things that

were the same and yet not the same—

Suddenly her pulse quickened. “You say there are berths left?” she asked.

Beside her, Rita stiffened. “Kaye—!”

The man before them looked startled, then wary. “Well, they have applicants, it’s just— They’re looking for specific skills.”

“You can’t!” Rita said fiercely, seizing her elbow. “You just got back!”

Hope rose and died in a heartbeat, then rose and died again. “They wouldn’t want me,” Kaye said sadly. “My skills are old. Obsolete.” On Earth, anyway. But the base station she had helped set up—she knew that station and its equipment. She knew its quirks and its limitations. She knew the geology of the planet, its hydrology and its weather, not from images and files but from walking its soil and breathing its air. That kind of experience had to be worth something.

“Is this why you came here?” Rita demanded of their visitor. “To try to recruit her?”

“No!” Anger flashed in his eyes, those pale blue eyes with the curling lashes—

In a flash, it came back to her. “Danny Schmidt?” she asked. She had taught school for a year while she waited for her application to ExSol to be processed. Junior high math and science, in a small school in Pembina County. Danny Schmidt had been an awkward, pimple-faced boy of fourteen, always stuffing his hands in his pockets like that, shrugging his shoulders—except when he played basketball. He was good at basketball.

Now he rolled his eyes, embarrassed. “Guilty,” he admitted. Then, “I didn’t think you’d remember me.”

“Sure you did,” Rita said angrily. “That’s why you came. You came to see if you could sucker her into another untested, unsafe—”

“No!” he snarled, eyes flashing again, and Kaye realized that was what she remembered, that temper. In a game against their arch rivals, he’d lost his cool and been called for a technical foul, ejected from the game. His hands came out of his pockets now. “I told you, I just—” Abruptly he stuffed the anger down inside somewhere; his hands went back into his

pockets as he turned to Kaye, his eyes pleading. "I hated math, till you taught it. I never dreamed of being an astronaut, till you—" He shook his head. "Forget it. This was a mistake." Turning away, he headed back up the street toward the park, shoulders hunched, and Kaye saw again that adolescent boy, trudging off the basketball court toward the locker room, sure he had spoiled his team's chance of winning.

"Danny," she called.

He stopped and looked back at her.

"Say your farewells," she told him. "And mean it."

He considered that for a moment. Then, "You, too," he said. Turning once more, he walked away.

Rita faced her sister now and clutched at Kaye's shoulders. "You can't be thinking of this," she said urgently. "Kaye, you can't!"

"I'm not," Kaye lied. They wouldn't want her. Her mental state was too fragile. She was a ghost.

But she couldn't go on gazing at the present and wanting the past. Danny was right: she had to say good-bye. To Jubilee. To her kid sister. Maybe to Earth.

"Promise me you won't go!" Rita cried, throwing her arms around Kaye. "I won't lose you again!"

*Too late, little sister...*

And as she returned the embrace, Kaye felt her sister warm and substantial at last. The summer sun warmed her back, and the scent of late-blooming lilacs reached her. Nearby, a meadowlark chimed his familiar song, and she savored them all, savored this moment of home and family, before it passed away forever. "Come on," she said, her throat tight with emotion. "Show me this house of yours. I want to see what you've done with it."