

# S P E C T R A L L A M E N T

A S H O R T S T O R Y B Y J O E L K A L L S T R O M

There are worse things than being a ghost.

I don't mean "ghost" in a special forces, gone-before-you-know-I'm-there commando kinda way. I'm a spook, a spectre. A "disembodied ectoplasmic entity" as I once heard some wanker put it.

Most of the time it's not *that* bad. I keep to myself, though, because the other ghosts laugh at me. More on that later.

Everybody's got their own theory on why people become ghosts. I've had a lot of time to think about it, and I still can't figure it out. We can't go outside during the day, and some of us can't even leave our "haunt". Some people think ghosts are all about revenge, but that's not really my bag. I've gone back to the moment I was killed a million times in my half-a-head, and still, I got nuthin'.

It was the fifth of November (yeah, I know, remember remember) and I was at my girlfriend Sally's house. We had just, you know, for the first time. I was seventeen. Hell, I guess I'm still seventeen. Ghosts don't age.

So – actually, why am I watching my language? Who's gonna tell me off? God? – we had just fucked. Both of us had just lost our virginity. I was on cloud nine. Some people say the first time's the best, some people say it's horrible, but I don't really have anything else to compare it with, do I? Oh yeah, ghosts can't have sex.

I was having a cigarette by the window, and Nirvana's *Where did you sleep last night* was playing on the radio. We were drunk, and she was feeling mischievous, and for some reason she had dressed me up in her clothes: a tight pink T-shirt that said "Slut" and some white hotpants. Nice fit, embarrassingly enough. Then she put my hair in pigtails and put her make-up on me. I never got to ask her why, and I was too love-drunk to care at the time. Now I'll probably never get the chance.

I heard yelling in the street. She lived on one of the busiest streets in Melbourne, so this happened a lot. I poked my head further out the window, quite forgetting the fact that I was in drag. The shouting grew louder, and there where gunshots. I heard Sally scream. I turned, and saw her mouth agape, her body splattered in crimson.

*No. I thought. Not Sally. Take me. It should have been me.*

I rushed to catch her as she lurched forward, and was surprised to find she passed right through me. I followed her stunned gaze and saw myself lying on the floor, a small hole through the front of my head and a much bigger one out the back.

*Oh. It was me.*

I took it fairly well, all things considered. Sally was much worse. She was screaming and crying, hugging me. At one point she tried to give me mouth-to-mouth, which I almost found funny. I was *clearly* dead.

The next couple of weeks sucked, though. The whole crime scene thing was kinda boring. I kept trying to talk to the investigators, but they couldn't hear me. Basically I was trying explain that no, I wasn't a transvestite, it was just unfortunate timing. So I drifted off in search of adventure, and that's when I met my fellow

ghosts. And *that's* when I became the laughing stock of the ghost world. You see, when someone becomes a ghost, they're stuck forever in the clothes they died in...

Yeah. So I wasn't exactly making friends in the afterlife. I wanted to go to my own funeral, but it was during the day, and ghosts aren't allowed into churches. Unless something really bad happens in the church, which *desecrates* it. I visited my grave a couple of times, but stopped pretty quickly, 'cause I didn't want to see the flowers dry up and die. That would mean people had forgotten about me.

Mostly I just kept tabs on my friends and family. I'd laugh when my friends joked, cry when mum and dad fought with each other. The worst times were when I could see that it was no one's fault, they were just angry because they'd lost me, and the remote just fell behind the couch, and I was trying to tell them but they couldn't hear me.

I spent a lot of time with Sally. Her family had moved house after what happened: a couple of suburbs away. About ten minutes, as the ghost flies. It broke my heart to see her crying every night, waking up from nightmares. I thought the nightmares might have something to do with my being there, though, so I decided to find a new hobby.

There are people that hunt ghosts, like in that awesome eighties movie. I can't watch TV anymore. I just see a white screen, and hear this high-pitched whine that's like a ghost version of fingernails on a blackboard (which doesn't actually bother me anymore, which is strange). So I hung out with these ghost buster wannabes for a bit, and tried to spook them, and laughed as they said things like "The electro-magnetic readings are off the charts!" or "My spirit-guide says turn left." That got boring, though, after a while.

I tried to go overseas, but realised ghosts can't cross running water. I thought about haunting a ship, or an aeroplane, but I was too scared. The further I go from the place where I was killed, the weaker I get. It's weird, but even though I'm already dead, I'm still afraid of what comes *next*.

About a year after my death, I visited Sally again. I guess I was feeling lonely. Just wanted to check up on her. She wasn't home. I drifted into her lounge room, and overheard her parents talking.

"... good to see Sally happy again, you know?"

"Yes."

"She's been so sad about... you know... but she really seems to be snapping out of it. This Jordan fellow has just been..."

"Yes... honey, can this wait 'til the ad break? It's just, this is the last of the mini-series and..."

*Moved on?* I'm not sure why now, but I was furious. *Jordan fellow?*

I wanted to smash things, break windows. Punch walls, until my knuckles were torn. Get drunk. Start a fight. But of course I couldn't. Nothing's more pathetic than impotent, ghostly rage. After a while I found I was just flying around in circles.

The next night, not knowing what else to do, I waited in her bedroom. She came in and threw herself on the bed, sighing in satisfaction. I'd only ever heard that sigh once before.

*Whore!* I screamed at her. *How could you!*

Her face grew troubled, but I barely noticed. I was in a rage. I hadn't felt this angry since long before I died.

*You forgot about me! YOU FUCKING FORGOT ABOUT ME!*

Fog began to creep up the window. I kept yelling. Sally shivered, feeling the sudden chill in the room. She began to cry, and I stopped. I never could handle the sight of her in tears. But then something strange happened.

The radio came to life. Kurt Cobain was singing.

*My Girl, My Girl,*

*Don't lie to me,*

*Tell me where,*

*Did you sleep,*

*Last night.*

“No” she mouthed, “no, no, no...”

Sally went silent, her eyes wide. Tears kept falling. She hugged her knees, rocking gently back and forth, then her eyes rolled back into her brain and she leapt to action. She ripped the radio from the wall, smashed it on the ground. It kept playing. She started shaking, having some kind of seizure. When the song ended she screamed, a horrible banshee scream, and I swear I heard her mind snap.

Three weeks later, she was admitted into an Institution for the Mentally Unwell, or whatever they call it. A fucking asylum. I tried to visit her, but it was too scary. They could see me. The inmates, patients, whatever, could *see* me. I'd pass them in the corridor, slumped over in their chairs, muscles limp and eyes vacant from their medication. Suddenly they'd jump up, point, and scream,

“You! There! You did this to her! Go back to hell! Abomination!” I never got as far as her room.

*How did they know? How did they know who I was? I couldn't stay to find out. I was... huh. I was spooked.*

I visited her parents, to find out how she was. That was just as painful: they were sitting there in the dining room, not saying anything. Not looking at each other. Their only daughter lost to them. Deader than I was.

So now I just float along the streets, ignoring all the other ghosts, ignoring the living, trying not to think about the girl I loved, the girl I still love, rotting away in the prison of her own mind.

Yeah, there are worse things than being a ghost. Like being an asshole.