

GHOST LOVER

I give her a dead stare, "What are you saying to me?"

She mumbles something incomprehensible. She wishes that her look might express some kind of unconditional love for me. It is equally misunderstood. I avoid her stare.

"I want my money!"

If I can't make sense of what she says, then there is no way that I can engage her in a conversation. I look back. But she only seems to exist in a world of shadows. I don't want to be so mean. I am trying the best that I can. I don't even know why I am here. I feel as if I barely know her.

I am waiting for someone to turn on the light. Then everything will be clearer and I can recognize where I am. It is as if I need glasses.

"Speak English!"

I make an effort to wrap myself around the words that I say. I show an excitement for my sentences. A glee for my points of exclamation. This is my language, and I want to feel comfortable in its world. I am at home!

Try as I may I cannot make her come into focus. I want to shake her and tell her to act normal. Her manners freak me out.

She lives with a man who is equally obtuse. He thinks that if he gets more excited that I will finally understand what he is saying. I don't do crazy emotions; I really don't.

"High-five."

I go to my room and get on the computer. My friends are glad that I have made it out alive. One never knows in a situation like this. And I don't want to make excuses for myself. I never do!

I am out to have fun. I hate being a spoil-sport. And a jolly demeanor is the first step. There's enough in the world to get you down without adding to the mess. A ray of sunshine can melt away half of the garbage that clutters our path. I am willing to let the sun shine on!

My friends know that I know where the party is. Even if it's just the few of us, I am willing to let loose and make it happen. You can't let things in your life get you down in the dumps.

There are loads of people who are looking for someone to blame their troubles on. They stumble around in the world and act as if they know what is going on. They don't! They know that they are only going through the motions. It would take an act from heaven to shake them out of their dreamworld.

It's obvious what I'm talking about. You could raise a red flag in front of their faces, and they wouldn't notice a thing. The Lord help you if you tried to offer advice to these lost souls. I hate to say that it's their fault. But you know the saying; you make your own bed.

I guess that I could have remained as smug about things as everyone else. And I could have remained locked in the world of darkness. Let me tell you that I know first hand the grief that is involved. There is no helping these prisoners who inhabit my place. They don't want to know any better. It's impossible for me to change things. People who are stuck in their ways just become victims of their own stupidity.

I have learned to value serenity. It's much better than getting in a panic about little things

in life. It's not as if we don't have the means to lift us out of those holes that we fall in. We have to learn how to listen. I listen very well. I just need other people to speak clearly. You can't explain what you need if you can't speak the language. If you can't make the blurriness come into focus, you are going to have to live in the shadows.

The guy who I went out with in high school told me that he was getting married. It should have devastated me. I'm only in my early twenties, but it could have made me feel old. After all, he is getting serious about his life. And I have no one with whom to share my deepest misgivings. I guess that's why we broke up. I always felt that he was holding me back. He wanted me to get in touch with myself. That meant crying on his shoulder. Of course, if I ever showed any real concern about anything, he was ready for an argument. He would never pick up on how I was feeling. He wouldn't even pick up the trash and put it out. But he was always lecturing me about careers and responsibility. Maybe he assumed that I wanted to be his maid. Oh well! No use crying over spilt milk.

We got together for dinner last Tuesday. The first thing that I wanted to make sure was who was paying. It wasn't as if I had any big revelation for him. And I wasn't going to pay to have him make a fool of me. This was a big occasion for him so I wanted him taking me to somewhere fancy. It would also give me an excuse to wear my new dress. I wanted to dazzle him so that he'd start to wonder why he was marrying this poor excuse.

Everything went pretty much according to plan. And he did spend all night fawning over me. He tried to make me feel guilty over my lack of direction. He claimed that he had been trying to bring me over to the straight and narrow. Oh well! I guess I never learned.

He was doing everything that he could not to flirt with me. Compliments would slide from his mouth as he balanced the shrimp on his fork. I batted my eyelashes to acknowledge his meager attempts. He was drooling like a baby. And it wasn't because of his meal.

I thought about how I could work this in my favor. What did I still want from him? What did he have to give?

I imagined myself lounging around in his new house. He was a go-getter. Even though Samantha was going to be working, he was going to bear most of the load. He also expected her to become pregnant quite early in the marriage. Everything was supposed to be by the book.

I gave him one really long look. How could I ever have tolerated a taskmaster like this. I tried to recall one really fun time with him. Sure there were the movie nights. But I spent most of my time engrossed in the screen.

I tried to dredge up those moments of passion. It wasn't as if he was a terrible lover. And in high school, a girl is often willing to make compromises. Ultimately, he has all the appeal of a wet noodle. If I could just keep him interested long enough, I could always get that little pep that gave my life some purpose. I guess that's what a lover is for.

I could never really let him in to my hidden world. There wasn't much to bring along. That was perhaps the worst part of all. Leaving aside his great plans for life, there was nothing really that ordered in his life.

For me, he became a proving ground. That way I could make sure that no guy could ever have his way with me. Lover boy would prattle on about his superior wit and his vision for the world. I could imagine him passed out over his copy of the *Wall Street Journal*. But in the end, he was a paper tiger at best. And I whipped him at his own game.

Over dessert, I began to feel sorry for him. Who would ever wake him from the somnambulance that passed for life? Maybe a cup of strong espresso might do the trick! But he'd waste it on after dinner drink and sink back into his trance. I tried snapping my fingers. He just looked twice at me.

He wanted to make me feel like a used car. He had traded me in for the shiny new model. He even imagined her in an expensive wedding gown. There were secrets about the old gal that he hadn't even thought about. And the horror show was only beginning for my little boy.

When I came home, I again found myself sifting through the shadows. My assertiveness seemed like only a memory amidst words unspoken and gestures lost in incoherence. Outside was a world where I thought that I was independent. Back here my helplessness was only exaggerated. I strained to make sense of what was being said to me. The chatter only became more oppressive. I felt as if they were hitting pots and pans together in a shapeless code.

My ex had offered little that distinguished me from the outside world. In a strange way, he took me away from all of this. For once, I really did feel a part of something. But there was no way that I was ever going to commit myself to his promise. As naive as I was, I ultimately realized that neither experience was any different. If you took away the script, he was only babbling in the darkness.

That night, I waded my way towards my room. When I turned on my computer, all the magic came to life. The color came back to me. I wished that things weren't so chaotic outside my bedroom door. I found that I was speaking to myself and repeating phrases from my dinner date. The more that I spoke, the more the ghosts of that night seemed to dissipate around me.

I was communicating with my friends and telling them all about the night. They wanted to know why I had wasted so much time with such a loser. But he had always been my loser. And he had offered me the confidence to show my face in public. I had gone to school with my head held high. Other guys would approach me. And I turned them down with such aplomb.

Now, I was alone. I had made my way into the wilderness of my own accord. Just thinking about it reminded me of the darkness that had surrounded me in my early days of high school. It wasn't all that different from the obscurity that now envelops me as I make my way to my room. But in those days, it was just the opposite. Beyond the door of my house was a Babel. And I used all my skills to try to work my way through the confusion. Within these walls I found only comfort. The honeyed tones reassured me and gave me a place of relief from the constant barrage outside. There, a gentle whisper sounded like the sky crashing down from the heavens. With such a blaring cacophony, I had little hope of piecing together anything of meaning. I'd find my place in the cafeteria and nibble away on my sandwich. There were a few other girls who faced the same misery. But I avoided them because I did not want to enhance my own melancholy. It was one thing to stare down my own demons, but I didn't want to be associated with those other freaks.

If I was going to make it back into the light, I would have to school myself on the ways of cool. It was certainly a difficult trek. Many of the role models on TV seemed too plastic to engage my interest. I needed some of that moxie. But too much pizzazz and I was over the top. If I didn't want to stand out any more than I did.

As I adapted my language and my wardrobe to this new hip, I began to notice the dissonance around my house. Only in my room could I relate to the harmony. When I opened the

door, all these out of tune notes hit me like little arrows. I covered my ears, but that didn't help. I could read the lips, and they continued to speak in this jumble. What was happening? I was feeling alienated from myself.

Once my fashion sense caught on, I seemed like the center of something. I had enough money to play the game, and it wasn't that hard to stand out. And I pushed the conventions just enough to get everyone talking. But now the voices seemed like part of a symphony. I delighted in picking out the individual parts. And there was even more of a joyous song in the grand scheme. I had finally come of my own. Even as I started to have my doubts, he came along to tell me that it was all right. I had made it!

My dinner showed me that my high school years were indeed a thing of the past. I had succeeded in dealing with all the pressures of those years. But I couldn't be nostalgic about any of it. At one point, he had leaned over to kiss me while we were eating.

"I thought that you were going to get married."

He had given me the wildest look.

"I was only reaching for the butter."

"All you had to do was ask me!"

Today I am going shopping. It's not as if I'm the *Material Girl*, but you can't live off of good intentions. It's Wednesday, hump day, and I want to show off tonight.. I want to get those fires burning again. My night with Tom was a real downer. And I am not going to dwell! I'm cute! Guys love me. So what's the problem.

The moment that I pluck the garment from the rack I am filled all over with this warm rush of feeling. What a sensation! Without such excitement in my life, I would be miserable! I know that makes me vain! It's not like I want to give in to my moments of despondency. I was destined to be gloriously happy. I merely have to summon up the image of some lover boy gently massaging my shoulders to send me into spasms of sheer joy.

Sometimes I wonder why I am like this. It's not as if I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth. But if a girl, early on, becomes overly fond of the finer things in life, she will develop an immediate affection for any poor soul who can sustain her refined taste. If she is allowed to bask in the prime sunlight, then she will continue her devotion to such a persistent admirer. I have learned quite early how to pick out such worthy suitors and how to guarantee their total dedication to me. Even if I occasionally err in the direction of a personal cluelessness, I can always discover some savior who will pull me out of whatever morass in which I have placed myself.

At times, it might seem like a contest of wills in my effort to satisfy myself. However, who can overcome a spitfire who has been disappointed from her fated reward. If I have been condemned by my outlandish taste, let me accept my damnation. There are loads of other devils who are willing to share the spoils of our collective struggle. And when push comes to shove, I am going to be at the top of the heap parading my ill-gotten gains. After all, I have sharpened my nails before entering combat!

As I take my victory lap, I realize that all those envious little witches are all biting their lips to contain their overflowing contentions. Give me a kiss, girls. I know you all love me. And what's good for the goose must be especially good for the gander. So fellas, don't come looking for this sister if you aren't willing to come bearing gifts of real value. I am opening my

portfolio as I speak. Champagne dinners and candlelight are only the beginning. I've got my pen ready for any men to sign me over his soul.

A girl has to know when to jump ship when it's time. Even if it's my doing that caused the HMS Pinafore to spring a leak, I am not going to be hugging the captain as he heads down to Davy Jones's Locker with his ship. I've got other fish to fry and a hot skillet to sear them to a crisp. Get cooking!

I know that some girls have a low opinion of me. They have taken the time to nurture a caring relationship with their man. But let's be honest, girl. All you need is a leash, and you might as well have a trained puppy lapping at your heels. And I know with some of you that leash really comes in handy. Just let it be known that I am woman enough to take your man. It doesn't take much. I am so unassuming. I'm like an innocent little child, and it is SO easy getting close to him. He never suspects a thing. A few drinks, and he starts to get suggestive. Of course, he is blaming it all on me. In the dark of the night, he no longer knows the difference. I guess that is the best excuse for his immorality. He can't help it. If you were only more attentive and less like a trainer, he might never stray! I don't want to be the home wrecker. And I didn't get into the game with the idea of picking up strays. I just know what I've got.

With that in mind I decide to go out for dinner with one of my recent catches. Like all of them, he has a suitcases full of excuses why he is really committed to some other girl, but he finds me so irresistible. For the moment, I need to feed my bruised ego. And if he's buying, then I'll be the official gourmet taster of the night.

From the moment that we sit down for drinks, he has been staring at my legs. I watch his eyes make the trail up to my skirt. And he lets his imagination take over. I am having trouble keeping his attention. He figures this is what he's shown up for, to watch me put on a show.

"I didn't know that I was on the menu!"

"You don't take to flattery?"

"Tom, I'm not going to sleep with you."

"We haven't even finished dinner."

"Enjoy it while you can!"

"You're making it seem like my last meal."

"You have a great imagination."

I sit up in my seat and arch my shoulders back. He is more in his reverie than ever.

"Don't get me wrong. I know how to love a woman!"

"Does that kind of line ever work? Let's just say that I have my own devices, and they do the trick. I came here looking for a little comfort and concern."

He feels that his defense has been pretty evident all along.

"I like you. I really do."

"Great! You're a real nice guy too. Dig in to your shrimp cocktail, and enjoy your meal!"

"I should. I'm paying for it."

I'm not sure if this is my cue to jump up and leave. I could pull a ten from my purse and toss it on the table.

"This covers what I've eaten so far."

I'm too clever to get petty this early in the meal. And I do want to see his face as he twists in the wind. Of course, he still believes that all is not lost. I am just waiting to hear all the

details from one of his masturbation fantasies. He can go ahead and catalogue his porno collection while I sit there in awe.

“I’ve been looking at a boat!”

“A big one?”

He nods full of excitement.

“Where are you going to keep it?”

“I’ve got friends near Savannah.”

“I’m sure that you’ll ask me up for the weekend.”

“Would you come?”

“You’re still working on that boat.”

He retreats sheepishly. Is this what it takes with most girls? I have to make sure that he doesn’t get the chance to close. He relies on that moment. The girl has had a little too much to drink. And she is on the sentimental side of lonely. All it takes is one kiss to send her over. And he is practiced.

“Are you going to have dessert?”

I am going to take him for everything that he’s got. I can hardly wait for him to pull out his wallet. This is not a good time to be so mercenary. But from the moment that we sat down, I felt like a flounder that he had just pulled out of the fish counter. He can finger me all that he wants; I am not going to come alive for this dinner.

He looks so smart in his suit, the picture of success. Too bad he doesn’t talk a better game. I feel like the alcoholic turning down a drink. I’m telling myself that I’m not an addict. And I can survive another night on my own. How long has it been since I’ve been with a man? The more that I think about, the weaker I get. And the after dinner drink is only making me more drowsy.

“I’ll take a cab home!”

“I’ve got you covered.”

Sure he does! I don’t want any tricks in the car. And I don’t feel strong enough to fight him off.

“I can get a friend to come get me. Let me make a call on my cell.”

“Nonsense! I can take you home.”

“I already told you that I am not going to invite you in.”

This is going to be tough. I feel like one of those magicians who is tethered in a straight-jacket and tossed in a tank of water. I only have so much time to escape before I drown.

He knows his skill. He tosses his hair just as he pulls up to my place. There is that interminable pause. Then he works his magic. He leans close to me, and he puts his hand on my hip. I shiver.

“Oh, baby!”

“What?”

“I’ve got to work in the morning.”

I’ve pin-pricked his balloon. He jumps in his seat.

“You’re not going to get the door for me.”

This is the ultimate in his humiliation. That doesn’t seem quite enough.

As he pulls open the door, he figures that he’ll give it one more shot. I’m debating if I’m

going to take one for the team. He's a guy, a hottie at that. And I need to get something for my troubles. If I hold my breath, can I just walk away. It's not as if I'm fighting for some cause. The present is NOW! In a few moments, I will be alone in my room. What will I have to show for myself?

Suddenly it happens! That weird feeling. It starts as a discomfort beneath the skin. Pretty soon, it has washed over me.

"I need to get in."

He reaches for me, but in the confusion it feels as if he is grabbing at me. I push him away.

"What?"

"I need to get in!"

I want to tell myself that the act worked. Tom tools away in his red Jaguar. And I tiptoe to my room. He has left with a sense of triumph. And I am slightly melancholic. It would have been so easy.

I am immensely excited. Through my sources I have been tipped off for a special sale. I just have to be in there at eight in the morning on a Saturday. That's hardly a problem, even if I am a little blitzed from the night before. I stumble over to the shop. I show my pass to the guard and am ushered in the door.

Talk about exclusive. I slide in the door, and no one else is around to compete for bargains. This really is luxury treatment. For the moment, I wonder why I have been singled out. I wander the aisles. I survey the racks. There are big tags on the for-sale items. I am overjoyed. I need to come up with a plan of attack. I'm here alone. I've got my head start. But this is not going to last forever. In only a few moments there will be an army of equally obsessed gals clawing for bargains. Even if I've singled out everything that I need, I have to be somewhat practical. I do have to pay for this stuff this century. And there are going to be no major lottery winnings to cover all this shit. I need to be selective.

Maybe I can get one of the women to help me. After all, I am the only one in here. And they can give me the advice that I need. All that stuff about how the dress will look fantastic on me. I need to take a deep breath just to fit into my fantasy.

I notice a couple of saleswoman gathered by the perfume counter. What a better place to start my campaign.

"Can one of you give me a hand?"

They keep involved in their conversation. They are talking so fast that I can barely understand a word that they are saying. Come to think of it. Their accents are really strange. I don't understand a word. Maybe if one of them just shut up for a second, I could make sense of the conversation.

"Ladies, I need some help!"

I feels as if I am talking to a parent. What a horror! I've got some real problems to deal with. If I don't come to some kind of agreement, then all these wonderful deals are going to slip through my fingers.

I decide that I better work on my own. These girls have their own agenda. After all, it is their time that is truly running out.

I get a shopping basket and load it with whatever seems appropriate. This isn't some kind

of supermarket sweeps. I do what I can. I take a breath. I don't want to get carried away.

Even as I am stocking up, no one seems to notice. I wonder if I could just jet out the door. But the alarms would all be set off by those security devices. I need the saleswomen to help me.

"Ladies, save me at my moment of misery!

They still are ignoring me. I am ready to check out. But not a peep in my direction. I begin to wave my hand and scream. I even start to throw things at them. I am going to lose my advantage.

I can't get behind the desk to take off the security devices. And these women are not giving me the time of day. Do I have to do a cartwheel to get their attention. I don't want to break anything. I don't want the guards hassling me. But this is utter frustration. I feel as if I'm going to get thrown out anyway for being in here without authorization. But I check my invitation again. This is the right day and time!

"I'm supposed to be here. Let me give you my money."

The women, who have been conversing, walk off to their respective stations. But even when they have dispersed, they don't seem to be of much help. I wake up and take a deep breath. What a crazy dream.

When I get up, there is all this incredible chatter around me. I don't need to explain myself. And I haven't done anything wrong. But the Furies are still pursuing me.

"I moved out. I've got my own place now!

My ghosts don't want to leave me alone.

"What do I need to do to make you go away?"

I feel that my dream is ongoing. What penance do I need to do to make everything OK? I wonder about my offenses.

It is an absurdly long day at the store today. My manager is in a panic because sales have been down. It's hard competing with chain stores. I know that our selection is unique. And we try to sell for as cheaply as possible. But we do have to cover overhead. We can't take advantage of buy in bulk prices or some other trick that they use at a national store. We try to make up for it in service. The manager is extra-conscientious about quality. A lot of off-the-rack clothes start to fall apart after a few times wearing them.

I am getting caught up in my job again. This is only increasing my fatigue. This is going to be a long day. It is not even lunch time.

I decide to have a drink with lunch. I only hope that my manager doesn't try to smell my breath. After lunch, I suck on a breath mint. One drink had turned into two, and now I am flying.

The big clock at work is turning much faster than it did in the morning. I have a new energy. Maybe I should try this more often.

Just before close, a customer comes in.

"What did you say? I don't understand."

He repeats himself. I still can't make any sense of his words. I point him towards the back of the store, and he smiles. He again mumbles.

I look at my manager, "It's time."

"Did you get all those new clothes folded and put on the shelf?"

“It’s all taken care of. I even followed up on those orders.”
 It has been a busy day. But it will be the same tomorrow. I need to forget about all of
 this.

The mumbling echoes in my mind. Where did that man go?

“You live on your own.”

“I’ve got my own place. I can pay for it with the money that I earn at the store.”

“Where is it?”

“In the Highlands.”

“What are you doing later?”

“Are you trying to pick me up?”

“Just making conversation.”

“Buy me a drink, and I’ll have a lot more to say.”

“It was a terrible day.”

“You could say that!”

She tries not to remember the visitor to the store, but her memory is nagging on her.

“I could help you forget all your troubles.”

“You look kind of cute. And I wouldn’t mind making out with you later. But what do we
 share in common.”

“We’re both human.”

“Funny!”

“We hate our jobs. We hate our lives. We want something more.”

“I don’t hate my life. Besides two negative make a double negative. And that’s more
 than I can stand.”

“You don’t like to share.”

“I’m looking for someone with possibilities.”

“Is that a brush off?”

“I’m still drinking the drink that you bought me.”

“You don’t want to come back to my place.”

“Maybe later. But you’re going to have to do a lot more coaxing. Do you have any
 interests? What are your hobbies?”

“I like art. I take photographs.”

“What kind of photographs?”

“Model shots. I’d love to take some shots of you.”

“You’re ridiculous. I’m not tall enough to be a model.”

“The camera creates its own reality.”

“More lies. I have enough lies in my world.”

“The camera can’t create beauty. It can only enhance.”

“Cheap flattery. Don’t you have something better to offer.”

“I have more money than you can know.”

“I’m not that kind of girl.”

“But you love the things that money can buy.”

“I just want them on my terms.”

“We can’t always have what we want.”

“But we can get close.”

He offers me no sense of romance. I have wasted too much time with him already.

“I can get you another drink.”

“One more and I’ll be tipsy. I’ll end up doing whatever you suggest.”

“You’re sending me away.”

“You can stay as long as you like. You’re just not going to be able to buy me any more drinks.”

“You don’t want to go somewhere and have fun.”

“You want to go dancing.”

“I was thinking back to my place.”

“I don’t see you that way.”

“You did at first.”

“The magic is wearing off.”

“I could take your picture.”

“You’re just not that cute.”

I want to hurt him. He is pissing me of with his relentlessness. Time is my savior. He sees another girl that he can talk to, and he vanishes.

“Is this seat taken?”

“No.”

“You were talking to that guy. Are you going out with him? Did you have a fight?”

“I just met him. And I needed to send him on his merry way.”

“He was a catch. You let him get away.”

“I’m not that kind of girl.”

“You are pretty cute.”

“And I’ve got morals. I don’t know who these strange men are.”

“You don’t know who I am.”

“You seem different.”

“I am.”

“Tell me about yourself.”

“What do you want to know?”

“What was the last book that you read?”

“The question game. I could make up something to make myself sound all intelligent.”

“Do that!”

“I finished some silly science fiction novel about people with two heads.”

“Really?”

“No. I’m playing with you. I’m not a reader.”

“I read. But only occasionally. Best sellers and the like.”

“Romance novels.”

“I’m not that sleazy!”

“Are they sleazy?”

“He slid his erect member inside her.”

“You’re kidding!”

We both start laughing. There is a glint in his eye as if he knows something.

“I have a girl. We are going out. She is out of town. I don’t want to sleep with you. But you could come back to my place and cuddle.”

“You think that I’m that easy. I just sent that other guy on his way.”

“And now you have an air of confidence. So you wouldn’t mind celebrating your victory.”

“You haven’t even bought me a drink yet.”

“You want a drink.”

“You buy me a drink, and I’m not responsible for anything that happens for the rest of the night.”

“Is that a promise?”

“It’s a promise.”

“I’m still going to respect you. I told you that I’m with someone.”

“Of course, you are.”

“And I do love her. But things have been a little difficult. I guess I’m trying to deal with a bit of heartbreak.”

“She didn’t leave you?”

“She’s away on business.”

“What kind of business keeps her away so much?”

“I didn’t say so much.”

“But while the cat’s away, this mouse will play.”

“Let’s skip that drink. I can get you something stronger back at my place.”

I ask him to repeat himself.