

## ARTS

## FICTION

## Not Really Like 'The Exorcist'

By Ashleigh O'Briant

My father sat me down on his knee one day when I was a kid and told me that I could be anything I wanted to be when I grew up. This was the biggest lie he ever told me. I know this is a lie because I died when I was twenty years old. I was never anything but an awkward teenager and a young adult for barely a week. That is certainly not what I used to dream about as a child while lying propped up on my elbows on my pink canopy bed, complete with unicorns and faeries. I thought I would at least have that wedding I had been dreaming about since I was old enough to run around with a pillow case on my head saying, "I do! I do!" I refuse to "move on to the next world," as they say because I am just too damn pissed off about being dead. I mean who gets killed by a 6 inch piece of hail while taking out the garbage? Oh, just me, yeah I thought so. I mean, did it have to come out of the sky so damn fast that crappy February morning? What are the chances that it would hit me in the head hard enough to KILL me? Oh, and not to mention the fact that it doesn't usually hail in February. Has anyone other than me actually died in this manner? No, I bet they haven't but I guess those were the cards that I was dealt. So, in the meantime, I hang around my old home town to kill time and to wreak some havoc whenever possible. I mean, hell, I do have all of eternity, you know. I think it would be more bearable for my family if they could just see me one more time or maybe it would be just more bearable for me.

Now that I am dead I have a habit of playing jokes on my family, especially my father. When he comes home from work at night, I take his car keys and hide them in a different spot when he isn't looking. This completely flabbergasts him and drives him insane. He knows it's me. I did the same thing with his keys when I was a little girl with long pigtails and a gap-toothed grin. He talks to me sometimes. I think it makes him feel better, something has to because mom isn't a help to herself, much less to anyone else.

My dad always says to me, "Dani, I swear to God you're going to give me a heart attack. You're you, even when you're gone, baby."

I try to talk back to him, I think he heard me once. I had been walking on the roof making clicking sounds because I was bored. He yelled up at me.

"Dani, you wanna knock that shit off? I mean seriously, I'm working on a business proposal down here. The least you could do is come on in and sit with me."

I came in and sat down in the big comfy black leather chair next to him. I swore he saw me that day. Maybe he did and can't bring himself to admit it. I know I miss him more than he could ever know. That's why I am always around the house, playing with his keys, changing his TV channels, and talking to him even if he can't hear me.

I guess I am what you would call a poltergeist. Yep, I said it, POLTERGEIST. Just like in that movie with the guy from the TV show Coach, and that little girl with the creepy white hair. I don't hurt people though. That's totally not my style. I do things that are more irritating than harmful. I like breaking dishes on my birthday, making the water run cold during a pleasantly warm bath, hiding things when they are needed, and changing the TV channels to my old favorite shows. Hey, even ghosts need their Seinfeld reruns. "No Soup for you!" I do these things to my family in my old house because it makes me feel like I am still part of the family, even though it drives my mother nuts. She has had the shingles three times in the last year! She knows it's me doing all the pranks though. She still talks to me even though I have been dead for over five years.

Out of all the people I knew when I was alive, I think my little sister, Emma, misses me the most. She was only seven when I was killed and it had a devastating impact on her. She thought I was the coolest girl alive and I bitched at her constantly. Hey, don't go thinking that I am a total bitch or anything, older sisters are supposed to bitch at their little sisters! I mean, she would not keep her hands off of my stuff and made it a point to emulate me in every way possible, right down to the way she combed her hair. Ella is more beautiful than I ever was when I was alive. She has the same dark hair with perfect naturally, red highlights, the same short stature complete with an attitude that would rival Napoleon if you got on my bad side, and unfortunately, she also has my penchant for trouble. I guess some things are genetic after all.

Emma is sitting up in her room listening to my Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, The Beatles, and The Doors records. Well, at least I gave her my impeccable taste in music and taught her enough to know that vinyl has the best sound in the world. I mean even though I was an eighties child, I know good music and these records were damn good. The crap that is out there now isn't good enough for me to spit on, much less willingly listen to. Emma has all of my old records spread out in front of her and is singing along loudly to Dylan's "Blowing in the Wind." This was my favorite song when I was alive, even when I was a child. I damn sure didn't listen to Barney or Raffi. I remember my father teaching me to sing

Dylan as he strummed along on his guitar with the excitement and happiness that only a child can seemingly possess. Emma remembers this vaguely and thinks about it now. She was only a baby then.

Emma changes the song to "Like a Rolling Stone," and sings to the top of her lungs, "Once upon you dressed so fine, you threw the bums a dime in your prime. Didn't you?" She is thinking of me again, wishing I was there to help her overcome her awkward teenage years. I move the needle on the record player to my favorite song, "Subterranean Homesick Blues." This song always made me dance when I was alive and hey, even ghosts can dance.

As I was twirling around her room, she felt the wind from my movements and watched as the feathers on her dream catcher moved ever so slightly in the window. She spoke softly, "I know you're here, Dani. Thank you for watching over me." The next thing I knew she was looking at me as if I were there, right in front of her, in the flesh. She could see me! She could really see me!

"Emma, can you see me? Can you hear me?" I asked.

"Of course I can, I have been seeing you since the day you died. You follow me everywhere. You're always wearing your South Park pajamas. I thought I was freakin' nuts at first, but I read some books about ghosts and figured as long as it was you I was all right. I like seeing you around here, but you know you are scaring the bejesus out of mom and dad. They like knowing you are around but we would all rather for you to be at peace and move on. You deserve that peace, Dani."

## Meeting Time

By Desmond Sykes

Today is Laura's graduation from college. It has been about five years since she had last seen me at her high school graduation. And though we've talked on the phone, I have done my best to stay out of her and dad's way. The way he has always showered her with gifts and love had always angered and sickened me. I guess one could come to believe that I was perhaps jealous and childish for not recognizing that a little girl needs more love than a little boy. I however always smiled in the presence of my dad as if nothing ever bothered me. I'd gotten in town to stay with dad last night only to discover dad wasn't here anymore. I was on my way to Laura's house driving slowly and the time was nine o'clock in the morning. I greeted Laura's eyes as I exited my car. Though she's now an adult her face still shows signs of adolescence. From her goofy and uncontrollable laughter she beamed of excitement and smiles. She is bouncing around the front door awaiting my hug and conversation. I can barely catch what she is bellowing out to me. Her velvety voice is being whisked away because the wind is howling like a banshee. I slothfully cross the black asphalt to what seems to be even blacker grass. I realize that everything seems darker that day, from my black coffee to my midnight complexion toast. I focus my attention back to my baby sister. By now her graduation smile has dropped a little. Laura has to have noticed that with every elderly step I took made her day grimmer and grimmer. Nothing but gloom I brought on this trip. I have not one present for the missed birthdays and Christmas's that she and dad had shared without me. I ascended the red, chipped brick staircase as a toddler, two feet upon each step. I was delaying my entry and what would soon become the most hated of all my reunion trips back home. My voice trembled out a hello. She replied with a more jellylike but interrogative, "What's wrong?" I hugged her tightly and a tear fell from my eyes upon her shoulder. Once again she asked, "What's wrong?" That's when I told her that last night I found dad dead in his favorite reading chair holding a picture of Laura and me and a golden graduation ticket in his hand.

From the volcanic trembling of her pale bottom lip, I could tell my words had damaged the core of her soul. She fell to the cold, hard uncarpeted floor as if weightless. A limp, precious oriental rug she had become. Laura had always been more emotional than I. Laura had always been daddy's little girl or his 'cutie pie' as he referred to her. Everything in life she did she did for him. Mom passed away after giving birth to Laura and dad turned all the love he had for mom into a love for Laura. Laura gave all the love mom had and all the love a daughter could have for a father and channelled it all to dad. I picked Laura up as her small frame was still light enough for me to pick up. I carried her to the couch where I carefully laid cutie pie down so I could go to the kitchen for a glass of water and a rag. After retrieving the items I swiftly made my way back to the living room couch where Laura lay huddled in the fetal position. She asked, "Why of all days this day, and why of all people my dad?" She cried so violently that the tears that I had been able to mostly hold back all day begin to flow. I told Laura that I had found him last night. I called the ambulance and they come to get him.

She said, "Why didn't you come to get me?" And sprinted off to the bathroom where the door slammed shut.

"Well, I am still pissed off about dying the way that I did. I just want to make sure you guys are all right. Plus I like hanging around here. It makes me feel like I am still a part of you guys' life."

"Dani, you will always be a part of this family. Not a day goes by that we don't think of you and some prank you pulled. Our memories of you bring us laughter on a daily basis. It's ok for you to let go. I mean, isn't there some white light to walk into so you can go hang out with Janis Joplin, Hendrix, Morrison, and all of those other dead musicians that you so adore? I bet you might even run into Hunter S. Thompson. I bet he's got some wild stories. I know you want to be with us, but we will be fine, really. You should find some peace. I bet they have your Dylan records in the afterlife."

Her words stunned me and I started to feel like maybe I had done the wrong thing by hanging on so tightly to the life and family that I once had. Emma looked at me with a light in her eyes that said she really never would forget me and that I would always mean the world to her. Nothing makes you see the truth of a situation quite like family.

"Ok Emma, I see your point. I am sorry if I caused you any extra grief. I just wanted to be close to you guys. It made it easier for me to be dead. I'm going to go and try to find that great white light. Hopefully some Dylan tune will lead the way."

Emma cranked up the stereo as my favorite song played like a tribute to my life. Suddenly my father, woken up by the music, came in and asked Emma what the hell she was doing with my records.

"Emma, you know I can't bear to hear these

songs since Dani's accident."

"Dad, she's here. She's standing over there in the corner crying, looking at you. Try to see her."

Dad stood there for a moment, trying to get a grip on the situation at hand. He breathed in slowly and opened his eyes. He sees me! He actually sees me! I smile at him through my tears and I let out a laugh that would rival a child.

"Dad, I'm sorry if I'm upsetting you right now but damn it I have been trying to get you to see me for a long time. I can't bring myself to leave you guys. I don't feel like there's anything out there for me, like heaven or hell or whatever else there could be."

"Dani, I can't believe this. This is the first time I have heard your voice or seen your face in five years. Now that I see you I don't want you to go. I can't let go of my anger over losing you and if that means you have to stay, then that's the way it will be."

I couldn't believe what I had just heard. He started singing along with Emma's record with tears in his eyes. I think the shock of seeing me was enough to give him that heart attack he always talked about before I died. He started to breathe heavily and fell to his knees. Emma rushed over to his side.

"Dad! Are you okay?! I'll go call for help!"

"Go, hurry, angel."

By the time Emma had left the room my dad was standing next to me, looking down at his body. He looked happy for the first time since I was killed. He seemed more at peace now than he ever has been when he was alive. I hugged him for the first time in years. He could actually feel my touch now. He was finally where he wanted be all these years: with me.

"Fuck you," she screamed as she headed back to the bedroom swiping a picture of dad on her way.

I now spent another twenty minutes of obvious conversation with myself leaning in her door way. She lay still as a rock on her bed blatantly ignoring me as I tried to remain calm. I conversed for those twenty minutes about how she may feel better after attending graduation. While I talked she cuddled up next to the picture as if I didn't exist. After about another eight minutes my calm fled. I stood there and with tears in my eyes and I let it go.

"You know what, Laura, to hell with this. To hell with you, to hell with dad and to hell with your graduation."

With my tone she flipped over with lucid eyes. I continued to let all of my bottled up thirty-one years of anger pour from my soul. I told her that I hurt in my heart as well and not because my dad is gone, it's because of the way I had always felt ejected from their lives.

"When I was little I believed it was all in my head, but now I see that it is not."

I said, "That if you are going to continue to be a spoiled little shit then by all means do so. But know one thing you are twenty-two years old and life is full of let downs."

I told her I was sorry that her first let down had to be one of this caliber but that's life. I told her there are plenty more heartaches where this one came from and life owes her twenty some years of pay back for her living such a blissful and carefree life. I was crying while saying this told her that I am not dad I don't have the right words to say. I don't have the money and time to spend on her.

She yelled back, "You act like dad never loved you. Are you bitter?"

"Bitter, yes I am bitter!" I saw how dad has showered her with her first car and money and everything she has and hasn't asked for and I was mad.

I was mad at her attitude toward me as I was trying to be her comforter.

And to her question of did Dad love me I replied: "I have thirty thousand dollars in school loans that show how much he cared for me." Of all the money he had he not once asked to help me pay off anything. I told Laura, "I know what you are going through must be hard but did you believe he would live forever?"

Maybe it was good that he was gone because she can grow up and I could move on. I told her that I was leaving, I would be in town to finish the preparations for dad and I would see her at the service. I stomped out of her house and made my way to my car. I started it up and sat and cried.

After about four minutes I drove off and found myself at the front gate of the Lafayette University. I followed the snaking cars around to the over filling parking lot. I exited my car and entered into the administration building. I found the president's office and there I met President McPherson, a balding and greying man in his mid sixties. I told him who I was and that he would have to excuse my sister due to the circumstances of our father's death. I figured I could at least do this much for my sister. The president expressed his condolences to me and my family and asked if I would mind attending the ceremony and accepting

See "Meeting" on page 8