

## Dead Eye: Pennies for the Ferryman

by Jim Bernheimer

Episode 1: Origins

I volunteered for Mr. Bush's war. A few years later, a roadside bomb selected me for something else altogether. Now, I help people with ghost problems. Occasionally, I help ghosts with people problems. No one really helps with my problems. This is my story.

#

I didn't mind driving a Hummer, except for the fact that I was usually the gunner. A change in assignments could sometimes break up the monotony, but today something was bothering me. The lieutenant, freshly minted from OCS, had decided to micromanage our assignments, switching us to different posts. So, I wasn't up on the M240, I was at the wheel, staring at the back of a truck for the better part of fifteen miles.

We were "monkey in the middle" with a bunch of trucks in front of us and even more behind us. Personally, I'd have rather been at the front or the back.

"Just another day in paradise, men," Sergeant Don Hodges said from the passenger's seat. I was already on pins and needles, and his comments pushed me closer to the edge. Something was just giving me the "heebiejeebies" and I couldn't shake it.

Hodges continued, “There’s talk of possible sandstorms moving in from the west. Stay tight and keep a sharp eye out. Porkchop! I don’t want to see you daydreaming up there.”

PFC Davis grunted an acknowledgment back at Sarge, just before all hell broke loose. The deuce and a half in front of us was brushed by the blast like a toy truck instead of the real thing.

We spun out of control and tumbled. I heard a crunching sound while feeling pain in my head and legs. The engine on the vehicle revved louder and then seized with a violent thrash. Our Hummer, well technically, the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Cav’s Hummer, was on its side and smoking. I reached out and felt something. It was Porkchop’s leg.

It wasn’t attached.

My head lolled to one side. A rusty crowbar was embedded in Hodges' chest. I couldn't make out his words over the ringing in my ears. I guess it’s just one of those things I’ll probably never know what he was trying to say, because Hodges died seconds later.

Someone pulled my tattered body out. The Sarge and Porkchop both went home in boxes. Me, I was still under warranty, so they shipped me back for replacement parts, but I turned out to be beyond “fixin’,” so they gave me some lovely parting gifts, the thanks of a grateful nation, some free medical care, and a tiny paycheck I’ll draw for the rest of my life, as they showed me the door.

That’s when my problems began.

#

Some places have associations that are forever burned in the tracks of my memory. At Fort Hood, it was the oppressive heat and fierce thunderstorms. In Iraq, it was the stench of sweat, sewage, and gasoline combined with charred hair. Back home in Maryland, it was the whispering.

Nearly eight months after the fateful day I almost lost my life, I found myself catching a Ride-On bus from the Shady Grove Metro station. As my scars fade and my gait is no longer unpredictable, the whispering has receded, but when I'm on the Metro, I still hear people whispering, see adults trying not to stare, and children scolded about pointing. That morning, a solemn young boy, maybe five years old, stared at me for ten minutes before asking, in a loud voice, "Why does dat mans haf a potch?" He didn't know that these questions were supposed to be whispered. After being shushed by the older woman sitting next to him, I expect that he knows that now.

I was on a bus headed back to college, medically discharged from the US Army, wearing the aforementioned eye patch. I had just returned from having stitches taken out of my right eye. My body hadn't rejected the cornea transplant – yet. I'd made it this far, so things were looking up.

Tiny scars crisscrossed the right side of my face. I'd been told they gave me a roguish quality. They were a constant reminder of how close to death I had been that day and how lucky I was to be alive.

My vision was poor but improving. At least with my eye, I was dealing with civilian doctors instead of the jackasses at the Veterans Administration, the ones who couldn't do anything about the lack of hearing in my right ear. Don't get me wrong, I

wasn't kvetching about every little thing. I was quite grateful I didn't have to use a cane any more.

Returning to the moment, I realized that if there was one thing that I've always hated, it's public transportation. With my messed up eye, I couldn't drive. Having to take the bus left me feeling like I wasn't in control of my life. Who knew what kind of day the bus driver was having? There's also a social stigma associated with people on buses. The Metro trains aren't so bad – everyone uses them – but buses seem to have a bad reputation. A few years ago, I looked at the slobs getting on the Ride-On buses and thought that life had really kicked those people in the face. Now I know how right I truly was.

Of course, the last time I had been behind the wheel hadn't turned out to be the highlight of my life. Survivor's guilt is a powerful thing.

It was tempting to blow off classes and just head back to the couch and the six pack of cheap beer waiting in the fridge. Instead, I got off at the stop for Montgomery College, known affectionately as "MC" by students. I headed toward my English class, bemoaning the fact that years earlier, I had been a classic underachiever in high school, and that in the Army all I wanted to be was a "ground pounder."

With a slight aptitude towards computers, I enrolled at MC. I was a General Studies major with plans to take as many hardware and software classes as I could. With all the Federal Government jobs in the area, I figured that my time in the Army, coupled with computer skills and disabled veteran status, would translate into money in the bank. That was the plan, but plans change.

The college gig wasn't bad, but it was strange to be a freshman at the age of twenty-three. I'd been looking for a part-time job to earn some extra money. Everything I'd found I either wasn't qualified for, or it interfered with my class schedule. Classes came first.

I slid into my seat just as the class started. We were three weeks into the term, so I didn't really know anyone, though a couple of people called me "Pirate Dude" because of the eye patch and long black hair. Mom wondered if I was going for the Johnny Depp look. My few friends had already graduated college and seemed to be more interested in getting on with their busy lives than spending time with a cripple. I guess my friends weren't much in the loyalty department – or maybe I just wasn't much fun to be around.

Jenny Goodman, one of my new acquaintances, sat next to me. She was short, female and decidedly attractive. At five-foot-six, I towered over the cute little brunette with short curly hair and two perfectly functional blue eyes. Fortunately, she was on my left side so I didn't have to ask her to speak up.

She smiled and said, "Arrgh, matey!"

My attention was drawn to the sling around Jenny's left arm. She held her pen clumsily in her right hand. "Why the good mood?" I asked.

"I fell and sprained my wrist. As for the good mood and silliness, well, that's the Vicodin talking."

"Be careful with that stuff," I cautioned, knowing full well from my own rehabilitation how tempting that little white pill could be. "Why don't you let me take notes and we'll run them through the copier after class?"

She refused at first, but after trying to scribble a few lines with the wrong hand, she gave up in frustration and agreed. Writing kept me from falling asleep from sheer boredom.

Near the end of class, I felt a little twinge in my bad eye, so I pulled my drops out and tilted my head back. The doctor wanted me to keep it moist and covered for the next week or so. I shook my head to swirl the medicated drops around, then returned my head to the normal position. Normally, I would flip my eye patch back over, but something stopped me.

There was a blurry figure standing next to Jenny. I hadn't seen any older women in this class. Where did *she* come from? I covered my bad eye to get a better look, but she disappeared. Taking my patch off again, she reappeared!

Something was definitely wrong. I was about to say something when Jenny reached into her purse and pulled out her painkillers. I was too stunned to do anything to help her as she struggled with the childproof cap with her "good" hand.

The older woman reached down just as Jenny managed to get the top off and swatted the bottle from her hand, spilling the contents to the floor.

"Sorry, I'm such a klutz! Would you mind giving me a hand? Mike? Is something wrong?" Jenny completely ignored the screaming woman. I couldn't hear her either. Her lips were moving, but it was like one of those silent movies. If Jenny wasn't speaking I might have started wondering about the hearing in my left ear.

I suppose it was a good thing my classmate didn't say that I looked like I'd just seen a ghost, because I might have lost it. Stammering that there was something wrong with my eye; I quickly pulled my patch back down and helped her retrieve her pills.

Every few minutes, I'd sneak the patch off my eye and look. The woman was still there. If this was a hallucination, it was a damn fine one! The "mirage" looked like she was in her late thirties or early forties. Given the fact that I could only see her with my bad eye, I couldn't really tell what she looked like. Straining, I could see a bit of a haze around her.

"Mike, are you sure that you're feeling okay?" The woman drifted away from Jenny, lingering in the corner.

I lied and said I was fine, but I wasn't feeling very well at all! Who could have blamed me? I'd been a gunner in Iraq. Any number of people had tried to kill me, and I had killed more than a few of them. Was I losing it? Was this some kind of post-traumatic stress disorder? I worried they would be sending the padded wagon for me soon.

Up until that day, I was certain that ghosts didn't exist. It was just that simple! The supernatural wasn't real. That's for stupid kids who dress up and run out to Burkittsville and look for the Blair Witch, or hang out in Goth clubs wearing black, pretending to be vampires.

Ghosts were for old ladies, desperate to believe their friends and family were in a better place. *They* believe in the supernatural. I believed in things I could touch; things I could see. Well, that sure put a kink in my position, because I was starting to see things.

Jenny had to remind me that I was supposed to copy my notes for her. Later when she looked at them, she might realize that I didn't write anything for the last fifteen minutes of class, but going insane was a passable excuse in my book. Sneaking another peek, I saw whatever it was still following Jenny as she walked away. As she approached

the exit, it moved right up behind her and pushed her and walked right through the glass! Poor Jenny stumbled into the door with a thud and dropped her book bag and purse.

A guy coming in helped the distraught girl to her feet and collected her stuff. I didn't imagine that. Whatever that thing I just saw was, it sure didn't like Jenny.

Notwithstanding what I just said about public transportation, I'd never been so glad to be on a bus full of other people in my life.

#

Mom's house in Gaithersburg, Maryland, was a simple ranch style, three-bedroom type that was mass-produced in the 1960's and 70's. It's almost paid for, thankfully, because property values in Montgomery County are beyond ridiculous these days. Even if I had a full disability check coming in from the Army, it wouldn't cover an apartment. Medical retirement pay for a Corporal doesn't cover squat. My check pays for my share of the utilities, most of the groceries, and a few odds and ends.

Thinking about concrete things, like bills and the tiny payments I would receive for the rest of my life, was good for occupying my mind. If I hadn't run out of hot water, I'd still be standing in the shower. Instead, I dragged my sorry ass out and got dressed.

I didn't feel like eating, and Mom was headed from her cleaning job at the National Institute of Standards and Testing to Pizza Hut, where she waits on tables. Besides, what would I have told her if she asked how my day had been? It might've been nice to talk to Dad, but he picked up and left one day when I was nine and we haven't seen him since.

Having run out of options, I decided I needed to call my doctor. After begging his answering service, I finally got to speak to him.



“Mr. Ross, are you experiencing any problems?” he asked in a calm, professional manner.

I’m sure I sounded pretty panicked at that moment. “Yes, no, I don’t know. I’m seeing, um, distortions and blurred vision. Do you think I should come back in?”

“Some anxiety is natural after getting the stitches out of your eye. If it’ll make you feel better, come in and we will fit you into the schedule.”

“Doc, I was wondering, where exactly did the donor cornea come from?” Up until then, I hadn’t really cared to know anything about the person whose death I benefited from. It suddenly seemed much more important.

“Most people usually ask that question at some point. I figured you would have asked sooner. I don’t have your file with me, but I think there might have been a waiver release signed by the donor’s family. I can tell you tomorrow.”

#

A day later, I had a name. Darren Porter of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania – the name really didn’t mean a damn thing to me. The man had signed the release himself less than a week before he died. It was all I had, well, that and a search engine called Google.

Waiting for the web page to load was painful. It’s why I usually went to the library to use the Internet, but basic cable was about the only non-essential that Mom and I could afford. It might come as a surprise to some, but high speed Internet actually *is* a privilege, not a right. The twenty dollar difference between dial-up and broadband, well, that’ll buy a lot of macaroni and cheese or put gas in a car for a week.

Imagine the look on my face when I learned that my donor was a psychic. He gave ghost tours of the Gettysburg battlefields, according to the few articles I found. His

business had a web page, but it was now a dead link. There was a mention of a public access television show where he and a group called “the Eye of Horus” were paranormal investigators. Who the hell were they? Wasn’t the Internet supposed to be able to find damn near anything?

I searched for the name of the group only to find more dead links and precious little information, mostly useless crap. Who really cares that the little floating eyeball that you find on the back of the dollar bills is the “Eye of Horus?” I pounded the desk with my hand. The only real background information I could find on him dealt with his death.

There was an article in the *Gettysburg Times* about his death. On March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2006, instead of meeting his tour group, he staggered into the emergency room and collapsed. They pronounced him dead at 4:17pm.

A cold shiver ran down my spine as I read the article. It was probably the first real bit of sheer terror I’d felt since combat and I can assure you it hasn’t been the last. I knew exactly where I had been at that moment. A corpsman was wheeling my battered body across the tarmac at Dover Air Force Base. That was probably the exact moment I had returned to American soil.

When Mom got home, I turned down leftover pizza and told her that I wasn’t feeling well – not a big stretch! I was restless that night. It was a lot like those nights in Iraq, or Germany, or Walter Reed, while I was healing. Back then, a feeling of hopelessness crushed me - my prospects were pretty bleak - but this time it was dread -- cold clammy dread. Was I some kind of freak? I considered not using my drops and hoping my eye would reject the cornea.

I should have been jumping for joy, right? I'd just seen proof of life after death – the eternal question and all that jazz. I was scared; scared like riding in a Hummer waiting for something bad to happen. I thought about a bad movie I'd watched once and concluded that I didn't like seeing dead people.

At some point, I must have passed out from restless exhaustion. When Mom woke me up, I could smell the coffee and nicotine on her breath as she kissed my forehead. Of course, I probably smelled like cold sweat and body odor, so let's call it a draw.

Stumbling through my morning routine, I prayed that the stuff I'd read last night was a bad dream. I had no desire to speak to the mental health "professionals" any time soon – not after that dumb bitch working off her ROTC scholarship at Walter Reed gave me my mandatory psychological counseling for my war injuries. She might as well have read from a damn form letter! The military docs were all right, but I'll be hanged if I can figure out where they get their psychologists.

Unfortunately, what notes I had on Darren were still there. It had been a nice delusion while it lasted. I doubted that I'd run into Jenny that day. Our next class together wouldn't be until next Tuesday. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I looked in the Yellow Pages, stopping short of actually copying down the address for a nearby psychic reader. My gut instinct told me that if someone actually had any talent like that, they sure as hell wouldn't be listed in the phone book here in suburbia.

Trying to decide what to do, I finally came to the conclusion that I should prove that this wasn't a fluke. I could track down Jenny, but her little friend didn't exactly seem like "Casper the Friendly Ghost." That meant I probably needed to find someone to talk to. Well, there was one person I wouldn't mind seeing again.

#

All Souls Cemetery in Germantown wasn't my favorite place. Cemeteries in general have always given me the creeps. Now, I understood why. The man sitting on the ground next to the headstone – twin headstones reading Warren and Melanie Majors – looked as if he was in his early sixties. His wool suit was a little heavy for the warm weather. He stood and greeted me with a wave as I came up to the plot.

I hadn't come to visit Grandpa's grave recently. In fact, the last time I'd come up here was that week of leave shortly before my unit shipped out. I tried to ignore the fact that I could now see Grandpa Warren plain as day.

In a way, when Grandpa passed, it was the start of bad times for the Ross household. After his estate had been settled, there was enough money in the bank that a week later dear old Dad emptied the account and decided to make a fresh start for himself, without his wife and son. If I ever catch up with Mr. David Michael Ross, Senior, last known residence Phoenix, Arizona, I'll have to decide if I'll spit in his face before or after I beat the shit out of him. Want to really get me going? All you have to do is call me David, Dave, Davey, or especially Junior. It sickens me to no end that I share that SOB's name.

I looked around to make sure no one was close, before I looked him straight in the face. "Hello, Grandpa. You're pretty blurry, but I can see you standing right there."

The ghost in front of me seemed excited and started mouthing words at me, but I couldn't make anything out.

"I'm sorry. I can't see you well enough to make out what you're saying, but it's good to see you again!" I could tell he was smiling as I held my hand out to him.

When he gripped it, it felt like I was getting an electric shock. It was painful! Almost painful enough to make me ignore that it felt like I was really shaking his hand.

*“Damn good to see you too, Michael.”*

Stung, I let go, but not before hearing his faint greeting. I looked again and his mouth was still moving, but I couldn’t hear him anymore. There’s nothing like pain to really drive home how surreal a situation can be.

“I could hear you when we touched, but it hurt. Let’s have a seat and we’ll try it again.” Seemed like there actually was an explanation for all those “phantom” pains I experienced in hospitals. Now I really never wanted to set foot in Walter Reed again. I didn’t even want to think about what I might see.

Sitting on the ground, I tentatively reached out for him again, just barely touching his index finger with the tip of mine. This time the feeling was like someone stepping on my hand – painful, but tolerable.

*“Can you hear me now?”*

Despite the pain, I almost laughed, but knew he probably wouldn’t get the reference. Grandpa never could stand television advertising.

“Yeah, how are you?”

*“Dead. Bored. Lonely. Take your pick. Mostly, I’ve been waiting for you.”*

“Why? Are you stuck or something? Where’s Grandma?”

*“I’ve been waiting and hoping to talk to you. You’ve got a real gift. I need you to tell your mom that I’m sorry for being so hard on her. I was wrong and too stubborn to admit it. You give her that message and I know that I can go on and finally see Mel again.”*

“It’s not just this guy’s eye?”

*“No. You might not remember, but when you were four, you used to come over to the house, and you’d play with your imaginary friends. One day, you came into the house and were singing a little song. I’d always thought that your mom taught it to you, but no. It was Mel trying to send a message to me – letting me know she was still around.”*

Not a lot of memories left in the old noggin *circa* age four. I just shook my head at him. There was a nice breeze blowing through the park. I tried to focus on it instead of the feeling that someone had my finger in a vise.

Digesting that, I asked, “And what do I do with it? Go give ghost tours? Be Whoopi Goldberg in Ghost?”

*“Whoopi who? No need to get short with me, young man! You’ve got a special gift. Far as I know, you don’t gotta do nothing with it. You could just ignore it and put that eye patch back on, or you could be some kind of angel of mercy and help people out. If you’re a no-good mercenary bastard like your dad, I reckon you could help the ones who’re willing to pay you.”*

Give Warren Majors some credit; when he was alive, he’d hidden his dislike for my dad pretty well. During his life, he’d been an electrician and a union man first, last, and always. From what I remember, he believed in doing right by people and in the value of hard work. He also expected to get paid for that hard work.

I kept switching hands so we could talk. Little red welts and blotches were starting to develop on my fingers. I kept trying to get him to explain what it’s like on the other side, but he just shrugged and said that it’d be like explaining sight to a blind man and that was only the in-between. Even he didn’t know what was next. After the fourth

time, he cut me off and said not to bother asking any more questions about what it's like. We talked of other things, like what he could do and what he couldn't do, for the next few minutes. Then, we talked about me and my life. He wanted to know if I was happy, and when I told him I wasn't, he asked what I intended to do about it.

*“Well, that's what you need to figure out, Michael. Listen, most of us departed can only hang out so long. I wasn't sure I was going to make it, but I managed to last long enough to deliver my message to you. I can move on now and go find my wife and find out what really is next.”*

“What about the ones who are haunting someone? There's this girl in my class...”

Grandpa Warren just started howling with laughter. I let go, seeing as I wasn't likely to be getting any information anytime soon.

*“Sorry! I don't really get a chance to have a good laugh out here. There's always a girl involved, isn't there? Well, the ones that won't go away, they done latched on to somebody or something. Getting rid of one of them is tricky business. You either have to destroy or bury the object they're anchored to, or the person has to free themselves. Is the ghost bothering the girl?”*

“Yeah, you could say that.” I explained what the ghost was doing to Jenny.

*“Well, you can touch me right? Pick up that stick there. Now, poke me in the leg. Nope, just passes through. Kick me with your foot. Damn! Not so hard! So, I can feel your shoe, but not a stick in your hand. I suppose you could beat the tar out of him and convince 'em to go away.”*

“Her,” I corrected.

*“You shouldn’t hit a woman, Michael – dead or not, it’s not right. I was going to recommend you get yourself a nice set of brass knuckles, but I don’t want to hear nothing bout you hitting no woman! You were raised better than that! You’re gonna have to convince that girl to free herself.”*

“How am I supposed to do that?” I didn’t want to offend his sensibilities. After all, the woman was already dead!

*“Well that’s the sixty-four thousand dollar question, isn’t it? You just gonna have to figure that one out. Looks like I’m done here.”*

Sounding like some cheap movie extra, I said, “Wait! Don’t go! I have more questions!”

*“There are plenty of people who can answer them – but not me. My time’s up. If you ever manage to convince your mother that you can do this, tell her how proud I am of her. I shoulda told her that more often when I was alive.”*

He paused, chuckling for a moment and saying, *“She’s pretty grounded in the here and now, so I reckon you’re in for an uphill battle on that one, but she might come around one day. You can mention that I never did punish her for stealing that fifty dollars from me when she was sixteen. I’ll bet she’ll remember that. Take care of yourself, Michael. Hey, see that woman over that way with that big guy jumping up and down next to her screaming ‘The money is in the attic!’ I think you’ve got your first customer.”*

I couldn’t hear anything but my Grandpa speaking, but as I looked over at what he was talking about and a sensation passed over me. It was like holding a rope and feeling it go slack. Spinning back, he was gone.



For a brief moment, I was again that startled preteen, who'd just lost his grandfather. Rarely would anyone catch me admitting it, but that was the point that my life hit rock bottom. The bastard listed under the father block of my birth certificate ran off right after that and ever since, it's been a long climb out of debt and poverty for mom and me.

Swallowing the sudden hurt, I stood and started towards the young black woman crying by a graveside. A portly man was standing next to her looking both ashamed and exasperated. Meanwhile, I was trying to think of a scenario that wouldn't end with her calling the police.

"Excuse me miss, but I think I can help."

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"My name's Mike. I want to help."

"Great! I don't know how much more help I can stand from you damn crackers! You're already about to take my house. What the hell else do you want from me?"

I pointed down to my ripped jeans and faded shirt. "Do I look like The Man? Do I have a three piece suit? Am I carrying a briefcase, wearing a tie? I don't think so. I see a big fat dude looking like he's throwing a fit and trying to tell you something." I looked at the headstone and turned to the ghost next to her. "I assume you must be Lamont? Come on over here, Lamont, and let me touch you."

Lamont looked as shocked as his daughter did, but did as I asked. "Now hold out your hand. Let's see if this works." I brush his fingertips and feel a sharp stab of pain.

"Ow! Damn, that hurts. Start talking!"

*“Tell Denise the money’s in the attic! There’s an old suitcase on the bookshelf. It’s got some old cigar boxes in it. The money’s in there.”*

“How much?” I skipped the whole moral dilemma thing. I didn’t plan on cheating people, but I’d be damned if I was just going to give it away! Even “Angels of Mercy” have to eat.

*“What?”*

“You heard me. You think I’m just going to stand here and let you shock the shit out of me for free? I want a finder’s fee, or I walk. How much money is there?”

He hesitated. *“Eight large.”*

“Lamont here says there’s a stash of money in the house. He says it’s ‘eight large’, I’ll tell you where it is, but I’m expecting something for my trouble. Say five hundred?”

#

Denise took some convincing, and it took several more jarring discussions going back and forth with Denise asking Lamont a question, and me getting the answer, before she agreed to my terms, but I eventually found myself sitting on her porch and waiting for her to come back down from the attic.

I heard the deadbolt click and lock the door. “Hey! What gives?” The mail slot opened and a fifty dollar bill slid out.

Through the door she said in a menacing voice, “That’s all you’re getting! Now get your skinny white ass off my porch before I yell out to the brothers on the corner and have them come beat the shit out of you.”

Considering I was a white guy in the middle of an all-black neighborhood, things didn't look promising. "Fine, I'm leaving, but I can tell you that Lamont's not happy with you."

"Don't you dare talk about my daddy! I should pop a cap in you right now! You start walking or I start shooting."

Lamont stepped through the door. He was laughing and pointing at me. I grabbed his arm. "What the hell was that all about?"

He smiled a feral grin at me and taunted me with a wagging finger. "*Tough break, whitey! She's upstairs right now with **fifteen** large! I never did like your kind no how! Now go on and get outta here!*"

I punched Lamont hard, driving my hand into his gut and throwing him down the steps. My hand really stung, but the ghost actually looked hurt. Grandpa was right; brass knuckles might be a good option. With one hand clutching his gut, he started to fade from view, but not before flipping me off.

Walking towards the nearest bus stop with not much to show for all this, I thought about the lesson that Denise and Lamont had just taught me – get my cash up front and don't expect gratitude. I considered mentioning Denise's windfall to the surly dudes hanging out on the corner, but I guessed I'd come out ahead, just not as far as I would've liked.

#

I still had twenty dollars left by the time I ran into Jenny again. I'd told Mom I'd done a few "odd jobs" (I just didn't want to tell her exactly how 'odd') and gave her

thirty bucks towards groceries. Jenny and I were eating at the poor man's haven – Taco Bell. Ten dollars there equals dinner for two plus change.

I endured all kinds of questions about my time in Iraq. No, things weren't as good as the politicians wanted you to believe, but it wasn't nearly as bad as the press said either.

“So now you've heard all about me. Tell me something about you.”

“Well, I live with my aunt and uncle. My dad's a colonel in the Army. He's in South Korea right now.”

“What about your mom?” I knew the answer already.

“She died a few years ago – car accident. My parents split when I was eleven and she took me back to Roanoke, which is why I still sound like a hick. After she died, I went to live with my dad at Fort Benning, but he'd already gotten the tour in Korea and if those orders got cancelled...”

“The next set would have read Iraq,” I finished for her. I did Advanced Infantry Training at Benning. I wondered if our paths might have crossed back then. She'd have been jail bait at the time since she was barely legal now.

“Yeah, so I moved in with Dad's older sister and I do my best not to wreck their house.”

“I'm sorry about your mom.”

A dark expression crossed her face. “Don't be. She was a hateful woman. She bled my dad dry and did her best to turn me against him. The only reason she even fought for custody was so she wouldn't have to work any more. I'm still ashamed of her. Oh,

hell! Sorry about that, Mike. I didn't mean to spill my drink everywhere. Here, let me get some napkins."

I didn't need to pull back the eye patch to know what just happened, but I did anyway. Her mother was glaring at her.

"No worries. I'll get you a refill and we can change the topic." I didn't see the need to make the spirit angrier. I suspected that fighting with a ghost in the middle of a fast food restaurant would go over *real well* on the evening news. Despite my best efforts as a teenager, my police record was still clean and I intended to keep it that way.

Frowning, Jenny looked down at the stain all over her skirt. "I need to go change. Fortunately, I live within walking distance."

"Want company?"

"Are you hitting on me?" she asked, slightly curious.

"For now, just call me friendly." I couldn't exactly tell her that we should go someplace private so I could interrogate the ghost haunting her, now could I?

She seemed to not mind the idea of an older guy hitting on her, and she agreed, although she did make an excuse to call her aunt to let her know she was with Mike Ross, that guy from her English class.

*Great! If the ghost decides to hurt her, I wonder who will end up taking the blame.*

Her aunt's townhouse was a nice upscale one – probably worth a pretty penny these days. I weighed the options while I waited for her to change. Beating around the bush with her seemed like a good option, except I'd be leaving her with "Mommy

Dearest.” I finally had a name for her though, after spotting a framed wedding invitation on the wall for Allen Goodman and Rose Carter.

While examining a nice collection of Hummel angels, I concluded that no matter when I told her, she was going to think I was a whack job. Why waste all the time and effort getting to know her if she was going to freak out on me anyway?

She came back into the living room with Rose close behind. I decided to get this over with. Jenny was grabbing a couple of Sprites out of the fridge when I circled near her mother.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Look Mike, I think you’re a great guy, but let’s not rush anything.”

“Do you believe in ghosts?”

“What? Sorry, I thought you were going to ask me out. Uh, ghosts – maybe. I don’t know, why?”

“Because I can see the one that’s following you around. I think it’s your mom. She’s been pushing you into doors, spilling your drinks and just generally making your life a pain and she’s standing right next to me.” I grabbed the ghost’s arm hard and jerked it behind her back and heard her hiss in pain.

*“Let me go!”*

“Mike, what are you doing?”

“What do you want from Jenny?” I used my best “tough guy” voice.

*“She needs to suffer. She’s an ungrateful little bitch!”*

“Seriously, Mike, you’re freaking me out! Quit it!”

The ghost stepped on my foot, hard, but I didn't let her go. Instead, I slammed the woman's face down onto the kitchen island, which shook with the impact. I had expected the ghost to pass right through, but contact with me must have made her somewhat tangible.

I grunted, "Jenny, look at me! Did you hear that? Did I ever touch the island?"

Jenny just stood there open-mouthed.

"C'mon! Snap out of it. While I'm holding her, you should be able to feel something here. Just reach out where my hand is."

That was the very first time I experienced this harsh lesson – a spirit in contact with the person they're latched onto can draw energy from that person. As soon as Jenny's hand touched her mom's head, I experienced the next best thing to being hit by a bolt of lightning. Whatever it was, it tossed me violently into the pantry door, momentarily stunning me.

Shaking the cobwebs out of my head, I saw that Jenny had fallen backwards into the living room and was having some kind of seizure. Though I couldn't hear the ghost anymore, I could probably guess the murderous intention in her eyes as she grabbed a butcher's knife from the block on the island.

Maybe I hadn't felt threatened initially because Rose was a woman. The knife in her hands went a long way toward getting me over my gender bias.

I'd been a wrestler in high school and the time I'd spent in the Army had only improved my hand-to-hand skills. She was a dead woman with a knife. She slashed at me twice before I stepped inside her lunge. Under the circumstances, I hoped Grandpa

wouldn't mind me roughing her up a bit. My fist smashed into Rose's jaw and sent her flying, literally, through the wall. The knife clattered to the kitchen floor.

Quickly, I knelt by Jenny. She seemed to be coming out of her convulsions, but when I reached down she started clawing at me with her one good arm.

*Fabulous! The kitchen's a mess and now I have defensive wounds on me. I'll need to start working on my insanity plea.*

"Jenny! Stop! It's me."

"Get back! Stay away! What was that?"

"I think it was your mom."

Her eyes were glazed over in terror. "But she's dead!"

Starting to reply, I was cut off by her gasping in disbelief. Looking over my shoulder, I barely got my arm up in time to block the rolling pin.

Yelping in pain, I kicked her straight in the kneecap. Even for a ghost, that had to hurt. I grabbed an old cast iron skillet and used it to block the next swing of the rolling pin.

Surprisingly, I blocked it below the pin and her arm rebounded off of the skillet. Next, I whipped it around and hit her directly in the head. If she hadn't already been dead, that would have finished her. She dropped to the floor and slowly sank into the basement.

The next minute passed with me dripping blood onto the floor and wildly scanning the kitchen, holding the small frying pan like an undersized Louisville Slugger.

"Is she gone?" Jenny choked out.



“For right now, yes. We need to get out of here. Can you drive with your arm like that?”

“Not that well. My car’s a stick.”

“You drive, I’ll shift. Where’s your mother’s grave?”

The poor girl looked confused, before whispering, “Roanoke.”

“Then that’s where we’re headed. Give me a hand straightening up.” I wrapped a dishtowel around my bleeding, bruised arm and started cleaning up the blood.

“Why? We need to get out of here!”

“Jenny, think about it. You told your aunt I was here. There’re signs of a struggle. What happens when your aunt and uncle get home? They’ll put an APB out on me and your car. I’ve don’t want to end up on the evening news.”

Giving Jenny some instructions helped her out of her stupor. After five minutes, it didn’t look like a brawl had taken place. The broken dishes were tossed into the garbage and I used a piece of duct tape on the backside of a cabinet door. It should hold it up for a day or two. The frying pan went with us.

Jenny was still in no condition to drive, so I dropped the garbage bag into the trash bin and slid behind the wheel of her Honda Civic. My driver’s license expired while I was in Iraq and there was no way I could pass the vision test now, but it seemed like the best option at the time.

Lucky for us, it was early afternoon, so traffic on I-270 and the Capital Beltway was manageable. We’d crossed into Virginia and I was trying to remember whether I-66 West was a left or right hand exit, when she finally said something.

“Mike, what happened back there?”

“I can’t really say. I haven’t exactly been doing this for long.” I proceeded to tell her about the cornea transplant from a dead psychic. When she had calmed down enough, I convinced her to call her aunt and make up some lie about going out with some friends this evening.

Hanging up her cell phone, she looked at me. “What are we going to do in Roanoke?”

“The ghost is either anchored to you, or to something of hers that you have. Do you have any of her jewelry?”

“No.”

“Crap. Well, I hope there’ll be a ghost in Roanoke that can tell us what to do. You know where the graveyard is, right?”

“It’s been awhile, but I’m pretty sure. So all this time, she’s been doing these things to me. I’m not a klutz. I’m not accident prone.” Her voice trembled slightly.

“No. You’re not. Hey, why are you crying?” I asked.

Okay, so I’m probably not the quickest when it comes to understanding women and Jenny had been through a lot. Anyone who’s ever been in a car with a crying woman can attest to the feeling of helplessness. I patted her arm every now and then and concentrated on staying in the right-hand lane through the thinning traffic as we headed past Manassas, still about three hours from Roanoke.

She cried for a long time and then fell asleep. I kept peeling back the patch and looking for signs of the ghost. Of course, if she was farther than twenty feet away, my messed up eye wouldn’t be able to see it. The other thing distracting me was the fact that Jenny had a really nice pair of legs. I didn’t see many nice legs in Iraq.

My passenger didn't wake until I pulled over near Front Royal and put my last twelve bucks into her gas tank. Having not driven for awhile, the price of gas really shocked me. I hoped she had some money or plastic on her. Otherwise we'd have to explain why we suddenly ran off to western Virginia to run out of gas.

Fortunately, she did have some cash and we went through a drive through. Somewhere on I-81 South, she started talking about her mother and how much the two of them hated each other.

#

We arrived in Roanoke at about seven in the evening. The sun was already setting and there was nobody in the graveyard—living or dead. Shocking how a couple of days had numbed me to this, but then again, I had just narrowly missed being killed by a dead woman wielding kitchenware.

Fortunately, the graveyard wasn't gated. Trespassing, along with Breaking and Entering weren't words I'd like added to my resume.

“So, what do we do now?”

I shook my head.

“You still don't know?”

I heard the slight panic in her voice. “Grandpa wasn't too clear on what to do. He only said that you'd have to free yourself. Did you ever visit her grave?”

“I only came here for the funeral,” she replied.

I was at a loss. “Maybe, you just need to go there and say goodbye.”

She laughed bitterly. “The last thing I ever said to her was that I'd dance on her grave.”

“That sounds like a plan. We’ll try that first!” I said.

“Are you crazy?”

“Well, I’ve driven for hours, looking for ghosts, armed with a frying pan. I’m not sure crazy would begin to cover it, but yeah, we’re going to try that first. If it doesn’t work, try just saying goodbye. After that, we may have to find another ghost to help us.”

Things were looking up, or at least I thought so. The moment we set foot in the graveyard, though, I saw three figures climb out of the ground, Rose plus two big-ass rednecks. I grabbed the skillet and resisted the urge to mutter something along the lines of ‘out of the frying pan....’

“Jenny! She’s here and she’s got help. I’ll hold them off!”

I named the “good ole boys” Bo and Luke and figured they wouldn’t be able to really touch Jenny. On the other hand, I was in trouble. Luke got the business end of the skillet and staggered to my left. Unfortunately, that allowed Bo to bum rush me, knocking the pan out of my hands and sending us both towards the ground. I reverted to my old wrestler form.

Using a few moves that would have gotten me tossed from any organized match, I was gaining the upper hand when his buddy leapt on us and added to the free-for-all scrum.

Anyone who’s ever gone down in a pile will tell you that no one comes out clean. Most of the time, your hands are too busy grabbing, pushing, and pulling to be real effective. Elbows, knees, foreheads, and teeth suddenly become just as important as the hands.

Want to know how much pain I was in? Ever wrestle on top of a fire ant hill? My skull was on fire after I head-butted one of them and my teeth were numb after biting the other's arm. Through it all I could hear Jenny's screams.

Poking the first one in the eye and rolling free, I scrambled back to my feet. "Luke" caught a foot in the face and went limp, while "Bo" grappled with me.

*"You're not gonna hurt her no more!"* he hissed.

"We've never hurt Rose. We're trying to help her cross." I figured I'd try that line on the first ghost we ran into.

The guy stopped for a second, *"What?"*

"You know, go on! Pass over. Shit, she's choking Jenny now!" Not having time to argue the merits of this, I smashed my fist into his solar plexus and left him gasping for whatever it is that ghosts breathe.

With a strength born of fury, I ripped Rose Goodman off of her daughter and began pummeling her. Thinking back, I was probably projecting some of my own unresolved parental anger on the dead woman, but it's like the bitch at Walter Reed said, when I experience uncontrolled anger, I should find a way to cope and not take it out on a living creature.

What do you know; the idiot was actually right about something!

Rose started to fade into the ground, but I snatched her up and dragged her to her feet. "Oh no, you're getting a ring side seat for this!"

Jenny was crawling away on her hands and knees, but I got her attention. Choking out raw sobs, she managed to get to her feet. The one remaining ghost was watching us cautiously, but seemed to be making no more threatening movements.

It took five more minutes for Jenny to find her mother's grave, but when she began to dance, the wind picked up and the ghost in my arms moaned and tried to break free. Muttering obscenities and finally begging for Jenny to stop, Rose faded from view.

There was a long moment of silence as the wind died. There were welts and bruises up and down my arms. My chest felt like someone had shaved it with a dry razor and poured a bottle of rubbing alcohol on it. The one remaining ghost scratched his three chins thoughtfully and approached me looking somewhat ashamed.

*"So you help people get to the other side, right?"*

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Like the preview? Get ready for the rest of the story! Next week *Dead Eye: Pennies for the Ferryman* goes on sale. It will be available at Amazon.com (both paperback and Kindle), Barnes and Nobles.com, Smashwords, and you can order it by giving the ISBN to your local book retailer.

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