

Grief's Ghost

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The Charlotte Wymond Memorial Library closes, on most nights, promptly at eight. Any students still browsing the stacks are ushered out, the random senior napping on the couch woken up, last check-outs completed, and research paused for as long as it takes to get to the next location. Finals week is the sole exception, when the Char (as students at the college like to call it) is open twenty-four hours a day for the entire week.

You'd be surprised if you decided to stay there all night. Students who could finish a paper in a couple of hours somehow manage to drag it out until midnight. Cups from the library's coffee shop (which typically shuts its doors at five but is pushing it to the library's typical eight o'clock hour for finals) litter the tables. In the middle of the common reading area on the first floor, a group of students gather around a white board, trying in vain to balance seemingly impossible chemistry equations.

At around two or three in the morning, the crowds start to taper off. Some students are simply too exhausted to keep studying, the effects of their large coffees wearing off, while others have given up. The paper will be done when it's done, and they'll get the grade on the exam that they get. It never gets fully empty, though.

What it *does* do is get dark.

Eliza wasn't expecting it. She'd been flipping through yet another book on the development of germ theory, trying to find the hook for the final essay for her history of medicine class. The paper is due in about thirty-six hours, and nothing has seemed compelling enough. It isn't a surprise, though. Eliza's been having trouble with her work ever since her aunt passed during the fifth week of the semester. Most people haven't noticed; her grades have been fine, she only missed three days of class, and she's still (at least physically) attending all of the social events she normally goes to. The only thing out of the ordinary, it seems, is the headspace she's in.

When the lights in the library snap off, Eliza drops her book in surprise and then glances at her wrist, pressing the light button on her digital watch. It's three on the dot.

"You're not going to find what you're looking for, I'm afraid," a woman's voice, lilting and sad, says, and Eliza turns around, looking for the source. But she appears to be completely alone in the stacks, surrounded by thick tomes of history.

“Who’s there?” Eliza whispers. This is a library, after all.

“My apologies.” There’s a light shimmer in the air in front of Eliza, and then the transparent form of a woman that Eliza thinks she recognizes appears. The woman has, as far as she can tell (since the woman might be a hallucination brought on by the stress of finals week), thick brown hair that has been carefully braided and pinned back, and she’s wearing a long dress made of a cream fabric dotted with little pink flowers. The bodice of the dress is criss-crossed with ribbons and the skirt puffs out from it. “I forget that you can’t see me. I’m here all the time, you know.”

Eliza realizes where she recognizes the woman from: it’s the portrait that hangs in the front entrance of the library, with a gilded frame and a neat little plaque listing birth and death date, along with societal contributions.

“You’re Charlotte Wymond,” she says.

She—Charlotte—nods. “I was once a student just like you.”

Eliza remembers the story from the tour of campus that was part of orientation a couple of years ago. Charlotte Wymond was the university’s first female student, in the late nineteenth century, earning a degree in English literature, and published two novels that are generally required reading in the first-year writing courses; Eliza herself has read them and found them fairly enjoyable. Charlotte would have gone on to have quite the illustrious career, except for the fact that she caught pneumonia the winter she was twenty-seven and passed.

And then got a library named after her, which is more than most people can say.

“But it’s not the work that’s troubling you, is it?” Charlotte has the kind of voice that makes her immediately sound like a friend, like she understands.

Eliza has been having a lot of trouble finding people who understand.

In the past couple of months, her friends have slowly drifted away. At first they were supportive, reaching out and checking in, bringing her homemade cookies and sending her affirmations, but then, Eliza kept on being sad, and apparently that put too much of a damper on junior year for them. It feels like her professors won’t understand why she’s distracted in class, and she can hardly call her family, who have been dealing with her aunt’s passing, too.

Eliza shakes her head.

“You’ve suffered a great loss.” Charlotte drifts closer to her. “When I passed, I had to watch my family mourn. I have many pleasant memories of my childhood, of holidays filled with cheer and outings to the theatre and reading books around the fire. But once I was gone, I saw my parents wither away in sorrow. What was once a happy house became cold and silent.”

Aunt Meg didn’t have a grand manor house like Eliza is sure Charlotte’s family did, but she did have a little bungalow that was crammed with all of her unique vintage finds and furniture she’d fixed up herself over the years and dozens of cookbooks, each promising the best cupcakes or meatloaf or whatever else. After the funeral, Eliza and her mother had spent days cleaning out the house, and eventually they had a yard sale once they decided what they’d keep. Eliza couldn’t bear to come along when they donated anything that hadn’t sold, leaving that task to her mother alone.

“They built you a library, though,” Eliza says.

Charlotte nods, smoothing down her transparent skirt. “To preserve my memory. But you don’t need to build a library for whoever you’ve lost. You’re mourning them right now, which means they haven’t really gone, have they?”

They’d scattered Aunt Meg’s ashes, but then Eliza’s mom still wanted a place to visit, so she got a memorial plaque for one of the benches in the park by Aunt Meg’s house. It wasn’t quite a library, but it was something.

“I guess.” Eliza swallows. It’s better, she’s sure, to have known Aunt Meg, to have had endless movie nights with all their favorite eighties rom-coms and made pies together for the holidays every year. Aunt Meg was the one who brought the biggest bouquet to her high school graduation, and the one who sent her a letter every week during her first semester of college.

“I *know*. I’m certain, because I’ve been here long enough to see almost everything.” Charlotte smiles. “But it’s getting late, and you’re not a ghost.”

“I have to finish my paper,” Eliza argues.

“But you’re not going to finish it right now, are you? As I said, I was a student once myself.” Charlotte’s expression is knowing, and besides, the ghost is right—Eliza is exhausted, and has been for weeks now.

She takes the pile of books she was looking at into her arms and starts to make her way through the stacks to the circulation desk (at the very least she can check these out and the night won’t

have been in vain), but before she gets to the end of the shelf, she turns back to look at the ghost one last time.

“Thank you,” Eliza says.

“Of course.” Charlotte waves at her serenely. “I am always here for my students.”

After she checks out the books, Eliza heads for the library exit. She hasn’t been outside in hours, and the warm, fresh air hits her as soon as she walks outside. Campus is quiet except for the fountain in the middle of the quad facing the library. The bells in the chapel just beyond the fountain start tolling, and Eliza realizes that now it’s closer to four in the morning than three.

But she’s still not quite ready to go home.

In her chest, she knows, lies Aunt Meg’s heart, still beating. She’s felt, as she’s traversed the rocky enclaves of grief, like she’s pulling along both of their dreams now. Aunt Meg was so happy for her to get into this university, so excited to see what she would do with her career. Now she has to do it alone, but she knows where she got her determination from. Unbidden tears, heavy and silent, flow down Eliza’s cheeks and drip off of her face onto her stack of books.

She doesn’t leave until the tears have stemmed on their own, and it is as if a weight has been lifted.

“But now, I don't feel silly. I just feel a rush of something up through my heart, wide and deep as a river of light, and it rushes over the banks, and up through the throat and into the mouth and out my eyes, a great big surge of something that for so long had no name, a fugitive animal in a wood, and I know the name of it now, and what it is, is love.” —Harrison Scott Key