

The Ghost, the Rat, and Me

R. Gioia

The mysterious note tingled inside my pocket.

I found it smushed inside my locker earlier in the day. Jammed between my binder and math book, it flipped to the ground when I opened the door. It had been folded into a triangle, the kind used to play paper football at lunch. I hated to hide it inside my pocket instead of reading it, but I didn't want probing eyes to see. The note would have to wait till I got home.

The final bell rang.

Kids poured into the hallway. My nemesis, Will Tuffy, burst through the gym doors in a hurry to leave; his copper red hair spiked six inches straight up. Everyone who saw him smiled at the red headed wonder. I ducked behind Bo Peak hoping Will didn't see me. Lucky for me, Bo is an offensive lineman on the school football team and could hide a house. A group of boys fell in around "The Tuffy", a.k.a. coolest guy in school. I watched him chat up his friends. Everyone laughed at his stupid jokes.

I sighed. Being one of the shortest guys in eighth grade doesn't stop the coolest guy in school from being a popular jerk. Truthfully, I think it's made him who he is today. He has a personality that fills up any room. And his appetite for attention is legendary. He dips pencils in glue bottles and passes them out to clueless victims. He folds tests into paper airplanes and flies them into the teacher's desk. He hiccups during silent reading, and burps nonstop in the library. He's created special hand signals to talk to his friends in class, and he flirts with every female in school, including the teachers.

But, it's the way he picks on my friends that really drives me crazy. He labels them "nerds," as if that's a bad thing, and then targets them for a bunch of his ridiculous pranks. Wyatt found his new binder super-glued to his desktop and Emily fell over backwards when Will pulled the chair out from under her. There was also the time when a love letter written to one of the cheerleaders ended up on the front page of the school newspaper. Unfortunately, it was a love letter penned by my friend Billy, only the shyest kid in school. Billy is the type to hide in the back of the crowd so no one sees him. When I asked Billy about the love letter, he turned beet red. After choking on his own words for ten minutes, he finally found his voice. Seems someone had stolen the letter from the back of his locker where he kept it hidden. Of course, that someone was the Tuffy.

Tuffy bullies my all of my friends, but he couldn't bully Temple. My best friend Temple was a total nerd, but Will didn't dare give him a hard time. That's because Temple was totally awesome, and the Tuffy knew when he was outmatched. Temple would run circles around the Tuffy if he was still alive.

Alive. That word froze in my brain.

A knot formed in my throat. A tear trickled down my cheek. I looked down. It rolled off the end of my chin and splash against the floor. My chest throbbed. The pain thumped inside. Thinking of Temple hurt so much I was afraid my heart would stop. I swallowed, trying hard not to cry. Not here, not now. Everyone would see.

It took a few minutes but I was finally able to stop. Pushing memories of Temple to the back of my brain took practice. It seemed no matter how much I practiced, it didn't get any easier. Wiping my eyes against my sleeve, I peeked around Bo's back.

Wills' two sapphire blue eyes turned toward me. I panicked. The Tuffy's eyes possess an uncanny power that bores all the way down to your soul. Makes me wonder what the boy can see. Lucky for me, Bo moved and I scooted along beside him hidden from view. The coolest guy in school didn't even know I was there. If the eyes really are the windows to your soul, that boy would realize I'm a mess inside.

Will and his groupies rounded the corner, so I grabbed my things and headed for home.

1

It Begins

The front door slammed shut behind me.

Slipping the backpack off my shoulder, I stretched my aching back before pulling the note from my pocket. Maybe it was from John Davis, the dreamiest boy in school. I saw him watching me in the library yesterday. He looks at me a lot when he thinks I'm not watching. Or maybe it's from Bernard the Weasel. He got the name weasel when he ratted out the person who dumped dish soap in the school water fountain. It's not that I hate him or anything; he's just not my type. I hope he's not begging to walk me home again. It all started when I gave him a quarter to cover his lunch bill in the cafeteria line. Now he follows me everywhere. If only John Davis was that obvious.

Looking down, I studied the sharp creases leading to three perfectly folded points. Whoever made this note knew what they were doing. That meant they were a player. That also meant I had watched them play football in the cafeteria. Biting my lip, I looked away. Who in the football club would send me such a note? And why?

That was the problem. The boys who played paper football at lunch weren't shy. If they wanted to say something, they would, in front of anybody, anywhere. They liked the power and the attention. Most of them played on the school's football team.

Before I could finish my line of thought, the phone rang.

For a brief second, I thought it was Temple. We always hung out after school. That was one of the things I missed the most... talking about the kids at school, where to eat, and what new band was playing in town. My stomach started to

churn. Forcing my thoughts away from a bunch of painful memories, I strolled across the room where I caught the handle at the end of the fourth ring. Once again, I triumphed before the answering machine picked up.

“Hello?”

“Guess who’s running for class president.”

A familiar voice filled my ear. I groaned. “Who is this?”

“I was surprised when I heard who old lady Brambles picked to run, but I’m psyched.”

“Will Tuffy. How did you get my number?”

“It’s in the phonebook.”

“Oh. I didn’t know you could read.”

“Down girl. Wanted you to know first. Brambles picked you and me to run for class president. She’s going to announce it tomorrow in social studies class.”

“That’s impossible. I withdrew my essay when I found out you were running.”

“Well somebody didn’t tell the selection committee. It’s you and me baby. I hope you’re ready for the fight of your life.”

Yippee. “Don’t bother. I’m telling them I’m not running tomorrow. Go find some other kid to torment.”

I could feel his snicker from the other side. “I didn’t know you were so afraid of me. My first campaign poster...Tuffy Knocks Outs Competition. Campbell Olson Withdraws From Race.”

That hurt. “First off, I’m not afraid of you. And that would be cheap to say I withdrew when I never entered.”

“You filled out the essay saying why you would make a good leader and submitted it. When I tell everyone that you quit because I was running, they’ll know it’s because you’re afraid of me.”

It’s amazing how fast a person can change their mind. “Don’t you dare tell anyone that. I’ll run only because it wouldn’t be fair to put anyone else through the misery.”

“None of your nerdy friends would dare take me on. Just because I like you, doesn’t mean anything. Watch your back.” Then he hung up before I could come up with a retort.

Frowning, I placed the receiver back in the cradle. Will Tuffy was trying to intimidate me. And what did that mean? Just because I like you? Did he think I was one of his groupies? I shook my head. Time to worry about him later.

Looking down at the note, I felt a weird sensation pass through my hand. The paper grew heavy. When I lifted my palm up to get a better look, it rolled off the tips of my fingers and dropped to the floor. I jumped back. A shiver ran down my spine.

Suddenly afraid, I caught my reflection in the mirror. What I saw surprised me. A little girl with curly brown hair and big, blue eyes stared back. That little girl was afraid of the monster under her bed. That little girl was afraid of things with big teeth. That little girl made grandpa check the closet for the boogey man every night before going to sleep. That little girl was me.

I huffed. Boy had Will Tuffy really gotten to me. One annoying chat had me imagining things.

In the middle of my crisis, a bird on the outside window began to sing. I listened to the short, crisp trill. The melody was full of life and cheerful; unlike me. That sound pulled me back to reality.

I took in my surroundings, and broke out laughing. That little girl in the mirror was the president of the Student Council and lead in the school musical. That little girl played powder puff football and the violin. And that little girl pushed herself into doing things that scared her anyway. That's because that little girl was really a big girl.

Mumbling under my breath that Will Tuffy was not going to get me, I straightened my shoulders, snatched the note off the floor (where it did not feel heavy at all), walked to the kitchen table, unfolded the paper and flattened it out.

Beware! Someone you know will lead you down a long, mysterious path. Choose your path wisely or you may not reach the end. Trust no one.

At first I blinked. Then I read the note again. A couple of seconds later, it hit me.

OMG! What path? Beware of whom? Is Emily still mad because I wouldn't tell Temple she liked him last year? Or is my arch enemy Amelia plotting against me because she likes John Davis and thinks I'm in the way.

Eyes closed, I tried to calm the chaos racing through my veins. Choose your path wisely or you may not reach the end . . . dread crawled slowly up my spine.

Crumpling the note into a ball, I threw it into the trashcan. It perched on top of the other junk, refusing to fall in. I bent down to look at it. As much as I wanted it to be something different, it wasn't. It was a normal piece of paper with plain writing on it. Nothing more.

Feeling like an idiotic for being such a baby, I pulled the note out of the trash and smoothed out the wrinkles. What was wrong with me anyway? It was just a note. Engage you brain girl. Get a grip on you scaredy-cat heart, and use your head.

When I examined it again, the absence of a signature came as no surprise. There were no secret marks, or hidden codes. No favorite pen colors. I love hot pink myself, but I didn't expect this person to use a special color like me. No, that would be convenient. The person writing this note had used black. Boring, old, dull black. I didn't like them already.

A voice suddenly pierced the air around me. I jerked so hard, I almost fell backwards.

"So, you were really picked to run for president, huh, Bell girl?" asked the voice.

My eyes combed the room, but it was empty. No one called me Bell anymore.

"Well?" said the voice again.

The voice sounded like it was right in front of me. Hairs rose on the back of my arms. Fear started at my toes and crept all the way up my back. My hands shook. I swallowed. "Who is it?" My eyes searched the perimeter of the room.

"Don't you know?"

It answered my question with a question. Even though I was a little freaked, that vexed me. "Should I?" I fought to keep the irritation out of my voice and stay calm. It had to be Will Tuffy. He must have broken in and wired my house.

"Have you forgotten me already?"

"Forgotten who already?" My voice cracked.

"I have only been gone four months, Bell."

A puzzle. I love puzzles, but not right now. I turned toward the unseen voice. "My best friend, Temple Black has been gone for four months. Temple died when he saved a kindergartner from stepping in front of an oncoming car. He pushed her out of the way but couldn't save himself. He died a hero."

The voice fell silent.

A knot tightened in my throat. The pain rushed back. I could still hear his voice inside my head. Memories of our life together ran like a full feature movie, 24/7. We played cowboys and Indians because he wanted to. We played Queen of Sheeba because I wanted to. He built a fort out of fallen tree branches. I built a fort out of sheets. We colored in my Disney Princess book. He played the sheriff. I played the bad guy. He coached me in soccer. I taught him how to dance. He made fun of my crushes; I made fun of the girls who liked him.

In just one day, four months ago, I learned the true meaning of death and what it's like to lose a best friend. The pain is beyond bearable. Only my pillow knows how many tears I've shed.

My parents died in a mountain climbing accident when I was a baby. Their death wasn't the same. I was too young to remember. Their memories do not fill my head. Their words do not fill my ears. Even though I knew they loved me, their love is not etched inside every cell of my being. All I have of them are stories and pictures on the wall. I cannot feel their touch or see their faces. Temple Black still lives inside of me.

I shook my head. Will Tuffy wanted to hurt me. This boy was cruel.

The voice spoke again. "That's how come I'm allowed to see you. Heroes are allowed to choose where they want to hang, and I've come back to hang with you. You are my best friend and you need me."

I couldn't believe my ears. What kind of nonsense was this? "Will Tuffy, you have gone too far! Shame on you for using Temple's memory like this."

I swallowed, trying to get rid of the knot. I wanted the voice to go away. But the voice did not go away.

"I'll prove it. We use to quiz each other. Why did the Egyptians preserve the bodies of the dead?"

As much as I wanted to run, I wanted to stay and fight too. Will Tuffy could not get away with this. I smirked. "Everyone knows that. The Egyptians believed they needed their bodies in the afterlife. That doesn't prove a thing." I couldn't believe I argued with a voice.

"Ask me a question. One that shows my total awesomeness. I dare you." The voice taunted me.

I contemplated my next move. Temple, known as Sir Brainiac to his friends, was wicked smart. Although smart, Will couldn't touch Temple in brains. What was the last question Temple asked me? Oh, yea... "Did Thomas Jefferson negotiate the Louisiana Purchase with France, Spain, or England?"

The voice scoffed. "That is so cheap! It offends me to be asked such an easy question. My cat could answer that. Thomas Jefferson negotiated with Napoleon Bonaparte from France. Here's a new piece of trivia for you. Napoleon Bonaparte used the bee for his personal symbol because he admired how hard they worked. I've met him recently. He's a cool guy."

Huh? Met Napoleon Bonaparte recently? No way was I going there. The rest of the answer sent shivers up my back. Temple had traveled to the next state to see the Napoleon Bonaparte display on loan at the museum from France. The person pretending to be Temple had done their homework. How would Will know that? The knot inside my throat tightened. It throbbed. I didn't know what to do.

"Bell, it really is me. Look."

Shades of many colors sparkled before my eyes. I rubbed them trying to focus. A swarm of glittery bits swirled in midair, like a cauldron of rainbow soup. The glittery bits formed into a tall boy with wild, curly, black hair. Gorgeous spider leg eyelashes formed under a pair of cool, black rimmed glasses. The Temple look-alike grinned at me. My heart jumped at the sight.

“No way!” I punched it as hard as I could. I expected my hand to pass through a hologram, but it landed with a thump on the thing’s chest.

“Ow!! What did you do that for? This is the first time I materialize in front of a real live person and I get abused!” The Temple look-alike rubbed its chest, pretending to be injured.

I stared at the likeness. The recreation was perfect down to the black curl flopping over the forehead. It was tall, athletic, and it had a smile that stretched from ear to ear. If I didn’t know better, I would have taken this boy to be my best friend since preschool.

Its arms flew up. “What do I have to do to prove who I am?”

I stared. It acted like Temple. It talked like Temple. But Temple was dead. And Will was a master trickster. Only a fool would fall into this trap.

“I got it!” The thing smacked itself on the forehead. “I know a secret about you that no one else knows. When you were in fourth grade, you stole a box of gumballs from the drugstore. You felt so guilty you broke into your piggy bank and went back to pay for it. You were afraid to tell your grandpa because you’d get into trouble.”

I gasped. No one else knew that. Now I was really confused. “Temple! How can it be you?”

It laughed. My mind went fuzzy. Temple had died. How could he be here? How could Will Tuffy know about the gumballs? And how can a person morph out of thin air? Even Will Tuffy wasn’t that good. I stared.

The look-alike did a football dance around the room. It stopped long enough to poke me in the side. “I’m back!” it shouted.

I pushed it away. “This is impossible. Ghosts don’t exist. If you are who you say you are, prove it.” I folded my arms. Temple and I were (or had been) amateur detectives and spent summers perfecting our craft. Will Tuffy would have to do better.

The thing, or whatever it was, paced in front of me, apparently thinking. At this point I was really confused about what to call it. I looked for anything that might explain its appearance. Nothing in my surroundings seemed out of place.

“Okay, but mere mortals don’t really understand. Molecular reconstruction is a complicated science.”

“Try me,” was all I could say.

The look-alike grinned. "Try to keep up now. I don't want you to be confused."

My eyes narrowed. "I'll let you know when that happens."

It snickered, obviously amused. "As a breathing organism, I had a living spirit. My body died, but my spirit lived on." It hesitated. "Still with me?"

I placed my hands on my hips and glared.

It laughed. "Gravity is an invisible force that keeps the whole solar system in place. The pull of gravity keeps everything on earth in place, too." It stopped.

I grew impatient. "Got it. Go on." As much as I didn't want to admit it, Will Tuffy surprised me. The boy was good. I almost believed it was Temple. Maybe I wanted it to be Temple.

The look-alike shook its head. "I dunno, Bell. You used to say, 'Temple, all you do is talk about science, science, science.' You called me a science geek, a super nerd."

I stared at it. "I called Temple a nerd because nerds are cool. Now spill it. You haven't proven a thing yet."

It frowned.

I raised an eyebrow, waiting.

A grin replaced the frown. "In this form as pure energy, I have the power to rearrange molecules and make them do whatever I want. I can tell my lips where to go, where my liver needs to sit inside my body, and how my brain works. Gravity and the attraction between the atoms negative and positive electrons glue everything in place. It stays that way until I release the gravity. Pretty cool, ugh?"

I looked away. I had to admit, it sounded plausible. The gravity and molecules I understood. It was wrapping my brain around Temple being a ghost that I found impossible. I looked around. Where did Will hide the video camera?

The Temple look-alike would not give up. "Listen Bell. There are limitations. I can recreate my body out of molecules, but I'm not really alive. And there are rules that I am sworn to follow."

I poked it. I would have to play along until Will made a mistake. "But, you felt me hit you."

"It took me a long time to figure out how to recreate every inch of this gorgeous bod, but I have a nervous system just like before. I can feel pain and hunger. I can feel the sun on my skin and the humidity rolling in with a storm. I'm my old self in every way."

The hopeful look on its face got to me. I tried to shake it off. Then a thought wormed its way inside my head. Maybe what it said was true. It knew about the gumballs. It knew about Napoleon. It knew I called Temple a nerd. It

called me Bell, Temple's special nickname for me. The thing looked like him down to the Converse hi-tops. My mind wanted to believe, but my heart held back. Losing Temple before had ripped my heart in two.

I just didn't know. "Then how come it took you so long to come back?"

It nodded, apparently satisfied with the question. "I had to earn the right to come back. I've been working as a guardian ghost, cleaning up toxic waste all over the world for months. Then I got this idea. I told the president the country needed to go green and how to do it. I planted the thought inside her head. That move earned me the position of free spirit. I got here just in time for your birthday. Am I not totally cool or what?"

I wrung my hands. A year older than me, Temple had won trophies in drama, science, math, spelling, geography, history, and sports. If anybody could find a way back, it would be him. The Temple look-alike stepped forward and wrapped its arms around me. Without thinking, I rested my head on his shoulder, just like I've done a million times before. It felt right.

He whispered in my ear. "It's okay Bell. I'm here. You don't have to cry anymore."

That was when I knew. My eyes became moist. The knot in my throat relaxed. My brain spun in a thousand different directions. Once I gave in to the fact that it really was him, my heart leapt for joy. Tears of happiness splashed down my face. Hope replaced my suspicions. Excitement coursed through my veins. My spirit lifted. I wanted to dance on top of the clouds. Who cared if I was crazy? My best friend was back!