

# NAMELESS GHOSTS

*Savannah Horrell* FICTION

**"Excavations revealed a crouched inhumation within a grave dug into the bottom of the ditch, opposite the entrance. A second grave containing the crouched skeleton of a child was found near the centre of the monument." - English Heritage Site, Woodhenge**

In between visitors, we fade into oblivion. Or at least, I try to. They wander the concrete pillars and harass the sheep across the road. The echo of an ancient wall rises up from the grazing pastures and empty fields, making a perfect place to play for a little ghost.

*Children.* It's not like they could die if they tried, so I don't supervise. I'm not their mum.

When a bulky car rattles up the road and settles in the car park, they return to sit on their grave, waiting for the new visitors to pay homage. I hover behind. It's our shared grave, really. My body is somewhere else, among the hustle and bustle of the big henge, but I was buried here. We both were, yet somehow they're still the one who get the memorial cairn. Children's deaths are so much more tragic; it's not fair. The archaeologists said that I was barely grown myself. (But they're not to be believed because they change their findings on a dime and call it "new research.")

A family tumbles out of the car, with a hurry of unbuckled seatbelts and dropped juice boxes. A mother, a father, and two little boys, rubbing their eyes and looking tetchy. Better than the bus of public school students we had an hour ago. Several young girls made daisy chains to lay on the flint grave with preteen solemnity. The wave of remembrance was dizzying. I could see the way the child's head caved in; the memory of an axe buried in it.

(Though scientists now think their death might have been due to natural causes, not gory human sacrifice, human minds change slow.)

Perception is key. They said you did not die until your name was no longer spoken. Stripped of names for millennia, but are still remembered. Damn archaeologists to hell. Our legacy lingers, as bodies excavated, and as lives reconstructed half-halfheartedly from bones.

They were three and buried in the center of the monument. Back when the wooden stakes stood high; their life and death must have mattered. Unlike mine, I was practically an adult (or actually an adult, or over thirty-five, or not yet done growing, so many contradictory details) malnourished and left in the outer ditch.

Our bones suffered the same fate. Both lost now, through professional negligence and chaos of the Blitz.

The mum is talking loudly, trying to explain our final resting place while her children assess the low concrete cylinders that replaced the long-rotted wood posts, checking them for fun potential. I'd spent the last few decades of my death stuck with an eternal toddler; I knew when things were about to be climbed on.

"Mommy," the older boy says, his American accent grating on my ears. (Another sign that I could not possibly be what I was when I was alive. British accents hadn't even existed, had they? No, I was shaped by the people who'd imagined me, dozens a day, every day including holidays, for sixty years. I was about as Bronze Age as the fake arrowhead necklace archaeology students on university trips liked to wear.)

"Mommy, it says someone died here," the boy all but yells, staring cross eyed down at the informational board. We have both drifted closer, instinctively seeking affirmation of our own existence. Now my littler counterpart is playing peek-a-boo with an unseeing partner; the smaller of the living children, who is only a few inches taller than they.

"A child," the mother tells him, authoritative but a little sad. The father reaches for their offspring, as if to protect them from monsters out of the past. "They killed her, it says."

No mention of me, per usual. A dead three year old gets all of the attention.

She is now next to me, shifted to meet new, dubiously accurate expectations. Her hair is a little longer, the axe sticking out of her tiny skull more pronounced. It gleams silver, like it's made of steel, which we both know is wholly inaccurate.

"*They killed me,*" she parrots back, in a ghostly whine. Her face almost looks like that of the little boys. It always does, when there are

parents around. They project terribly and she mirrors back their fears, an unseen reflection.

I should be glad to let her soak up the spotlight, to fade happily back into the quiet darkness of forgotten history, but somehow it rankles. If we must be remembered, it should be equally.

The family treks over to the child's grave, a mound of flint pieces fused together. People leave things here often, and they prove no different. Once his parents are gone, the big boy goes and finds a feather, and places it carefully in a groove amid the flint pieces. Without even a stone to anchor it there, it will blow away soon, but that doesn't matter.

It's the thought that counts, quite literally.

The little ghost coos as she leans to examine her new treasure, and pulses a little brighter. These children do not know what ancient means. They only know old. They garb her in princess clothes from a movie, flouncy dress and all. She plays tig with them among the concrete and grass until their parents take them home.

It's getting dark with rain clouds. It starts to drizzle, and I know we won't have any more visitors today. The dirt roads and grassy fields here get muddy to the point of being untraversable when it rains.

It's just us, the sheep, and the wind. I inspect our new offering until the wind blows it away, and they throw themselves on me. Away from outside forces, they are indistinct to the point of being unrecognizable, just a small, smoky figure. Genderless, featureless, curled up in on itself. This, the ghosts they had once been, were found crouching on the ground.

"*I want-*" they whisper in a voice only the two of us can hear. Neither of us are sure what they wanted. Their mummy? No, they have no way of being certain they had one, no way of knowing what life was like for a child buried under a monument alone. Certainty is all a specter really craves; certainty and the peace of being forgotten.

Perhaps there are other memory ghosts somewhere, in particularly well-tended graveyards. In museums, there must be other creatures like us, brought back from the dead kicking and screaming by the cold hands of science. Up the hill and across the road, by the old burial mounds and low

barrows, there are some less distinct shades. But they do not get nearly the attention we do. Those long-neglected ghosts are pale shadows amid the long grass and cow patties, with no personality to speak of. The big henge, Stonehenge, has its own army of the dead, but amid the hubbub they can get lost. We cannot.

Until the last researcher forgets, until concrete crumbles and the strange English language on the signs marking our newer, more permanent graves is forgotten, we linger.

I cuddle the faceless little ghost close. There is something unmistakably tragic about a lost child of history that even I can't remain unmoved.

"It's okay, it's okay," I soothe, unsure if they can even understand. We died so far apart in history, really, there's no guarantee our language is even the same. Instead, we communicate in what we are given, the English of scholars and historians, muddled by their ideas of what a teenager and a child from the Neolithic era would have sounded like, which is like, whatever.

Eventually they quiet and lay silently on their grave. It is all too tempting to go and find my own burial place (just a patch of mud, really) and settle down.

Instead, I hold out a hand.

"Come on, let's go play with the sheep."

When I love them, they become less unfortunate in features, less the frail waif. The curvature of the skull grows less pronounced and ghoulish, ghostly cheeks fill in. You can almost see the chubby, happy, affluent child they almost certainly, possibly, maybe could have been.

I am still bone thin, skeletal. They say I was underfed, and I have never known life as anything but a skeleton anyways. I see no reason to change it, though it often tries to change. Archaeologists and their facial reconstructions can bite me.

A small, ghostly hand slips into mine. Maybe we are still human enough to have expectations and shape existence because I can almost feel

skin against mine, a distant memory of sensation.

We go and frolic among the sheep, who remain unaware of us. We have seen flocks of lamb, mature and die.

Would I have seen this if I had stayed dead? Sheep, cameras, cars, people of every color and shape.

It is not a ghostly thought, but we are so well loved by tourists that we are barely ghosts any more. The young man (almost certainly a man, scientists in the 1930s agreed, though I don't trust them) buried here long ago was a nothing, not thoughtful, not kind, not knowing any of this. We are stories, fed by sacrificial flowers, feathers, coins, and regret. A modern Frankenstein's monster cobbled together by misinformation, badly remembered history, researcher's theories, and a dash of human tragedy.

A word of advice to those of you with delusions of immortality: engrave your life story on your bones or else hide them somewhere the archaeologists will never find them. Eternity sucks without even a name.

*This is a short fictional story I wrote quite a few years ago. At 16, while living in England, I visited Stonehenge and its sister site Woodhenge. I had a chance to see the cairn to the exhumed child mentioned in the story myself. I was struck by the small offerings left there; the coins, flowers, small stones, and other tokens for a child dead since the Bronze Age. The story haunted me until I wrote it and I've been sitting on it ever since. What is it like to be remembered (for your bones alone) long after everything else you know has disappeared?*

