

# BEAUTIFUL GHOSTS

*Brendan Manning*

A late autumn breeze greeted Daniel as he entered the cemetery with a chill strong enough to reach the bone. He refused to make eye contact with the pale white statue of Mother Mary, her sad eyes would follow him for the duration of this meeting. He stopped to hang his red scarf on a low branch nearby to pass the time; the branch wilted under the pressure, resembling the strangled neck of a corpse. He made his way over to his father's grave and sat down on the damp grass.

Daniel took a deep breath—the steam that escaped brought him comfort on the dark, starless Pennsylvania night. He shivered while taking off his backpack; he pulled out two cups and a thermos. He poured the hot tea into each cup respectively and placed them on the tombstone in front of him, as if it were a table. Daniel thought nothing of it while mixing in cream and sugar. Don't people always have tea parties with their deceased relatives? Maybe not, he thought.

While raising the first cup to his lips, he followed the steam of the second until it dispersed and gave way to a tall translucent figure. "Hi Dad."

"Hello, Daniel," the man said, his voice haunting yet serene. He sat on the stone facing his son. "It's been a while since you've visited me. I almost thought you had forgotten."

"I'm sorry. I've been busy—college applications and stuff. I made your favorite," he said, gesturing to the peace offering. "Just like you used to make it for me after school."

His father looked at him with a painful look in his eyes, as if the memories that were lost long ago had suddenly resurfaced.

*Daniel opened the front door. "I'm home!" he called, setting his backpack down on the floor. He entered the kitchen, ready to greet his father and drink hot tea as they often did while sharing details of their days. Sometimes his sophomore-year high school stories eclipsed the tales of his father's workday, but Daniel never noticed.*

*The tea kettle sat empty on the marble counter. There were no cups in sight either. His father stood at the other side of the room and put down his briefcase. His shoes were on, a rare occurrence for someone who typically worked from home.*

*"Dad? Are you going somewhere?" Daniel asked.*

*His father looked at him with sad eyes. He touched the hospital bracelet on his wrist. "The doctor wants me to stay over tonight."*

*"What happened? I thought your numbers were going down."*

*"They were going down. But now they are back up."*

*The green tag was louder than either of their voices. Daniel looked away. "Does Mom know?"*

*"Yes. She's on her way home from work now. She's allowed to come with me to check in."*

*"Can I come?" he asked, although he already knew the answer.*

*"They don't allow visitors because of the pandemic."*

*Daniel fought back tears as he hugged his father. "I thought the chemo had fixed everything"*

*"Not everything." His father's heart skipped a beat, as if he were fighting off nerves to tell his son the truth. "Just remember that whatever happens, I'll always be with you."*

*Daniel closed his eyes, taking in the scent of aged wool and apples that stemmed from his father's sweater. The same old sweater that Daniel would wear as he poured himself tea after school every day since, regretting that he seldom asked his dad any questions about himself. The sound of his father's voice echoing through the dark and empty kitchen.*

Maybe the news would have hurt less if he didn't work from home, thought Daniel. He fought hard to forget the way he argued with his mother after learning that his parents had been walking on eggshells around him for months, keeping the relapse a secret from him. His father looked down at the cup of tea. "I'm sorry. I cannot consume anything in this form."

"Oh, right." Daniel looked down, embarrassed, and brushed away dead leaves. "How are you feeling?" He repeated the question he had asked so many times when visiting his father in the hospital grave.

"No longer struggling." His bones were frail, he looked just as he had the last time Daniel had been with him in the hospital—before the disease took him away.

Daniel merely nodded uncomfortably and held his hands around the cup, letting the warmth burn his freezing hands.

"Why are you up so early this morning?" his father asked casually.

"I had to get blood drawn the other day," he said, shattering the 'I'm fine' facade. "The doctor wanted to test me because it's genetic, you know." He looked down to avoid the pained look in his father's eyes.

“And... How did that go?”

“The tests came back negative. It just hurt.”

“The needle?”

“No. Well yes, that hurt too. But I thought about you having to get blood transfusions every other week without ever complaining. And somehow that hurt me more.” Daniel pulled up his sleeve to show his dad the bandage around his arm.

His father reached for his hand and grasped nothing. Daniel pretended he could feel the ghost’s touch. “At least the nurses are nice, right?”

“You always tried to make the best of a bad deal.” Daniel sighed.

His father smiled, the same way he had when Daniel sat down next to him in that grey hospital room.

*Machines buzzed all around. While relieved in the absence of the nurses, Daniel worried that if something went wrong he would be unable to do anything in time. “How are you feeling?” he asked.*

*His father could barely sit up in his bed, let alone answer a question. He breathed heavily, gasping for air. He turned his head and smiled weakly, probably struggling to do that much.*

*Daniel held his hand and waited for a response. A train that would never come. He wished he had been able to come visit when his father was still able to speak. Due to the pandemic the hospital did not allow visitors, with the exception of a patient ready to let go. It was his first time seeing his father in three months, yet there was nothing to be excited about for this reunion.*

*Tubes and wires connected to his father pumped blood into his heart. He looked like a rusted version of the Tin Man, desperately in need of an oil can. There really is no place like home. Daniel wished something would happen, for better or for worse, nobody should have to struggle so hard to live. He breathed deeply through his face mask.*

*His mother came in with the nurse to pull him away. “It’s time,” she said.*

*He couldn’t bring himself to look back over his shoulder on the way out. The machines continued to beep more rapidly.*

A dog barked from a house at the edge of the cemetery, bringing Daniel back to the present. “Do you think the dog sees you?”

“Maybe he only sees you.” His father’s eyes twinkled.

“How is the afterlife treating you?” Daniel asked to avoid the fact that he could be imagining all of this inside his head. “Have you reunited with your parents? Or shaken hands with your favorite president? If you see Malcolm, please don’t forget to tell him my favorite song. I always think of you when I

put that record on.”

His father sighed. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be there to give it to you myself.”

“It’s okay, Mom did it for you.”

“Have things improved between the two of you?”

“I guess. I mean we’re talking now. She just likes to pretend it never happened, that you never even existed.”

*Daniel sat beside the Christmas tree, staring at the twinkling lights. His cup of hot tea sat untouched on the table beside him. The presents he had wrapped for his father mocked him from their permanent spot under the tree.*

*“Aren’t you going to open that one?” His mom gestured to the neatly wrapped square in his lap. His father was notorious for his sloppy wrapping paper skills, and this certainly was not the work of his father. Looking at it, he cringed even more in his absence.*

*Daniel slowly unpeeled the tape and unfolded the paper. He picked up the record that he had admired in the store window only a month ago. It felt wrong to hold in his hands after wishing so hard for it on that rainy day in November. How the times have changed. The eyes of Mac Miller on the cover did little to remind him that everything would be alright.*

*His mom didn’t wait for a reaction before placing a hand on her son’s shoulders in an attempt to soothe him, although those were not the hands he craved. She knew no boundaries, the same way she did not hesitate to get rid of every scrap belonging to her dead husband following his funeral. All except the old wool sweater which Daniel had held onto and stashed under his bed so she wouldn’t find it, like a hidden pirate’s treasure. The house stood half empty in a never ending suburban nightmare.*

The skin under his bandage pricked with painful memories that tugged at his heart seams. A whole year hadn’t even passed since then, but the memory hurt as if it had just happened yesterday. There was much to be said but very little that could be spoken of.

“The doctor told me that it often can’t be detected so early. He told me to come back every few years.” Daniel looked into his father’s eyes, the same eyes he saw every time he looked into the mirror. Eyes might not be the only things he inherited from his father.

“So you’ll go back and get checked. I always did. There was nothing to detect now so there’s no reason for you to be worried.” His father said, reassuringly. “How would you have liked it if I just sat down and sank into despair from fear of dying? You would not have had the happy life you had.”

Daniel felt warm as the sun began to rise, casting shadows over the trees— shadows of his past. He smiled, grateful to remember those happy

days.

*A young Daniel pedaled fast uphill to catch up with his father's bike.*

*"Stay behind me."*

*"Why?"*

*"Because if a car is coming it will see me first."*

*"What if it doesn't stop?"*

*"Then it will hit me first."*

*"I'd rather it hit me first instead of you."*

*Daniel's dad smiled but didn't speak and continued to pedal faster, racing to the top.*

"It had to be me first," said the father, as if he had been transported back to the same spot on memory lane.

Daniel smiled softly as tears pricked his eyes, he fought the urge to let them fall.

His father rose from his seat on the stone and looked towards the amber sky he used to love so much. "You should go now, Daniel. Don't want to be late for school."

"It's senior year, I don't really care about being late anymore." He laughed, remembering all the times he had yelled at his dad in the car for making him late.

"Go, now that you don't have me to blame for anything."

Daniel pulled off his scarf from the nearby tree and wrapped it around his neck.

"Remember," said his father, "I will always be with you. Just keep in your heart the memories and there I will always be."

The dog in the distance had ceased its barking as the shape of his father vanished in the sun's soft rays. Daniel stood up and vowed only to return during the day, in an effort to tame his imagination. All that followed was the sound of the whispering wind; gentle but fading.

*Brendan is a second year junior majoring in English who, despite the dark tones of this piece, dreams of working (and writing) for Disney. He is grateful to the staff of the English department at Rollins for encouraging him to write and submit his work, and for entertaining his rambles on everything from Barbie to Johnny Depp.*