

My appointment as psycho-pomp to Merlyn College, Cambridge, came with a light enough workload. Even among the grizzled academics of the Senior Combination Room, in one of the largest colleges in the city, there weren't that many deaths. But the Professor of Egyptology was afraid of ghosts, though, oddly, not of animated corpses, and this was his gift, a personal appointment. A thank you for assistance with translation, and some targeted research.

Most of the deaths in Cambridge among the academics occur, naturally, in the departments. The helical alchemists have a tendency to overwork in toxic environments. The biologists cross-splice unlikely subjects, and the pure chemists cook up brews of lurid iniquity. Those investigating the more arcane reaches of their subjects have been known simply to disappear, perhaps unnaturally, and I've sat in on several entertaining discussions of the cut-throat competition rippling under the supple surface of etiquette. Every college wants the annual crown of First, and the undergraduate grades make up a fraction of it. Unique publication, incontrovertible discovery - that's the plum in the pie, the sixpence in the pudding. I get the impression the finder sometimes waves it around too much, a little too soon, until suddenly it was never theirs at all.

As for me, I adjust my brown leather gloves, and go looking for ghosts.

My name is Charmian. I wear gloves at all times, and expect neither companionship or sympathy. For a surname I long ago chose Hope. I watched the sun rise at four o'clock that morning, thinking how everyone had surnames all of a sudden, and at noon, I wandered out into London and came across a public execution. Somebody needed hope, so why not me?

The ubiquity of the sealed confessional was severed around that time, along with a number of heads, and I took refuge for a few centuries in fashionable epistolatory relationships. Now the screen of my expensive laptop, that blessed interface, relieves me in turn of my enforced loneliness. Up to a point.

Taking my new appointment with habitual seriousness, I find there is indeed a ghost. A boy, by the kitchen, as you go through into Hall. He regards my casual inspection of him in shock. Even if ghosts could talk he'd still be mute.

"It's that way," I say, and show him. A silly looking boy, Edwardian by his clothes, he trails me out of thin reality, and I leave my jointed body standing like a clothes horse to terrify the modern kitchen staff for a few minutes, while we walk along. I enjoy these little excursions.

I abandon him by the gate, still gawking at me. If he can't find his way from here, he isn't trying, and I leave him, taking my time, meandering back through the sideways gleam of stars and the long wind that whips in my face and hair, against the flow of spirits, blundering. The fear of death rises up round me, repeated and repeated, and I shout at them all to relax, be

calm, it's done, no need to breathe. There's no sound here. The dead, as I said, don't speak. I quicken my pace.

I step back into dessicated Charmian, duty done. There are no other ghosts in the college, or not today. They run in cycles. How else do you think they'd last? They appear once a week, once a year, sometimes only once a century. I still can't predict when, and this annoys me. I started attempting it on papyrus, then on vellum, and now I program the apparitions in multi-dimensional graphics on the best hardware I can run, and I still cannot fathom it. There must be a pattern, but it's cruel to observe a ghost until it starts to fade, and I don't ever risk more than three or four observations - perhaps half an hour or so of their shattered time - before I lead them out to the gate in the wind. Everyone has their personal morality, and this is mine. That, and not to scare children.

So, my only remaining task as a member of College is to attend Chapel. There is delicious irony in this, and I go, to every available service, sitting quietly in the corner as if asleep. Every chapel should have a memento mori, and the choir, I am proud to see, get used to me. The organist starts to weave themes from horror films into his improvised recessional. The sopranos giggle, and the altos snort.

I also stalk my ghosts. Twice a week I take a carriage to London, where most data is available, and do a circuit. There are usually a few new points for my graphs, and a couple of souls who must be escorted now. Time grows routine, again. I text chat with Americans on servers all night and blitz through several new gaming releases. The Egyptian is spoken of with respect, bro, and I smile.

I have been at Merlyn perhaps three months when I call in on my patron the Professor one morning, out of civility, an unwelcome guest who cannot even be served coffee.

The Professor is dead.

His body lies face up in the middle of his study floor, his mouth open, his head pillowed politely on his latest publication. He has been shot in the chest, and the startling mess is at odds with his careful pose, and with the rest of the immaculate, modern, boxy room. Aspidistra leaves quiver on the tall pot-stand in the breeze from the open window. His books in the square pine cases are ordered by theme, alphabetical within their categories. I can see no sign of the gun, but the professor's ghost stands looking at me wide-eyed, dabbling its spectral shoes in the pool of blood. The dead, as I said, don't speak. And those who are murdered don't go.

I hate this. I hate them coming round, again and again on that erratic cycle, fainter every time, unpredictable, unescorable. They won't leave. They can't.

There's a ghost in the college, and I can't get rid of it.

Shit.