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ANNA



Once, a long time ago, and also not so long ago, there was a young ghost named Anna. Anna had been a ghost longer than she could remember. She was pale and transparent. She floated from place to place, she walked through walls. She was lonely.



Anna was a young girl, and older than America. She was fourteen, and had been a ghost since the Jamestown settlement. She had watched the world unfold with sad, monochromatic eyes. She had stood in the middle of Civil War battlefields, and once frightened John F. Kennedy late at night in his dining room. But she was not interested in the nation's history. She was fourteen.



Anna was a lovely ghost. Her hair was light and wavy. Her eyes, when not gray, were pale blue. Her slender form tapered and faded into nothing. She liked to think she resembled a white silk flag, waving in the breeze. Sometimes she would let go and let the breeze take her, let herself drift upward into the sky, holding her thin arms out like a bird, closing her eyes, smiling. She had died peacefully in her sleep. Yellow Fever had consumed her organs.





One morning in 1981, Anna met a boy. She found him playing at a park in a small town somewhere in America. He was a small, skinny boy, four years old with pale skin, dark brown eyes, and hair like earth. He was playing in the sand with two metal trucks, ramming them together and making crash noises. Anna floated down in front of him and smiled.

“Hello,” she said.

The boy looked up at her. “Hi,” he said, and squinted. “Are you an angel?”

“No,” Anna said. “At least I don’t think so.”

“Oh,” the boy said, and looked down at his trucks again. He raced them around in a circle, spinning on his knees and making engine rev sounds. Anna watched him in silence.

“My name is Oliver,” he said, not looking up from his toys. “What’s your name?”

“Anna.”

The boy’s mother walked up to him then and started talking to him. Anna couldn’t understand what she was saying, but she sounded upset. She took his hand and made him stand up. She started to walk away with him. The boy twisted around and waved at Anna. “Bye,” he said.

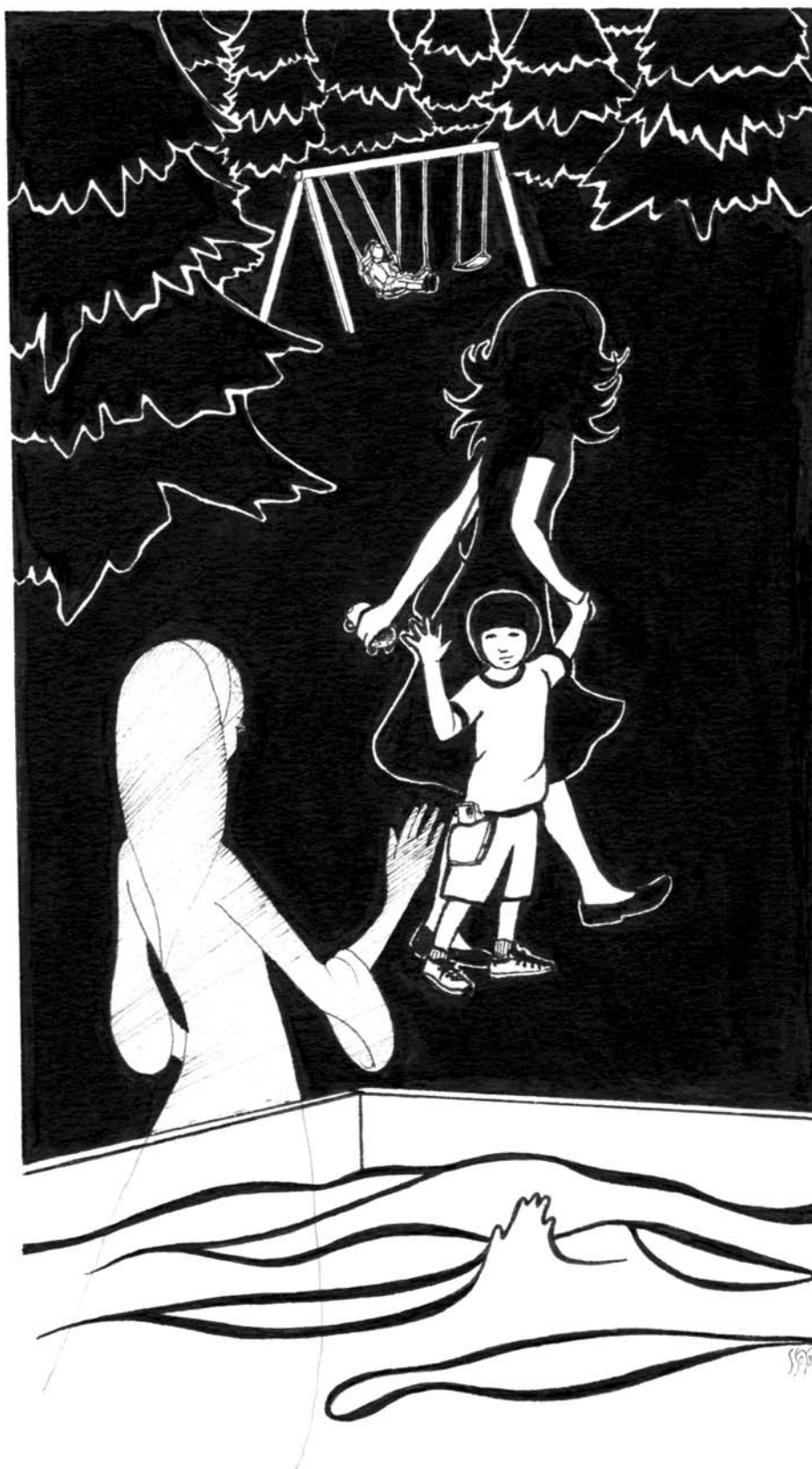
“Bye,” Anna said, and waved back. A breeze kicked up off the grass and she began to drift backwards.

Frowning, the mother asked the boy who he was talking to.

“My friend,” he said.

Anna gave in to the wind and floated away.





Time was soft for Anna. She was not tied to it in any concrete way. She had to concentrate to stay tethered to any certain moment, and if she wanted to, she could relax her hold and time would blur. Years would flutter past. This is how time was for a ghost.

One day, while she was floating on a mild summer breeze, drifting over some suburbs with a flock of geese, she saw the boy again, far below. He was leaning on the sill of an open second-story window, resting his chin on his hand, staring up into the sky. Anna floated down to him in a lazy circle. He saw her, and his face lit up.

“Hi!” he said.

“Hi,” Anna said. She stopped just outside his window and hovered there, smiling. Her teeth were perfect white, despite the hygiene practices of her day.

“I remember you,” the boy said. “Your name is Hannah.”

“It’s *Anna*,” she said.

“Oh, sorry. Do you remember me?”

“Of course,” she said. “Your name is Oliver.”

He smiled. He had nice teeth too. Anna realized a few years had passed. The boy was around seven now.

“You’re a ghost, aren’t you,” he said proudly.

Anna blushed. "I guess."

"I saw a movie about ghosts. They were scary. They were hurting people."

Anna's face fell. Her eyes became sad, and their pale blue drained to gray. She remembered some of the things she had seen in her long past, the wars and murders, people with huge holes in their faces and blood everywhere. She had never met another ghost, but she didn't know why they would ever want to hurt people who were alive. People who were alive were so beautiful.

"I don't hurt people," she said.

The boy considered this, then nodded. "You're not scary. You're nice."

Anna smiled. Some color returned to her eyes.

Someone in the house yelled something, a harsh, ugly sound. The boy turned his head to look inside, then looked back at Anna. "I have to go now," he said. "I have to go do some chores."

"Ok," Anna said, and looked down at the ground.

"It won't take me very long," the boy said. "Will you wait here for me?"

Anna nodded. The boy disappeared into the house, and Anna tried to wait, but a strong gust of wind blew her away. She drifted off into the sky amongst spirals of leaves and dandelion seeds.





The next time she saw the boy, he was in school, and he was older. She flew in through his classroom window and hovered in the corner, watching him. He had grown much taller. He was about the same age as her now. Fourteen, not four-hundred. Anna waited in the corner, waiting for him to notice her, but the bell rang and he got up and got his books, and he did not notice her.

She followed him out to the playground where his class was having recess. He was playing Four-Square with his classmates, slapping the ball with great vigor, grinning and hooting and breathing hard. Anna smiled as she watched him. He was very alive.

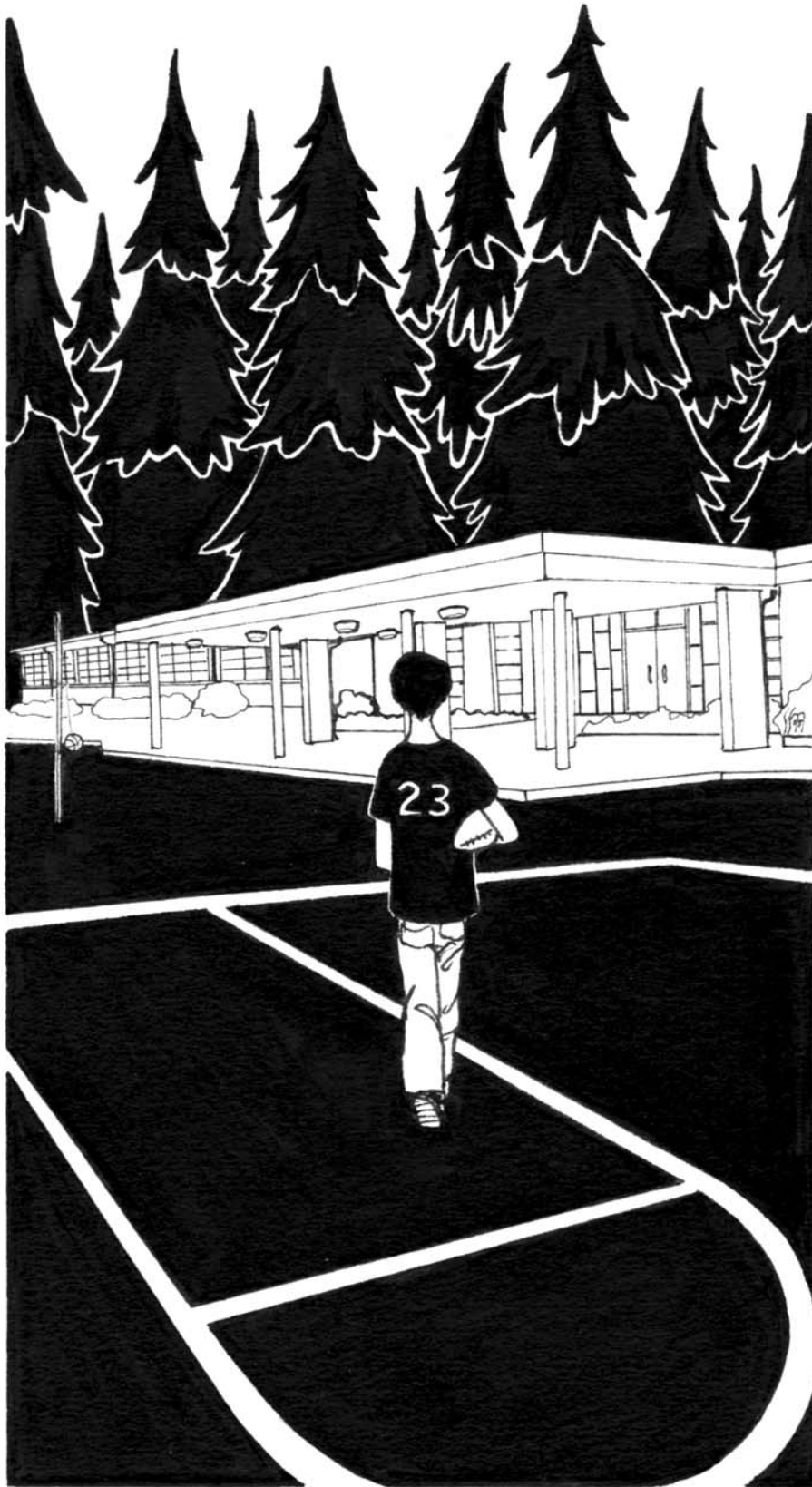
She waited in the trees while he played with his friends. When he finally separated from them and began walking back toward the school, she came out of the trees and appeared in front of him.

“Hi,” she said, smiling shyly.

But the boy didn't seem to notice her. He missed a step, hesitated, looked around, but then kept walking. He walked straight toward Anna, and walked through her. She shivered.

The boy did not look back. Anna watched him disappear into the school. Her eyes went gray, and she closed them. She sank halfway into the ground, and lost her grip on time. Time slipped away from her, and the school disappeared, became an empty field, then condominiums.



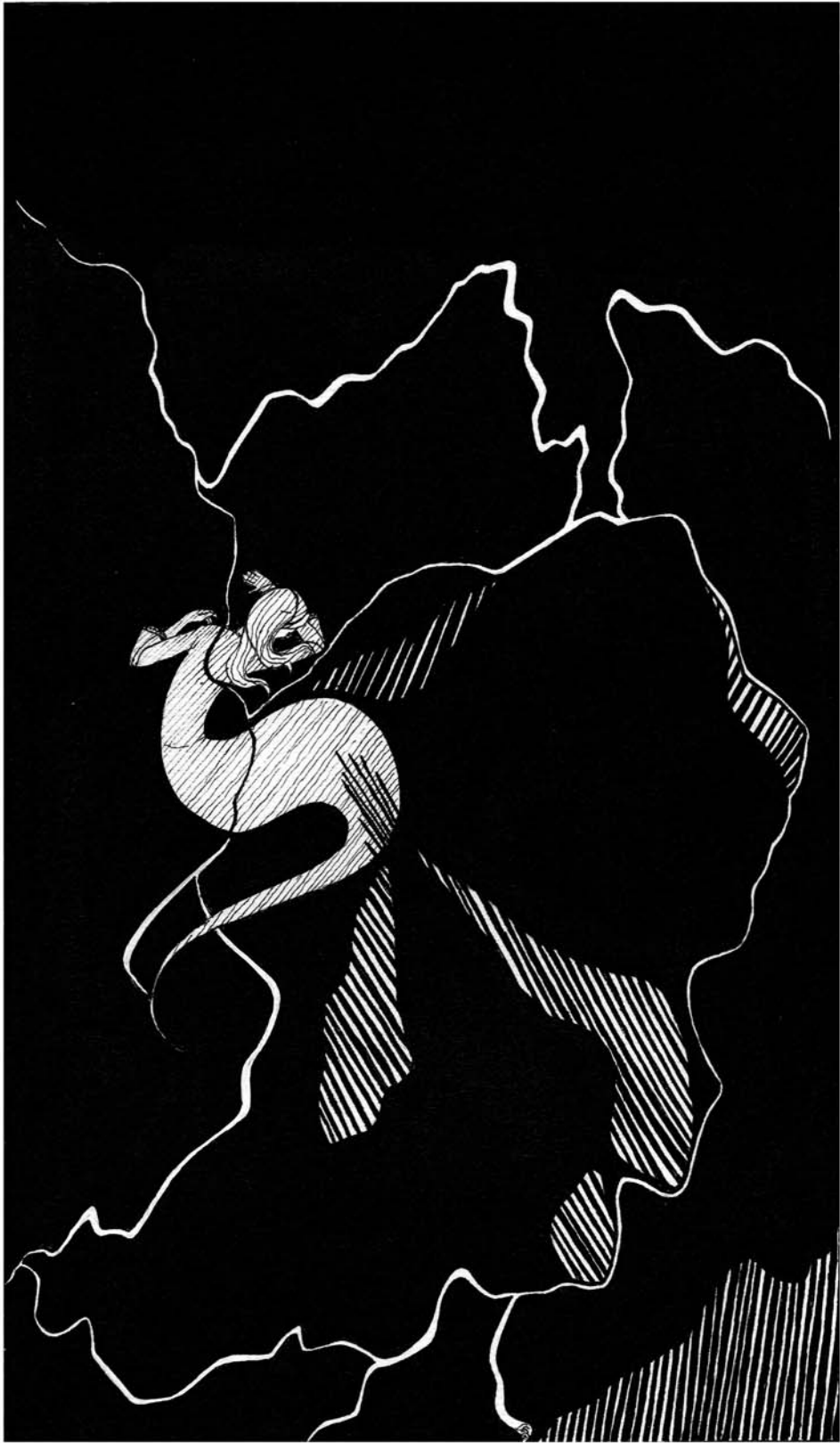


Anna did not need to sleep like people who were alive. She did not get tired, or hungry or thirsty. But sometimes she would close her eyes to let years pass, when the present was too sad. She had once skipped eight decades this way. When she opened her eyes, everything would be changed, and she would find herself in a time and place she didn't know. But every time and place was the same. This is how it was for a ghost.



Even though the boy could not see her anymore, she continued to watch him, drifting through walls and ceilings to hover in the corner of rooms, smiling with a strange sort of pride. He grew taller, stronger, more handsome. The boy slowly became a man.

One day in high-school the boy met a beautiful girl, and they kissed under the football bleachers. Anna turned away, and wished for a strong wind to blow her far from there, but the air was still. She floated into a mountain instead, moving through the rock for miles until she reached the mountain's heart, and closed her eyes there, feeling the warm, dark crush of the mountain's life grinding around her.



The mountain was far older than Anna. It was as old as time, as old as God. It embraced her, and told her to be silent and patient. These were things the mountain knew about.



