

Living Dead
by Juno Francis

There is a ghost haunting Ophelia's apartment and it's her fault. She brought it home, full of love and fear and, cruelest of all, hope.

She hadn't meant to do it. She hadn't wanted to try at all. It wasn't fair. Gwen had hinted at wanting it before, just little teasing comments that Ophelia could laugh off without too much worry, but that awful afternoon? Blood and tears pooling under her knees as she stared up at Ophelia, gasping and choking out a desperate plea as the mugger-turned-murderer ran off? How was she supposed to refuse her last request?

But she'd never done it before. How would she know when to stop? Too much or too little and she would be dead and it would be all her fault. She hadn't anticipated how good she would taste, either; the sharp metallic tang of the smooth liquid pouring down her throat almost too much at first. Then, without warning, she *needed* it. She needed it like she needed air, needed more and more and more and—

Ophelia had a craving, a thirst, but she had love first and foremost. Love and fear and hope. She pulled away, licking her lips for every last drop, pressing a firm hand to the wound to stop the blood. It was only a trickle now, a pathetic little stream dripping into the puddle beneath them. She panted with the effort of holding herself back, eyes darting across her lover's face for any sign of life— but there was nothing.

She prayed for Gwen back. She actually prayed. Years and years of silence, of asking and begging to be normal, to be a good girl like she's supposed to, to be able to do just one thing right, just one; years and years of asking and only silence in response. In the end, she had decided a god who had no answer for her was not one she felt was worthy of worship and left the god to their silence.

And yet, there she had sat, music off, eyes closed, head bowed. She waited and listened for hours.

The sound of the sink running was enough to remind her of the ghost, and she had given up. She cranked her music up as loud as it would go to block out the sink, her thoughts, and the voice of a god who was too late.

The ghost had taken to tidying her apartment while she was at work. When she was at home, it seemed like it tried to avoid her. Ophelia liked it that way. She didn't want to see it.

Every once in a while, the ghost tried to make casual conversation. It was stilted and uncomfortable, and Ophelia got the sense the ghost was scared of her. Wasn't that ironic?

As much as she hated the ghost, she could tell it was bored. She noticed her bookshelf had been rearranged, and every so often she'd find a book sitting out on the table before the ghost had a chance to put it back. Ophelia refused to give the ghost any more thought.

Everything Ophelia saw reminded her of Gwen. The ghost, of course; her spitting image, aside from the hair. She couldn't look at knives anymore, not without seeing them buried to the hilt in Gwen's stomach; couldn't see a cartoon robber without getting sick to her stomach. She felt ridiculous but there it was.

In less insidious ways, the bookcase Gwen had insisted she buy to make it a "real home", the sweater she always borrowed, the plastic plant that sat on her desk after she'd killed the first three. Some days she wanted to burn it all to the ground, to leave all her belongings and start somewhere new where she wouldn't have to remember.

Yet even that wouldn't work. She saw Gwen in the rain; one of their first dates had been a poorly timed picnic that had ended with them dancing and laughing in a torrential downpour. She smelled Gwen in cafes; where they had first met. She heard Gwen in the birds; whenever she succeeded in dragging Ophelia along on a walk, she would point out their calls and try to mimic them with varying degrees of success.

Even her own body was full of reminders; she could still feel Gwen's fingers gently poking at her dimples, threading themselves through her own, tucking that one strand that always fell out of place behind her ear.

Ophelia looked herself over in her gold mirror; sharp white teeth peeking out over darkly painted lips, porcelain skin framed by tangled hair, dark smears under wet eyes—she didn't know where the eyeliner stopped and her dark circles began. A small, terrible

part of her hoped that the glimpses the ghost would get of her looking like this would either push it to remember being Gwen or push it away entirely.

Look what you've done to me. Look what I've done to me.

At the funeral, Gwen's parents had offered Ophelia a small box of journals. They couldn't bring themselves to read them, and had decided Ophelia could do with them as she pleased.

She had considered asking Rhiannon to drive her to the lake so she could toss them in and let Gwen's words remain a mystery.

She didn't, of course. She tucked the box beneath her bed and waited for the day she'd be strong enough or weak enough to open it.

It was weakness that led her to the box. She'd called in sick to work— she hadn't been able to stop crying— and had simply lay in bed cursing the world and her circumstances and anything and everything that had led her to this moment. All she wanted was for Gwen to pull her into her arms and console her, to remind her why life was worth living.

She remembered the box beneath her bed with a start and scrambled to unearth it from the mound of laundry that had accumulated in front of it.

She spread out the journals in front of her; six of them in a variety of sizes and covers, the sole unifying factor dates printed neatly along the spine. With a trembling hand, she plucked one from the bed and flipped through it, smiling tearfully at that familiar handwriting adorning the pages in every colour imaginable, the memories and ink as vivid as Gwen had always been.

She stopped on a page near the beginning and skimmed it. She remembered the night Gwen was recounting; they'd gone out to see a movie and ended up wandering the town afterwards in the dark. They had come across a pond and Gwen had instantly kicked off her shoes and waded in, her giggles echoing across the water. Ophelia had rolled her eyes but couldn't help but follow, trying to hold her dress up out of the water. That was one of the first nights she'd felt really and truly free.

As she lay in her bed and tried to read past her tears, she came to a realization that made her breath catch in her throat. She wasn't reading it in Gwen's voice. In fact, she couldn't remember Gwen's voice at all.

Ophelia had never been very good at reading in the first place. She could rarely make it half a page without her mind drifting someplace else. She often found herself rereading the same sentence over and over, unable to take in the meaning.

As a kid she'd grow frustrated too quickly to make it very far, and by the time she was a teenager she'd given up completely. When it came to dropping out of high school it was of no concern for her; she'd never imagined herself graduating anyway.

Gwen had pushed past her refusal, past the denial to find the root cause. She knew that Ophelia wasn't making excuses for no reason, and made her feel safe in admitting something she'd never told anyone before. Being diagnosed with ADHD made everything click, and soon after, the medication did the same. She still had trouble reading, but knowing it wasn't her fault helped. As did a friendly audiobook service by the name of Gwen.

Mourning Gwen meant mourning far more than simply the love of her life. Ophelia mourned for her sanity, her sense of calm and her steadfast faith that everything could turn out alright. How would anything be alright again?

Gwen had made the whole world seem a little clearer, a little more manageable. Time slowed when they were together and Ophelia felt like she could finally breathe. Without her, she felt like she was drowning.

"Um..." She sobbed, hiding her face. She took a shaky breath and tried again. "C—could you?" The ghost glanced between her and the journal Ophelia was holding out to it before gingerly taking it. Ophelia hugged herself, trying to catch her breath.

"She was wearing a long dress, because of course she was. I could probably count the outfits I've seen her in that didn't involve a long black dress on one hand." The

ghost read. It's voice was wrong, a little lower and it... formed the words a little differently, somehow. But it was close enough to send Ophelia into tears again.

"I'm— I'm sorry, was that not—"

"No! No, please, keep going." Ophelia gasped.

The ghost worried its lip between its teeth for a moment, but continued on.

Ophelia stood and listened for what felt like hours, eyes darting across the ghost's face for any sign of Gwen, but aside from the basic structure, there was very little. Even its facial expressions were different.

This reflection though, however warped, still showed her Gwen. She could fill in the gaps herself. The combination of the ghost in front of her and the ghost in her memories was almost enough for now. At least she knew she hadn't lost Gwen completely.

She couldn't trace the exact series of events in her memory, but at some point she'd become curled up with her legs across its lap, crying silently into its shoulder as it continued to read. She had woken up the next day stretched out with a blanket laid across her shoulders, the ghost nowhere to be seen.

Before she left for work she left out her laptop with a guest account set up.

The first book Ophelia had read all the way through on her own since she was 10 years old was Frankenstein. Night after night she'd sat in her room mumbling the words to herself to keep her focus. Her heart had ached for the creature who had so selfishly been given life and then damned for trying to live. When she finished the book she stared at the back cover for a few minutes, her mind still trapped between its pages. A smile tugged at the corner of her lips when she realized what she'd done and her fingers twitched for her phone to tell Gwen.

Ophelia sat on her bed, opening her battered copy of her favourite book. With a storm outside providing the perfect ambiance, she sat and read until she'd finished and looked up with new eyes.

She stared out at the pouring rain for a while, listening to the patter of the drops against the sill. Slowly, she got to her feet, setting the book down on her bed. She wandered over to the window and slid it open, holding one hand out into the rain. The cool drops collected in her palm and trickled down her fingers. She hesitated for only a moment before pushing her other hand out the window, letting them both become drenched. The scent of wet asphalt wafted in through the window. She closed her eyes to take in the sensations.

They snapped open at the sound of a sliding windowpane. She squinted out the rain streaked window to find the source of the noise and caught a glimpse of a wispy hand poking out of what must be her bathroom window. It seemed the ghost had wanted to do the same.

For the first time since Gwen died, she felt a smile tugging at the corners of her lips as her heart swelled with love and fear and hope.