

The Ghost in the Machine

by Ann Snead

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Characters

FRAN	A small, fortyish woman just beginning to show her age. Dressed in purple.
JOHN	A tall, twenty-something medical student.
TONY	A twenty-seven-year-old medical student.

Setting

The counter at Tranquility Tanks/a morgue.

Time

A spring morning. The present.

(In the darkness, the sound of Indian music, which fades as the lights come up. We see the surtitle: Tranquility Tanks. Exam-time Special: One Hour, \$50, incl. Tax. FRAN and JOHN face each other across the counter.)

JOHN

I came for Tony's backpack. I thought he might've left it here.

(FRAN takes it from behind the counter and hands it over.)

FRAN

How exactly did he die?

JOHN

He got stung by a bee and went into anaphylactic shock. I drove him to the hospital as fast as I could, but—

(He begins to tear up. FRAN goes to hug him. He's so tall and she's so small, she ends up embracing his waist.)

FRAN

I'm so sorry!

JOHN

I should've insisted he take his kit to the park with him.

FRAN

Why would you think he'd need it so early in the season?

JOHN

I feel like it was my fault. I keep thinking there was something else I could've done.

FRAN

It was his time.

JOHN

Age twenty-seven?!

FRAN

Anyway, I'm sure he doesn't blame you.

JOHN

What're you talking about? Tony's dead—you can't know.

FRAN

They tell me there's no such thing as death. There's only life elsewhere.

JOHN

"They"?

FRAN

My friends in the spaceship.

JOHN

Oh, yeah. The ones who're attached to your head by wires. Who keep sending you messages. Who want you to wear purple all the time. Did anyone ever tell you? You are one crazy lady!

FRAN

Because I can channel? Lots of people can!

JOHN

You're right about that. I see them all the time in Emergency. But tell you what—if you really can prove to me that Tony's still alive, somewhere, somehow—do it. I want to apologize to him.

FRAN

I'll need his body.

JOHN

Why don't I give the hospital a call? Maybe they'll deliver!

FRAN

You're interning. Don't you have access to the morgue?

(The surtitle changes to "Morgue." The counter revolves and becomes a hospital gurney. A body lies under a sheet. JOHN pulls the sheet back to reveal TONY.)

FRAN

I have to go into a trance first.

(FRAN unrolls her yoga mat. She sits in the lotus position, fingers curled, eyes closed, does some deep breathing, a few OM's.

FRAN

Hello? Hello?...Oh, there you are. It's me again...Look, I need the formula for contacting someone who's dead...Just yesterday. Umm...Well, that doesn't sound too difficult, but I don't understand the second part...Let me get it straight—first I chant—

(She does, stopping in mid-syllable as TONY sits up.)

JOHN

Jesus!

(TONY gets up. FRAN, her eyes glazed, stands in front of him; he stands behind and puts his arms on her shoulders.)

JOHN

Tony!

FRAN

(Feeling TONY'S body)

There's been a mistake. This isn't my body! Where's mine?

(She looks around frantically.)

Oh, shit... Stay calm, Fran. Contact them again and ask them what to do.

(She sinks to the floor, carrying TONY with her. She tries to get into lotus position, but TONY'S knees won't bend. As she struggles to make them, he stands up, pushes her aside and gets in front.)

TONY

God, I need a cigarette!

FRAN

(Gets back in front)

Smoking kills!

TONY

(Pushing her aside and talking to JOHN)

You've got my backpack. Check inside. And while you're at it, see if I left a couple cans of beer there, too. I need—

FRAN

(Front)

Camomile tea!

TONY

(Front)

A drink!

(While JOHN'S rummaging through the pack, FRAN wiggles her way in front of TONY. She starts to "OM". TONY puts his hands over his ears.)

TONY

What's that noise?! Someone pull a cat's tail?

FRAN

I'm trying to calm down!

(JOHN finds some cigarettes and a can of beer. He tosses the pack of smokes to TONY.)

FRAN

I can't—

(Her hand scoops the pack out of the air.)

Catch.

(TONY grabs them from her and lights up. FRAN mimics him dragging on the cigarette.)

FRAN

Oh, my! That's almost as good as...sex. Now I understand why people—

TONY

Pass me the beer, John.

(He chugs it, with FRAN mimicking.)

FRAN

Haven't had one of these since I became a vegan twenty years ago. Makes me feel quite...mellow. Quite...sexy.

(FRAN leans over and tentatively strokes JOHN'S arm.)

JOHN

Don't!

FRAN

Why not?

(She gives him a playful tap on the shoulder, which somehow leaves him sprawling on the floor.)

FRAN

John, John, I'm sorry! No one's ever fallen over when I've hit them before.

(She picks him up with an ease that astonishes her.)

FRAN

I don't know what came into me—

JOHN

We need to talk. And I want to talk to Tony, Fran, not you.

(TONY gets in front. FRAN peeks around him, eavesdropping.)

JOHN

I'm sorry, Tony.

TONY

Sorry for what?

JOHN

For letting you die.

TONY

What're you talking about, man? I'm alive. I'm standing here drinking with you!

JOHN

You're alive because she's in you. Haven't you noticed?

TONY

Noticed what?

JOHN

There's somebody else in your body.

TONY

Sure, John!

JOHN

Why do you think you made a pass at me?

TONY

I... There is a voice...kinda like radio interference...A crazy lady.

(He slugs back the remains of the beer, bangs the can down.)

TONY

What a conversation! Am I drunk, or what?

JOHN

You're dead.

(TONY bursts out laughing.)

TONY

Dead drunk, possibly, though I don't think so. Not after just one beer.

JOHN

What day is it today, Tony?

TONY

It's Friday, April 15th.

JOHN

No, it isn't. It's Saturday, the 16th. Where did you sleep last night?

TONY

Who slept? I kept having these weird dreams...

JOHN

Look around. Where do you think you are?

TONY

(Recognizing where he is)

Oh, my God...This is some kind of joke, right?

JOHN

We were in the park, remember? Playing frisbee. You bent over—

TONY

And something stung me.

JOHN

You went into anaphylactic shock. You didn't have your epipen with you. By the time I got you to hospital, it was too late.

TONY

I died?

(Draping his arm over JOHN'S shoulder)

But John baby, if I'm dead, how can I be standing here, talking to you?

JOHN

Fran—you remember, the lady at Tranquility Tanks—

TONY

That nutbar? How's her cat? Still giving her stock market tips?

JOHN

She told me she could bring you back for a while.

TONY

How?

JOHN

She went into a trance. But something went wrong. She ended up in your body.

TONY

So where's hers?

FRAN

(Popping up)

I don't know! I need to ask them how to get back to it.

TONY

Sounds good to me.

JOHN

You don't understand. She's the ghost in your machine. It's her soul, her spirit, whatever you want to call it—that's keeping you alive. If she leaves...

TONY

You're a real joker, John.

JOHN

Look at your finger, Tony.

(Turns TONY'S hand over)

See this little hole, right here in the middle?

(TONY stares at it, then jerks his hand away.)

TONY

You let me die?! You're a doctor and you let me die?!

JOHN

I didn't have an epipen. Neither did you. I got you to the hospital as fast as I could!

TONY

You drove? Why didn't you call 911? The medics would've got to me faster. They would've saved me!

JOHN

I'm sorry, I'm sorry! It was all my fault. I'll never forgive myself!

FRAN

(Popping up again)

Don't say that, John. You did your best!

(TONY pushes her back.)

JOHN

I don't know how much time you have left. I don't think she does, either.

TONY

I'll make her stay! I'm stronger than she is. She didn't want me to smoke, but I am. She didn't want me to drink, but I'm doing that, too.

JOHN

You have to talk to her.

TONY

Fran?

FRAN

Yes?

TONY

John says I'm dead. He says you brought me back.

FRAN

That's right.

TONY

He says as long as you're in me, I'll live. I want to live, Fran. Let me live, please!

(He cranes his neck to look back at her.)

TONY

You like my body, don't you? It's a nice body, nicer than yours. Stronger. You'll have an extra twenty years in it.

FRAN

But I won't be connected to my friends on the spaceship!

TONY

You know I was interning. Think about the life you could have as a doctor. You'd never have to worry about money again.

FRAN

I don't now. Between the store and the investments Dad left me—

TONY

Tranquility tanks are a fad. OK, OK, so they're useful if you want to chill out. But when they go out of fashion, what will you do?

FRAN

I'll teach yoga.

TONY

Why not practice medicine instead? You're helping people—that's important to you, isn't it?—and you get paid, really paid, for it.

FRAN

Look. All I want is to get back to my own body. Maybe it's not as nice as yours, but it's mine, and I like it. I like my life, too. I don't want to be younger or richer or anything other than what I am.

TONY

I need you!

FRAN

Maybe, but what makes you think I want to go through life hovering over your shoulder?

TONY

We could work out a deal.

FRAN

Monday, Wednesday and Friday, I'm you. Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, you're me. Sunday we flip a coin? Somehow I don't think so. Listen. I don't know how I got into your body. It wasn't supposed to happen. I was just supposed to wake you up for a while—contact you like in a séance—to let John apologize.

TONY

I feel...kinda funny. John, you got me into this—

JOHN

Can't you do something for him, Fran? Please!

FRAN

I'll try chanting again. Do it with me, Tony.

(She starts. Hesitantly he joins in. A light begins to glow in mid-air. It hums like an electrical transformer.)

FRAN

Oh, there you are! Listen. We need help—

TONY

To get back to how things were before!

(The light expands, like a giant firecracker, then contracts with a boom to nothing. Dazzle turns to darkness, darkness turns to light, the light reveals FRAN sitting in a trance in lotus position. She finishes off the Om she was in the midst of when TONY sat up—TONY who now lies flat on the gurney. JOHN reaches out and feels his friend's pulse. He looks at FRAN. He pinches himself. Blackout.)

THE END.