



SHIVAUN PLOZZA

HOLIDAY HOUSE  NEW YORK

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I'm standing in the parking lot of the Marybelle Motor Lodge in Wildwood, New Jersey, and I'm dead.

I don't know how to feel about being dead but I have opinions about the motel.

It's green. A bunch of different greens, like lime and forest and seafoam. The building is horseshoe-shaped, three stories high, so many doors (all painted forest green). In the middle of the horseshoe is a pool, also green—is it supposed to be that color or is it algae? Out front is a flashing sign (neon green) at the top of a pillar (seafoam green). Around the pool there are clusters of fake palm trees (green and brown) and in the lot there is one car (mostly brown).

My opinion is this: I hate it.

Ms. Chiu, my English teacher—that is, my *former* English teacher (I'm dead, remember)—would have asked me to elaborate. *Why do you hate it, Tegan? How does it make you feel? Use quotes, sources, and references, please.*

I liked Ms. Chiu. She wore bird earrings, a different bird for every day of the week, and she had a lisp and a crooked front tooth like a wonky fence picket. But I'm sixteen and I'm dead and

I'm standing in the parking lot of the worst motel in New Jersey so I'm not really in the mood for homework.

How did I even get here? One second I was riding my bike in the Hills, and the next I was here.

Am I a ghost?

I think about that for a second but it's part of the whole I-don't-know-how-to-feel-about-being-dead thing so I stop thinking about it and start looking around instead.

It's gray. Not the motel; that's green, as I said. But everything else is gray: the sidewalk, the sky, every other building. Gray like the little cup of water you dip your paintbrush in that always turns into a muddy, murky sludge. It's windy too. The wind howls through the lot, making the station wagon rock and the palm trees sway. Somewhere, a loose shutter bangs against a wall.

But I don't feel cold.

Last time I stood here—not here exactly; I was closer to the pool and facing away from the motel—but last time I was standing hereabouts, I was cold. I remember how the wind crept beneath my layers of clothes and under my skin, how it seeped into my bones until it was all I could feel.

But not now.

Ms. Chiu, I feel nothing.

No, that's a lie. I feel an irrational hatred for the motel and I guess I feel confused and, like, unsettled. But I don't feel cold, so that's something.

Feelings are *ugh*, though. You let yourself think about how the color green fills you with incandescent rage, and before you know it you're in a tailspin about being dead and I do *not* want to do that. So I focus on the car.

It's my dad's station wagon. One of the doors is a peachy-cream

color but the rest of the car is brown. The left taillight is cracked. The windows are dark except for the reflection of the motel's neon sign. A corded rope dangles from the roof rack and down the back window like a little tail—it's even frayed at the end. That's why we called this car the Cow. Big, lumbering, brown, and with a tail.

Dad, can I borrow the Cow?

Don't park out front in the Cow, it's embarrassing.

Your mom's gone to get groceries in her car so take the Cow instead.

See? Feelings: *ugh*. Look at how they creep up on you.

Ms. Chiu, I feel...something. An ache in my chest. A tightness.

I hate it. I hate it as much as I hate this motel.

I really should suck it up and start thinking about how come I'm dead and standing in the parking lot of the Marybelle Motor Lodge, shouldn't I? The one place on Earth I swore I'd never come back to.

I should but I won't.

I walk toward the car. It shudders in the wind; the neon sign's reflection is splashed across the two passenger-side windows. I cup my hands around my eyes and peer through the glass.

Empty takeout containers litter the floor, Dad's sunglasses poke out of a cup holder in the center console, a Naruto bobble-head sits on the dash, and a four-leaf clover air freshener dangles from the rearview mirror. But there's no Dad. And no Quinn.

I pull back and catch my reflection in the window.

I don't look like a zombie so that's cool. I'm not see-through, either, so I guess I'm not a ghost. I don't even look like I got hit by a car while riding my bike, which I did. I don't have tire marks or weeping blood or bits of my insides on the outside. I'm

just me—cropped brown hair, thick brows, ears that are a little pointy—like a woodland fairy, my dad always said.

So I'm dead, alone, not a zombie, not a ghost, and I'm in New Jersey.

I can work with that.

Behind me are the road (gray), an auto shop (brownny-gray), and an office (gray). There are cars parked in the street (black, white, and gray), but I don't see any people. The office windows catch the sun's glare and shine like mirrors. It gives me a headache just looking at them so I turn back to the motel. I guess I should go inside?

I step through a strip of overgrown grass and onto the square of concrete outside the front office. There are double glass doors and windows, but I can't see inside because of the glare and all the posters advertising stuff like room rates, breakfast deals, and a mini-golf course behind the motel. The mini-golf ad is one hell of a poster: it shows a family holding golf clubs, surrounded by clowns and giant mushrooms and a windmill. They're laughing while their heads explode. I remember Dad pointing to that poster, saying, "See? You kids are going to have fun."

You and me got a different idea of fun, Dad.

When I push through the doors and step inside, I can tell from the loud hum that the clunky split-system heater behind the front desk is on, just like last time. The little ribbon flappy things wriggle and wave as hot air pumps out. But I don't feel a change in temperature.

Strange.

The room is small. There's a display with pamphlets on my right, a bad drawing of the water park hanging on the wall beneath the heater, and a long wood-paneled counter in the middle of the room. The walls are lime green.

A bell sits on the counter, like a doorbell stuck to the laminate with duct tape. I move to ring it but then I freeze.

Behind the counter is a desk, and sitting at the desk is a person.

Their head is bent, face hidden behind a computer, one of those chunky old beige ones, and all I can see is their shiny black hair parted in the middle with lots of frizzy flyaways. They're humming. The song is familiar, but I can't quite place it. It's like *déjà vu* or something.

I clear my throat.

The head doesn't move.

A note stuck next to the bell with yellowing, peeling tape says: *Please ring for attention!*

I press the bell. It rings like an electronic doorbell, loud and piercing in the small space.

After a pause, the head rises. It belongs to a girl. My age, shoulder-length hair, large brown eyes, lips twisted in thought, a pointed chin. Cute. Very cute.

Her eyes narrow and look me up and down. I look me up and down too.

It's only now that I realize I'm not wearing my clothes from the whole bike-car-splat thing. Instead, I'm in the clothes I was wearing the day we came here. The clothes I threw on at 3 a.m., half asleep and panicking. The Mickey Mouse T-shirt I'd slept in, an oversized black-and-white plaid flannel button-down, black jeans, and the Cons I should have tossed out forever ago because the rubber sole is half peeled away.

"You're Tegan Masters," says the girl in a drawl, deep and husky. She has a smattering of freckles across her nose, which is scrunched up as she looks at me.

I shift nervously from foot to foot. "I am."

“You’re checking in.” It’s not a question. She taps a pen against her lips, one of those four-color clicky pens (purple, red, black, and green).

“I am?”

She nods. “Room eighty-four. The Wi-Fi password is ‘there is no Wi-Fi’ but there *is* mini-golf and pay-per-view and a pool shaped like a rainbow.”

She tilts her head to one side, a crease between her brows. I get the feeling I’m not living up to expectations.

There’s a tightening in my chest again. Ms. Chiu, I feel... afraid.

I hug myself like I’m cold, but I’m not. I’m just dead and very confused. “Sorry, where am I?”

The girl leans back in her squeaky office chair and smiles, not a toothy smile, just a curve of her lips into something wry. It doesn’t make me relax. Pretty much the opposite, actually.

“Forgive me,” she says. “I should have said that first, huh?” She holds out her arms, a mini Christ the Redeemer behind the front desk of a two-star motel. “Welcome,” she says, “to heaven.”