

ADVENTURES IN GODHOOD

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SAMPLE

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The pigeon exploded on Detective Marty Breck's fifth-floor window ledge at 7:08 on a Monday morning. One second the bird was there, doing its little bobble-head strut, and the next it was gone—*pouf!*—leaving nothing behind but a crimson smear across the outside of the glass pane and a scattering of grey and white feathers on the sill.

His gaze having been inexplicably drawn to the window just a moment earlier, Marty flinched, nearly spilling his coffee as he slammed the mug down on the nearest flat surface and dived for cover behind the sofa. But there was no further gunfire, no shower of razor-sharp glass fragments. The window remained intact. There wasn't even a bullet hole.

Evidently, the pigeon had been the target.

Marty gloved up, raised the window sash, and conducted

a careful inspection of the wooden outer frame. He found some peeling of paint, some wearing of edges—but no sign of a bullet, and no damage to the concrete ledge, either. The shot had gone straight past Marty’s window. That meant the shooter must have been leaning out one of the other fifth-floor windows on this side of the building.

Grimly, Detective Breck lowered the sash again and removed his gloves. He had no love for pigeons. They were nothing more than rats with feathers. Nonetheless, a fired weapon was a serious matter in Toronto. A police matter. Snatching up his phone, Breck speed-dialed the station house.

“Dispatch,” announced the voice at the other end.

Marty’s heart dropped. Al Gerber, again? Just hearing the man’s voice brought back unpleasant high school memories.

Bravely, he continued, “This is Detective Martin—”

“Right. What is it now, Breck? Someone’s cat up a tree? A UFO sighting, maybe?” Gerber drawled.

Marty could practically hear his lip curl with disdain.

“Actually, I’m reporting a shooting death.”

“You’re—!” There was a sound like a crash. Marty smiled inwardly as he visualized Gerber falling off his chair in surprise. When the dispatcher came back on the line, he was all business. “What’s your location, Detective, and what do you need?”

“I need a couple of uniformed constables to help me canvass the fifth floor of my apartment building and determine where the shot came from.”

“And where is the body?”

“Part of it is still on my window ledge. The rest disintegrated when the bullet hit it.”

Gerber paused. “You’re saying the victim was a bird? Good one, Breck! I guess you suspect there’s been *fowl play*. Hey, maybe it was a hit on a *stool pigeon* to keep it from *singing*!”

Now the dispatcher was falling off his chair for a different

reason. Marty let out a long-suffering sigh. “Listen, what I suspect is that there’s been a firearms violation,” he tried to explain.

It was no use. Gerber couldn’t hear him—he was still laughing uproariously at his own lame wit. And unfortunately, with no physical evidence to prove that a shot had in fact been fired, there really wasn’t anything to report.

“To hell with it,” Marty muttered. Ending the call, he poured the rest of his coffee into the sink and finished getting ready for work.



Later that day, Johnny and Flo were sitting on their customary bench in High Park, tossing chunks of stale bread onto an expanse of fresh-mown lawn. They watched in amusement as the pigeons they’d attracted raced back and forth after the free food, like tennis players chasing volleys. Abruptly, all the birds froze in place. For a moment there was total silence. Then a very unpigeonlike noise arose from the middle of the flock.

“Do you hear that?” whispered Flo.

Johnny nodded. “It sounds like a car with a weak battery.”

In a tattoo of beating wings, the pigeons took flight. All but one. As Johnny and Flo stared in horrified fascination, the bird that was uttering the coughing, whining sound rocked in place for a second. Then it began ballooning in stages, as though someone were inflating it one breath at a time.

“It looks sick,” Flo remarked uncertainly. “Maybe we should find another bench.”

This time Johnny shook his head. “Maybe we should just get behind this one,” he started to say. But before he could finish, there was a sudden *pouf!* and they were sprayed head to foot with gore and feathers.

“Did that bird just—?” sputtered Flo, her nose wrinkling with disgust as with thumb and forefinger she set about

plucking bits of pigeon off her sleeves and pant legs.

“Spontaneous explosion,” Johnny confirmed solemnly. “I’ve heard about this, but only in connection with antiquated mines and old mortar shells. Never thought I’d see it happen to a bird.”

As he was reaching into his pants pocket for a tissue, they heard the sound of laughter. Johnny and Flo turned and saw a young man standing ten feet away from them. He was wearing jeans and a team windbreaker, and had obviously been using the smart phone in his hand to record their mishap.

Flo leaped to her feet. “Did you do this?” she demanded, pointing an outraged finger at him. “Just to have something to post on some video channel? You—you’re a monster!”

Meanwhile, Johnny was doing something more practical. He’d pulled out his own phone and was taking a picture of the perpetrator to show the authorities. “The police are going to hear about this,” he warned.

“Knock yourself out, old man,” said the kid, grinning as he jogged away.



Every weekday morning for the past six weeks, Ellie O’Toole had descended into the gloomy bowels of the old medical building on the Upper Canada University campus to begin a seven-hour shift as Dr. Phinegal’s lab assistant.

This structure was the first to be built when the university was established back in the 1880s. Med students commonly referred to the basement as “the dungeons”, owing to its narrow, dimly-lit passageways, its tiny rooms with barred windows, and its heavy oaken doors with stout wrought iron fittings. However, there is an exception to every rule, and in this case it was Phinegal’s spacious and well-lit lab. Though hardly cutting edge in terms of the technology it contained, it was an oasis of modernity by comparison with the rest of the rooms below ground.

Phinegal taught in the mornings, then lunched in the faculty dining hall, leaving Ellie alone with two dozen caged rats from nine a.m. until one in the afternoon. She didn't mind, though. In fact, by now she actually preferred their company to his, and felt relieved whenever he was late in arriving—which had been happening quite often lately, making her suspect that he might be feeling the same way about her.

Phinegal's instructions had been clear enough for even a high school student to follow, as he'd made a point of informing her several times already. Rats in cages marked with a large red A were to receive twice-daily doses from the syringes with the red caps. Rats in the cages labelled with the large blue B got their shots from the syringes with the blue caps. One group was getting a placebo. The other was receiving something that Phinegal had concocted while working alone one night. He hadn't put a name to it yet, choosing instead to give it a numerical code.

Six weeks into the experiment, Ellie still had no idea which group was which, or what was in the solutions she was injecting. Obviously, Phinegal knew, since he prepared the syringes himself and put them into the fridge. And he'd made a convincing enough proposal to the university's allocation committee to secure funding for his work, so the committee members had to know the purpose of his research as well. Everyone else, including his lab assistant, was apparently being kept in the dark.

Phinegal had been hinting at some dramatic effect she should watch for—"a stunning development" were his exact words—but so far nothing of note had occurred. She had meticulously followed the schedule he'd laid out, and her recorded observations had all been the same: no change in any of the rats. Not in their appearance, or their behaviour, or their feeding habits. *Nada*. Ellie had certainly had more interesting summer jobs during her undergrad years at UCU, but none that paid as well as this one. So, hers not to reason why.

On this particular Wednesday morning, Ellie let herself into the lab and dropped her backpack onto the desk just

inside the door. As she was shrugging off her jacket, she heard a noise that gave her pause. It seemed to be coming from the direction of the cages, but it was too low-pitched to be made by any of the animals. It sounded more like a machine that was having trouble starting. A car with a sick battery, perhaps. Or a gas-powered lawnmower clearing its throat.

Stepping gingerly, she followed the sound and found herself standing in front of one of the cages marked with an A. Something was wrong with the black hooded rat inside that cage. Its mass had apparently doubled overnight. Its albino cage-mate was frantically attempting to dig an escape tunnel, and even the animals in other cages were pressing themselves into corners, trying to put as much distance as possible between the hooded rat and themselves.

Ellie pulled out her phone and began shooting video. Was this the dramatic change Phinegal had been talking about earlier? As she was debating whether she ought to quarantine the still-expanding rat, all at once—*pouf!*—it exploded, launching bits of itself through the bars of its cage in every direction.

A considerable amount of rat ended up on Ellie's face and clothing. (Her phone had very sensibly leaped out of her hand at the moment of the blast and was now lying on the floor halfway across the room.)

That settled it, she thought, using both forefingers to squeeze rodent gore and clumps of black and white fur off her cheeks and forehead. B was definitely the control group.

When he arrived, Dr. Phinegal was less than pleased with the observations she had recorded. However, given the supporting evidence—which she had carefully preserved in plastic baggies after exhaustively photographing the scene of the phenomenon—he couldn't dispute them. Nor could he fire her for ruining the experiment, since she'd spent the next few hours injecting the remaining twenty-three rats on schedule, making her notes about each one, and then

returning the lab to its previous orderly condition. He couldn't even scold her for making a lab coat dirty—the explosion had happened before she could put one on. Obviously frustrated and wanting her gone, Phinegal was left with just one option. He gave her the rest of the day off.

Ellie didn't wait around for him to change his mind. Throwing her jacket on over her blood-spattered clothing, she snatched up her backpack and headed for home.



Ellie lived alone in a small apartment just off-campus, two floors above a laundromat in a strip mall that had seen better days. The Greater Toronto Area was an expensive place to live. Normally, a full-time student wouldn't have been able to afford her own flat. However, the property was owned by someone who apparently owed her grandfather (a retired jurist) a large enough favour to warrant dropping the monthly rent by forty percent and throwing in the utilities and Internet access for free.

Being naturally independent, she'd thought about objecting to having strings pulled on her behalf. Then she'd reconsidered. After all, when still on the bench, Cormac 'Mack Truck' O'Toole had been a tough Superior Court judge. Even her parents thought twice about arguing with him once his mind was made up, and Ellie thought twice before arguing with *them*. So, there was nothing for it but to say, "Thank you", and move on.

As it happened, Ellie did her laundry every other Wednesday, generally in the evening. Today she didn't wait until after dinner. After scraping off the worst of the rodent gore, she let her clothing soak in cold water while she showered and washed her hair. Then, wearing a clean T-shirt and her last pair of jeans, she threw everything else into the laundry basket and took it downstairs.

The only other person in the laundromat was Rhoda, the manager. She asked Ellie to mind the store for a couple of hours while she ran some errands, and Ellie agreed. It was an easy favour to grant. At this hour of the day, the place

was never busy. And, as a bonus, she would have the metal rack of celebrity gossip magazines near the front door all to herself. They were Ellie's drug of second choice.

About an hour later, she tossed her final load of washed clothes into the drum of the industrial-sized dryer, slipped her pay card in and out of the slot, then settled back onto her chair with last week's edition of *You Don't Say!*

The rumble of the dryer faded into the periphery of her thoughts as Ellie immersed herself in the alleged carryings-on of this issue's targeted couple. Cheating with an ex. Getting checked into rehab. Waging a custody battle over a pet. Seeing a UFO. She didn't believe a word of it, not for one second, but that didn't stop her from envying these people their fame. Nothing wrong with that, she told herself. As one of her profs had concluded in a lecture, humans were hardwired to desire attention. Everyone longed to be front page news somewhere, for at least a little while.

All at once, something was pinging off the margins of Ellie's awareness. A strange sound had begun beneath the noise of the dryer, as though a metallic object had found its way into the drum and was being tumbled along with the clothing. She listened intently. It was more than one object, she decided, and they were apparently bouncing around pretty hard in there.

Great. She stood up and checked her jeans pocket. It wouldn't be the first time that she'd accidentally washed and dried her keys. But no, they were exactly where she usually put them. So what could be making such a racket?

Her memory of that morning still painfully clear, Ellie crept up on the dryer, approaching it from the side. She stopped a foot away, turned her ear toward it, and heard the rhythmic mechanical sigh of the drum rotating, nothing more. Then she let out the breath she'd been holding and thought, *All right. If this isn't the source, then what is?*

The building was old. Maybe the pipes were rattling. Or maybe someone was trying to rattle *her*.

Ellie threw a glance in the direction of Rhoda's glassed-in office. It was empty. Then she checked out the rear of the laundromat to see whether anyone could be hiding in the washrooms or the service corridor. They were all empty too, and the service door was locked from the inside.

For the second time today, she was alone and hearing things. What next? Was something else about to explode? Was she losing her mind?

As she was framing this thought, the strange sound abruptly stopped. Ellie counted the seconds. After fifteen had come and gone, she sank down warily onto her chair. After twenty-two, she dared to reopen her magazine. After thirty, she'd relaxed enough to focus her full attention on what was on its pages. Then:

"Ell-low," said a raspy voice behind her and to her left. It sliced through her concentration like a scalpel, dissecting her thoughts and instantly straightening her spine. No one had come through the front door. She would have seen them. If this was a flesh-and-blood intruder, then they must have had a key to the service entrance. And laryngitis, she added, considering how hard they had to work for each syllable.

"Are you—are you talking to me?"

"Esss," the voice replied.

Ellie leaped to her feet and spun around. She saw no one.

"Where are you?" she demanded unsteadily.

"I... ee-yer."

She cocked her head and let her gaze roam over the three rows of washing machines, searching for anything that was different or out of place. The top-loading machine in the corner snagged her attention. She'd noticed earlier that its lid was down, and there was an "out of order" sign taped to it. Could someone have climbed inside? Swallowing hard, Ellie crossed the room and carefully lifted the lid, just enough for a look.

It was more than enough. With a gasp, she jerked her hand away, letting the lid slam shut again.

Not someone. *Something* was inside the washer. A pale, glowing mass of... of... ectoplasm. That had to be it. Like

in that movie, *Ghostbusters*. There was a ghost inside the machine.

Her hands trembling, she fished her phone out of her pocket and called 9-1-1.

A man's voice answered on the second ring. "9-1-1. What is your emergency?"

"I need help. It's trapped inside the washing machine, but I don't know for how long," she replied breathlessly. "I'm at the laundromat in the Cornerstone Plaza near Steeles and Weston Road."

"Is it an animal, ma'am? Are you injured?"

"No, I'm not hurt. And I don't need Animal Control for this. I need—"

Who ya gonna call? teased the refrain at the back of her mind.

She knew who she needed. Ghostbusters. If only they existed!

"Ma'am? Stay with me, now. What's your name?"

"Ellie. Ellie O'Toole."

"Okay, Ellie. You're doing great. Now, can you tell me what you've trapped in the washing machine?"

"No." *Because you would never believe me.*

"Then can you describe it for me?"

Closing her eyes, she said in a rush, "It's glowing. And it's shaped like—like a mouth, a big blobby mouth, with a disgusting tongue and floppy lips."

Silence.

"It's a ghost, dammit!" Ellie shrieked at the phone. "It spoke to me! I heard it!"

More silence. Then a different man's voice came on the line.

"Ma'am? I'm dispatching a police officer to your location to assist you."

"You are? So you believe me?"

"Yes, and he will too. You might say he's our specialist in this kind of emergency. Please remain as calm as possible and stay where you are. He'll be there shortly."

Hearing laughter in the background, she broke the connection.

Right, she thought bitterly. A police officer with a butterfly net, no doubt, for me. Meanwhile, the damn ghost is probably sliming the inside of the machine.

“Ell-lee?” rasped the voice again.

She whipped around, startled. Then a wave of horror broke over her, sending a chill the length of her body. “You know my name?” she whispered hoarsely.

“I... ee-yer. I... Demonai.”

“The police are on their way,” she informed the ghost in a voice half an octave higher than usual. “You can talk to them. I’m not saying another word to you.”

Silence.

Twenty minutes later, an unmarked car pulled into the parking spot directly in front of the laundromat. Ellie watched through the window as a man wearing a well-tailored grey business suit stepped out of the vehicle. He was of medium height, with short, dark brown hair and a set of features that suggested his face had been assembled by a committee unable to reach consensus.

Not surprisingly for someone who was “an expert in this kind of emergency”, his demeanour was friendly and open, she realized, the kind that might encourage distraught people to talk to him about what was troubling them. Whether or not he believed a word of it, he would hear them out, because that was his job. He would listen attentively, nodding in sympathy and eventually calming them down, so that he could kindly and pleasantly escort them to the nearest mental hospital.

Ellie was regretting having made that 9-1-1 call.

He stood in the parking lot for a long moment, visually surveying the area. Then he strode through the front doorway, paused, and gazed around the laundromat as well before making eye contact with her. His eyes were the colour of smoke. She swallowed hard, feeling as though they were pinning her in place. Like a butterfly he’d trapped in a net.

“Are you Ellie O’Toole?” he finally asked, pulling a small

spiral-bound notepad out of his inner jacket pocket and flipping to a blank page. "I'm Detective Breck. You called 9-1-1 about trapping something dangerous inside a washing machine?"

"Yes. I—" Ellie couldn't bear the thought of saying it aloud again. Perhaps it would be best to let him see it for himself. Tiptoeing back into the corner, she beckoned to him. When he was standing next to her, she grabbed the lid of the out-of-order washer and flung it open, taking a reflexive step backward.

Nothing happened.

Tentatively, Breck leaned closer and stared inside. He made a show of looking all around the inside of the washer drum. Then he straightened up, cleared his throat, and asked, "Are you sure this is the right machine?"

"I'm positive!" she declared. "It even spoke to me. Told me its name: Demonai. And when I looked inside—" Ellie stuck her face over the aperture and repeated the detective's inspection. "It's gone," she murmured brokenly. "There isn't even a smear of slime to show that it was here. Damn!"

"I beg your pardon?" said Breck, his pencil poised to take notes. "Slime? Like what a slug leaves behind?"

"No. Like what a ghost leaves behind. Ectoplasm."

"Uh-huh." Breck put away his pad and pencil. "You reported a haunted washing machine? Tell me, did Al Gerber put you up to this?"

"No! Nobody put me up to anything. You must think I've lost my mind. But I know what I saw and I know what I heard," she said stubbornly.

All at once, a raspy voice said from somewhere behind them, "Hello, Detective Breck. And Ms. O'Toole. It's a pleasure to see you again."

Moving in tandem, they spun 180 degrees. Nothing had changed. They were still the only people in the laundromat. They exchanged wide-eyed looks. Hers had a *Now do you believe me?* tilt to it.

"Did it sound like that?" Breck asked her tightly.

“No. The ghost who spoke to me earlier could barely string two words together,” she replied.

“That’s true,” said the voice. “But I’ve been practising since then.”

“Since twenty minutes ago?” she challenged.

Breck motioned to her to keep the conversation going and began to prowling the room. Looking for microphones, most likely.

“Twenty minutes for you, a great deal longer for me,” the voice replied. “Your kind travels a timeline at a constant speed and in only one direction. My kind is bound by no such limitations. I’ve had ample opportunity to learn how to communicate with you.”

“With me?”

“With your kind. I find you... interesting. Definitely intelligent. Well worth studying. Fun to observe. Even more fun to play with. I’m over here, Detective Breck,” said the voice. “In the dryer.”

Ellie whipped her gaze to the left, where a faint glow was emanating from the circular glass pane of the machine that now contained a considerable portion of her wardrobe. “Oh, shit!” she muttered. She sidled over and risked a closer look. Her clothing was being tumbled by the rotation of the drum. In the middle of it all, hanging motionless, was a smallish, luminescent, roughly spherical object.

“Don’t you dare slime my underwear, Demonai!” she warned.

“Demonai?” said Breck, coming now to stand beside her. He was scribbling fiercely in his little spiral-bound pad. “That’s your name? And have you spoken to others of ‘our kind’, as you put it?”

The voice chuckled, sending an icy shiver across Ellie’s shoulders.

“You should ask your grandfather about me, Ms. O’Toole. He’ll have some stories to tell you. And you, Detective Breck, should look up a novel by an author named Claire Amory. I believe you’ll find them both extremely informative.”

“You say you can move back and forth in time,” Breck

persisted. “While practising your language skills, did you happen to blow up a pigeon on my window ledge two mornings ago? And one in the park yesterday afternoon?”

“Pigeons have been exploding?” Ellie echoed.

“Yes. Someone recorded the incident in High Park and posted the video online. The damned thing has gone viral.”

“Your recent past is my long ago,” said Demonai. “Those were crude attempts to speak through a living creature, and they failed. Now that I’ve learned how to make vibrations without disaggregating matter, you can expect to hear from me—or to have heard from me—fairly often. Check your memories from time to time. And be careful what you wish for from now on. Just saying.”

And with that, the light inside the dryer winked out.

As it did, the two people in the laundromat let out the breaths they’d been holding.

“It’s gone,” Breck announced unnecessarily, slipping the little pad back into his pocket.

“I guess we have something in common, Detective,” Ellie told him. “A laboratory rat exploded in its cage, right in front of me this morning.”

He frowned. “Where was this?”

“Where I work, in the basement of the medical building at—”

“—Upper Canada University? That was *your* lab I visited?” He pulled out his pad again and flipped to a page. “I spoke to a Dr. Phinegal there. He claimed the rat had been stolen during a break-in. And he didn’t mention you at all. You know, lying to a police detective—”

“He had no choice. Otherwise, he wouldn’t even have called the police,” she said. “He needs something credible to tell the university when they question the sudden disappearance of rat number 14 from his experiment, and the truth is just too weird to be believed. And for the record, he’s only my boss for the summer. Once I decide between English Lit and Drama, I’ll be a postgrad student at the university next year.”

“Uh-huh.” Breck made a brief notation on the pad before continuing, “So, we’ve got exploding pigeons, exploding rats, and now a haunted washer and dryer. It sounds like something from the tabloids, doesn’t it?”

“Ye-es, it does,” she said, struck by a sudden thought.

He cleared his throat. “Listen, I have to write up a report about this, and it needs to be as complete and truthful as possible, so I may need to contact you again. To ask you some further questions,” he explained, stumbling a little over the last sentence.

She quashed the impulse to flirt. He was cute, in a lopsided way, but there were probably police regulations about fraternizing with witnesses in open cases or some such thing. “You want my phone number?”

“Yes, if you wouldn’t—I mean—yes, I’ll need it for my report,” he said stiffly.

She told it to him, adding, “And just in case I think of anything else you should know, maybe you’d better give me your card.”

“Oh, right!” he said, and dug into his breast pocket for one.

Before retracting his sensory pod through the fifth dimension, Demonai paused to observe the conclusion of this scene. If his kind had a mouth, he would be smiling. Instead, he felt a gentle warmth expand outward from the core of his essence. He knew exactly how Tillah would react when she met these beings: Awww.