



GHOST

*Relentless Reggie*

DECEIT

Alice Winters

Relentless Reggie (Short story following Ghost of Deceit)

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Proofed: Courtney Bassett

Reggie

I wait until Hiro has picked up the bowl of chips to appear before him.

“Hey, Hiro!” I say.

“Shit!” he cries as he flings the bowl dramatically, sending it in a rather spectacular arc through the air, chips flying every which way as his eyes bore into mine. Honestly... I don't really feel like that one was my fault. Maybe... maybe just a little bit. It's possible that I *did* wait for him to pick up the bowl, but maybe I also didn't think he'd *fling* it.

“Whatever you have to say must be extremely important,” he declares.

“It is,” I say with a huge smile as I try to think about the most important thing that could absolutely captivate him. “Today...”

“Uh-huh?”

I'm getting a little worried now. “I saw...”

“Uh-huh?”

“A kitten.”

He grabs his bowl, throws more chips in it and leaves the room.

“Hiro, no! Hiro, come back! Hiro, I miss you!”

He pretends I don't even exist as he heads to the couch and sits down beside Maddox.

“What happened?” Maddox asks.

“Nothing. I merely dropped my bowl. That is it,” he says, voice sharp.

“That sounds oddly menacing,” Maddox says.

“Can’t fathom why you’d think that,” Hiro says as he turns his narrowed eyes onto me.

“I’m completely innocent. I’m just like... sitting here being innocent and sweet and just... my god, all around amazing.”

There’s a scoffing noise behind me that makes me shift. I’m all prepared to glare at the savage input when I see who it is and immediately smile instead. “Keaton,” I say, pleased to have found a new vic—friend to talk to.

Hiro is beaming at Keaton which seems to make him oddly concerned.

“Hiro, your face is scaring him,” I say.

“Keaton, remember how I did so much shit for you and cared for you when you first became a ghost?” Hiro asks.

“No,” Keaton immediately answers, but Hiro isn’t deterred.

“What if you do me a favor and distract Reggie?” Hiro asks.

I glare at the evil man. “I am not a child who needs to be... *distracted*. I don’t need anything from any of you. I will merrily spend the whole afternoon alone where I will be sad and alone but that’s fine. As long as you’re happy,” I say before disappearing.

Now what?

Standing in the backyard, I realize that I really don’t know what to do. Living as a ghost has some benefits, but mostly it’s negatives. And while I might have maybe shouldn’t have been trying to see how many times I could scare Hiro in one afternoon (six is what I got up to), I had little else to do.

Now what? I guess I could go haunt a neighbor or something. Try out moving shit until they contemplate moving house... which only happened

*once*. It's really not my fault they left a week later while making the sign of the cross.

I slump down on a chair, deciding that I will just stare at the grass until Hiro has forgotten my previous accidental scares which shouldn't take more than an hour... he's a pretty forgiving man.

"I'm going for a walk," Keaton announces.

"That sounds fun," I say as I watch him slowly get farther from me. I can't quite tell if I'm invited or not. "Like... super fun."

He slows down a little.

"Like... immensely fun."

"Do you think I would have come back here to tell you if I wasn't inviting you?" he asks.

A beam immediately takes over my face as I jump up and run after him. "Where are we going? What are we doing? Should I have worn different clothes? Or no clothes?"

"We're going on a silent walk," he says as he heads off through a field.

"Well, that oddly sounds less fun than a talkative walk. Tell me everything about you, Keaton. Where do you want to get married? How many kids do you want? Do you mind if I steal the kids to save money?"

"No, no, and yes."

"You'd rather elope? That sounds sexy. I love the idea of eloping. Stripper Ghost could strip dance while marrying us. God, everyone would be jealous of how amazing we are, you know?"

Keaton weirdly doesn't seem to know as he picks up a brisker walk.

"Where are you powerwalking off to?" I ask.

"Just hoping to find someone who makes sense, you know?"

"Well, that'd just be boring, wouldn't it?"

He's quiet for a moment as I try to think of what to say, but before I can, he says, "I always vowed to never get married."

"Why?" I ask curiously.

"My parents were religious so they took the whole 'until death do us part' thing literally. They hated each other so much, yet they were determined to live through it because that's what they were supposed to do. So I vowed to never get married."

"You do realize all people aren't like that, right? Not all marriages are toxic."

"I didn't when I was a kid," he says as he turns down the road. I realize he's heading toward a patch of trees a ways down the road that I've seen him go toward a few times in the past. "But yes. I realize it now."

"Did you ever date anyone seriously?" I ask curiously.

"No... you?"

"No... I liked to compare them all to my relationship with Maddox. Don't get me wrong, I was never in love with Maddox, but he gave me a sense of stability that I'd never had. He made me feel like I had a family or something. And I wanted that with whoever I was going to end up with."

"Then why the hell do you pester me so much? That's definitely not me."

I think about that for a moment. "It's not? I think the group of us make up a pretty damn nice family. Don't you?"

"Weird family. We make the Addams family look normal," he says.

"I think we're the normal ones. It's Hiro and Maddox who aren't normal. And don't get me started on Natalie. We're just perfect, so sometimes, I think we judge poor Hiro too much, you know?"

"Sure, I'll let you believe that," he says.

I beam at him, glad he understands it. “Where do you go every time you come out here? Just walk?”

He glances over at me, and I can’t help but question if he didn’t realize that I knew he liked to wander out here. “Nowhere, really... I just like to walk.”

“Hmm... I actually wasn’t much of a nature guy while alive. Maddox was much more athletic than me. He wasn’t much of a partier either. So the one time I got to take him out, I dragged him all around town to the weirdest places. Want to see?”

Keaton hesitates. “I’m not sure I do.”

“Of course you do,” I say as I grab his hand and pull him after me. A mere moment later, we arrive outside of an old brick building I haven’t been in for years. “Are you ready?”

“Not in the slightest. I don’t even know what this is.”

“Trust me, it’s hot and sexy and you’re gonna be so damn turned on when you leave this place, you’ll be begging me for more,” I assure him as I tighten the fingers wrapped around his and pull him through the door. We step into the room where the music is loud as the sweaty bodies move to the beat and...

“Oh wow, you weren’t kidding. I was immediately rock hard the moment I stepped in here,” Keaton says as I stare at the elderly women (and one elderly man) dancing to the beat.

“I’m... not sure how I feel about that,” I say as I spin around looking for the poles and the stages and the creepy men waving dollars around.

“This used to be a strip club.”

“Ah, looks like their strippers are getting up in years. Is this what turns you on?” he asks.

“No, it does not!”

“But wow, you’re right. This has fulfilled all of my wildest fantasies. Thank you.”

“No! you’re supposed to be... no! You were going to see the ladies with their knockers out on display.”

Keaton points to a woman who clearly gave up wearing bras as hers reach for the floor. “I can almost see hers coming out the bottom of her shirt,” he says.

“That’s it, ladies! Keep moving to the beat!” the instructor says.

“I can’t even hear the beat,” one says.

“Thank you, Reggie. This satisfied me more than you’ll ever know,” Keaton says, clearly making fun of me.

I narrow my eyes at him. “Well... good. I’m glad you’ve been pleased thoroughly.”

“Where to next on this expedition?” he asks.

To say that I’m shocked that he still wants to go with me would be an understatement. “Um... well... after this, I took Maddox bowling with a big group of friends. There can’t be anything alarming about that, right... right?”

“It’ll now be a club for nuns,” Keaton says.

“You know what? That sounds fun. I want to see a club for nuns,” I decide as I grab his hand again and lead him off. The most shocking thing about this whole experience is that every time I do, he doesn’t pull away. Maybe I’m finally breaking him down and he’s submitting to this.

When we reach the bowling alley, I see that it’s about half full and is still, thankfully, a bowling alley.

“I’m kind of disappointed it’s just a bowling alley,” I say. “Did you like to bowl?”

“I think I went once back in grade school or something,” he says.

“You never went later? I was always awful at it but I joined a league with this group of retired dudes. God, I was awful and still to this day have no idea why they didn’t kick me out.”

Keaton glances over at me. “It’s because you have this weird way of charming people or something.”

My eyebrow rises as I stare at him. “Did you... did you just say I was *charming*?”

“Conning. I said you have this way of conning people,” he says.

“I think not. You think I’m charming. You’re... *charmed* by me,” I say as I drag him down the bowling lane toward the pins. “Want to see how charming I am?”

He doesn’t seem certain as I stoop down and wait for the next guy to bowl. He seems pretty uptight as he examines the lane for far too long as his buddies jokingly chastise him. And when he finally submits to rolling the ball, I focus on it as much as I can. Without Hiro here, it’s ten times harder, but I’ve done it enough with Hiro that sometimes, I can pull it off. As the ball nears me, I put up both of my hands and fixate on catching it. I can feel the ball the moment it hits my hands. There’s too much force for me to fully stop it, but I sure manage to slow it down and twist it off into the gutter.

“That might be the evilest thing I’ve ever seen you do,” he says.

I grin at him. “Oh buddy, I can be a whole lot more evil,” I say as the young man hollers about how the lanes must be fucked up. His second roll is not much more successful than the first after I assist as best I can.

“I didn’t know you could be evil,” Keaton says.

“I’m making their days better. Look at his friends laugh at him.”

The young man starts laughing too and I decide that I’ve done my good deed for the day.

“You ready for our final destination?”

“I’m... a bit scared if I’m being honest.”

“I would be too,” I say as I grab his hand again and drag him off. This time, I make sure we materialize right in the middle of the building. Keaton warily looks around. “You guys went to a children’s trampoline park?”

“We sure did,” I say as I hop on the trampoline I’m currently standing on. “Jump.”

“I’m not jumping.”

“You know you want to jump. Come on. Jumpity jump. Do it. You know you wanna do it.”

Keaton folds his hands over his chest and takes on his bad boy routine while staring at me like what I’ve asked of him is as bad as cutting at least one leg off.

“Jump.”

“I’m not jumping! I’m not five.”

“Jump, jump,” I say as I move toward him. “Come on, Keaton. You can do it.”

He just stares at me, like he’s positive doing so will cause him bodily harm. “I’m fine not jumping. Thank you for your concern.”

“You wanna jump.”

“No, no, I don’t.”

“You wanna go in the ball pit?”

“Nope.”

“You want *my* balls?”

“Also no.”

“You can juggle my balls in the ball pit.”

“There are children around.”

“They can’t hear me!” I say as I look around. “Any of you wee little fuckers hear me?”

No one answers but when I turn back, I notice Keaton is trying to discreetly head off. I grab his wrist, locking him down tight, prepared to keep him from fleeing at all costs.

“Come on,” I say. “Little hop.”

“If I jump, will you be satisfied and let me leave?” he asks.

I grin at the man who clearly wants to hop but needed to be bullied into it first since otherwise he wouldn’t feel manly enough or something. “Yessss.”

He takes one teeny, tiny hop while staring me dead in the eyes.

“You liked it, didn’t you?” I ask.

“A little bit.”

“You want to hop again, don’t you?”

“No. That was enough jumping for a lifetime.”

“Do it.”

“You said if I jumped once, I could leave,” he says.

“That was a baby jump. Give me a manly jump.”

He sighs and gives me the second-saddest jump I’ve seen in my life.

“God, that’s hot,” I whisper.

“What is wrong with you?” he asks.

“Wanna roll around in the ball pit?”

“Absolutely not. That thing is crawling with germs,” he says.

“That you can’t get,” I remind him, but since I’m still clinging on tight, he jerks me forward and I find myself back on the walk toward the woods that we’d been on before we got sidetracked. “I take it that was enough fun for one day?”

“Way more than my body can handle,” he says.

“We don’t want to tax you too much,” I say as he starts walking. Following after him, I find myself wishing he hadn’t let go of my hand. It feels cold now that his hand is gone even though I know that I don’t truly feel temperatures like this.

“You never dated Maddox?” he asks.

“Umm... not really. We tried once but it just felt weird. We were better as family. You didn’t have a close family?” I ask.

“Not really,” he says as he takes a sharp left and hurries off. I trail after him, wondering where’s was taking me, but I know I’d follow him anywhere he wanted to go... as long as I was back in time to pester Hiro.

He clambers over fallen trees and dodges through the brush like he doesn’t remember that he can just pass through them, but maybe that’s not what makes this experience fun. Maybe that’s part of the experience. So I follow along after him, stepping and climbing over things like I would when I was alive... and weirdly... it does make me feel alive. Ever since I met Hiro, I’ve felt more alive than I have since my death.

I’ve felt anxiety, fear, happiness, and love instead of just bitter hatred. I became so bitter for a while... so jealous of those still alive and how they were able to interact with the world around them.

“I know I said this was a quiet walk but I didn’t think you’d actually follow those rules. Are you ill? Did jumping cause you trauma?” Keaton asks as he looks back at me.

He must have realized I was wandering off to a dark place because there’s no other reason why Keaton wouldn’t reveal in the quiet. But I’m sure he gets it. I’m sure all dead people get it.

“Just thinking about how fun it would’ve been to have you on the trampoline naked, you know? Just bouncing around.”

“Ah, lovely,” he says, quite sarcastically.

I hurry to catch up with him since I'd started to lag behind. "I like it out here."

"Yeah?"

"It's... nice. I feel like I'd have liked it less while alive. I can just hear the mosquitos, but dead... it's pretty nice."

"There are a lot of things we don't appreciate until it's too late," he says as he breaks through the trees and over to an opening on the top of a hill. "You asked earlier where I go all the time... and it's here. I like to watch the sunset."

I stop just inside the edge of the trees and look up at the beautiful sky. Vast pinks and blues stretch across it, though it's not the sun that holds my attention but the man standing before me.

I think I've got it bad. I think I got something real bad that I shouldn't have.

"I never watched the sun go down when I was alive. I never had the time for it, but now..." He turns to look at me, the sun glowing around him.

"Now we have all the time in the world."

"But do we?" he asks.

I stuff my hands into my pockets as I walk forward to stop next to him.

"You know that someday we're just going to be gone... just... like that. And we don't know what happens after or where we go or if we don't even go anywhere at all," he says.

I shrug, which maybe isn't the most considerate of gestures. "So? What's it matter? I would think dying would make you realize that you never know when something's going to end, so would you rather move on with regrets? Trust me, when you move on, you're going to be thinking 'Man, I wish I'd kissed Reggie.'"

“That’s all I’ll be thinking?” he asks.

I nod. “Pretty much.”

He reaches out and tips my chin up before leaning in and pressing his lips against mine. I can feel his warmth against me, the heat building up inside me, the desire for him crashing around, but it’s over far too soon. It’s such a short kiss and I want it to be so much more.

“Now I can be like ‘Man, I wish I didn’t kiss Reggie,’” he says, face red as he turns around and speed walks away.

“K-Keaton!” I yell, my heart thundering in my chest. I’m not sure it even needs to be there, but it’s pounding away as I run after him. “Oh my god, Keaton. You love me?”

“No!” he says before disappearing.

My heart is exploding. There’s so much love. The love is gushing between us. He loves me too. He just proved he loved me too. So much love.

My only guess is he went back home, hoping Hiro would protect him, so I quickly appear in the middle of the living room. Hiro jumps, tossing his phone with a “Fuck!” and then a “What is wrong with your face?”

“K-K-Keaton—”

“Keaton did nothing,” Keaton declares.

“No, no, you did something.”

“Yeah?” he asks, face still red as he grabs Hiro’s chin and places a weirdly unintimate kiss on his lips. “Thank you, Hiro. I missed you too.” And then he walks off like he thinks that will solve everything.

Hiro blinks a few times in rapid succession. “So... Keaton kissed you then was so embarrassed or horrified or something by it that he thought kissing me would make it better?” Hiro asks.

“Keaton kissed you?” Maddox asks. “What the hell is going on?”

“He did,” I whisper as I fall onto the couch on Hiro’s lap. “All I can hear are lovebirds. I will never wash these lips.”

“You guys have a weird relationship...” Hiro says.

“He loves me,” I whisper.

Hiro just puts a pillow on top of my head and turns the TV up, but I don’t care. I’m fucking floating because Keaton kissed me.

And when the sun sets tomorrow, I’m going to be waiting for him. I mean... why else would he have shown me his secret spot?