

Nightmare
by M. Bennardo

M. Bennardo lives in Cleveland, Ohio. His spine-tingling cover story is his first tale for *Asimov's*. An earlier version of this story won the Edith Garber Krotinger Award for creative writing at Case Western Reserve University.

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Ethan stares into the glass tank in front of him, determined concentration on his face. He's not really tall enough to see over the railing, so he hunches forward on the tips of his toes, supporting himself by his armpits. His hands dangle loosely in the space between his face and the glass. It doesn't seem a comfortable way to stand, but I know that Ethan's dug in for a long watch.

"Come on, buddy," I say. "Your arms'll fall asleep." I try to say the words disapprovingly, but my heart really isn't in it. I'd rather be at this exhibit than any of the others. At least there's nothing really to see at this one.

"No, they won't." Ethan answers me with the stubbornness that comes from being six years old. I know he won't leave until he's seen the ghost in this tank too. It doesn't matter that we've stopped at every other exhibit in the building. If we don't see them all, he'll be disappointed.

I stoop down next to Ethan. He's grinding his teeth together, feeling his chin move along the railing. I point up at the wall, at a television screen above us. The picture's grainy, in black and white, but there's a bright patch in one corner that moves a little from time to time. "Look up there," I say. "You can see it on the screen."

Ethan just shakes his head. I stand up straight again.

Two men with rucksacks pause near us, looking up at the information posted above the tank. The building's dark, and the printed panels are softly backlit. After reading for a moment, one nudges the other. "Poltergeist," he says, grinning. He stands at the railing next to Ethan, looking into the exhibit. The man turns to me. "This is shy," he says. His accent sounds German. Evidently he's not having much luck seeing the ghost either.

"Invisible," says the other man, reading from the panels. He points into the exhibit, at the streamers hanging loosely from the ceiling. "Maybe when it moves."

"We should wake it up," answers the first man, still looking at me as he talks. He reaches toward the glass, trying to tap it, but he has trouble balancing with the rucksack on. It's not long before one of the attendants comes over and asks him to step back.

"We are just trying to see the poltergeist," says the man. As he talks, his companion nods solemnly, his whole body swaying in rhythm.

The attendant frowns and looks up at the monitor. He stares for a moment at the blurry patch, and then he looks back at the exhibit. He pulls a flashlight from his belt and twists the aperture. Then he points it into the tank and briefly switches on the beam. The bright shape on the monitor convulses, and then balls up more tightly.

Ethan is gripping the railing tight now, and he's pulled himself almost entirely off his toes. The attendant switches on the flashlight again, this time for longer. After a second or two, the shape on the monitor darts out of its corner and races around the exhibit. All at once, the skin tightens around my cheeks and forehead, and I look away. I don't close my eyes because I know I'll only see it running across my shut eyelids. Instead, I look to my left, toward the exit. A thin sliver of sunlight slips around the corner, illuminating a few of the fibers in the carpet.

When I turn back, the streamers in the tank are swaying. One of them twists violently, whirling madly before it suddenly snaps straight again and is still. I look up at the monitor and see that the ghost is back in its corner.

The Germans are laughing and talking to the attendant, asking him questions. I feel Ethan take my hand. Now he's ready to go. I reach down and cup his head in my hand. It's strange for me to think that he's so small, yet he can stare steadily at any of these ghosts while I can only wince.

Ethan leads me outside, where a colorless brightness blinds me for a moment. I take Ethan over to a bench. It's hot and my mouth is dry, so I stop to drink at a water fountain. After I've finished, Ethan tries to climb up between my legs and the fountain to get a drink himself. He reaches out and turns the handle, but only a limp stream dribbles out.

"Turn it hard," I tell him. Ethan leans forward, gripping the base of the fountain with his left hand, twisting the handle with all his might. The stream of water shoots up, arching high over his head. I wrap one arm around Ethan's body and lift him up until his lips meet the water. He drinks.

In another minute, we're sitting on the bench. It faces a long arcade flanked by a line of exhibit houses. Ethan kneels on the bench, looking over the back at a fenced-in mockup of a cemetery. There are a few crumbling tombstones clustered together in a little depression near the center. Trees and vines grow wildly all around them, covering everything with ivy and twisted roots.

"What's here?" asks Ethan, pulling himself back and forth against the back of the bench.

I look at the little fake cemetery bathed in sunlight. A couple of birds are playing in the trees, chasing each other from branch to branch. "Just orbs," I say. "They won't come out until night."

"Oh yeah," says Ethan. He continues staring at the tombstones for a little while, as though he's deep in thought.

“Look over there,” I say, pointing to a clock tower a little distance down the arcade. “What time is it?”

Ethan turns to look. “Twelve,” he says. Then, almost immediately, he corrects himself. “I mean three.”

I take the map of the park from my back pocket. It’s creased and a little damp from sweat. “I think we have time to go see one more place,” I say. “Then we have to meet your brother and sister.”

Ethan holds onto the back of the bench and leans back as far as he can without falling over. “Banshees,” he says. He doesn’t look at me, but his voice is decisive.

“You already saw them today.” I hate the banshees most of all. That’s why I had Ethan and Ryan go in together before we split up for the afternoon. I sat outside with Noelle because neither one of us much like those exhibits. Really, I think that I have more trouble with them than she does. After all, she’s never seen the wraith that they keep in there too. I still have nightmares sometimes where my fears take its shape. “Wouldn’t you rather see something else?” Even before I ask the question, I already know the answer.

We walk slowly back toward the banshee house. I shouldn’t really complain too much about Ethan’s choice, since it’s the same place where we agreed to meet Ryan and Noelle. As we walk, I catch sight of a knot of children—most about twelve or thirteen years old—eating French fries near one of the kiosks. One of the boys is Ryan, and soon I see Noelle standing off to the side. She looks back at me across the twenty or thirty yards that separate us, an empty look in her eyes.

It takes a moment until Ryan follows Noelle’s gaze as well. I’m sure that he sees me, but you’d never know by looking at him. He just stares through me, a bored expression on his face. Quickly he turns his attention back to his friends. One of the other boys is talking and making big hand gestures, and everyone else is listening. A few paces later, the kids are all out of sight again.

Still holding my hand, Ethan leads the way inside the banshee house. A nylon rope snakes its way around the lobby. There’s nobody waiting in line, so the attendants have opened a straighter path as well. Ethan lets go of my hand so he can make his way through the long route, going back and forth again and again. When he reaches the end of the coiled path, he lifts up one of the ropes and slips underneath to join me again.

The lobby is bright and the walls are covered with reproductions of old paintings of banshees, as well as a few photographs. There’s also a large banner advertising the special wraith exhibit inside. I’m glad that we don’t need to wait in line, as Ethan would no doubt eventually want to know what it says. Even though he’s far too young to see the wraith, I’d rather that he didn’t know about it at all. More than that, I’d rather not read about it out loud.

Leaving the lobby, we walk through a darkened hallway with runner lights embedded in the carpet. Almost immediately we're in the exhibit area and, rounding a corner, we come face to face with a tank full of small banshees.

Ethan walks up close to the glass, a look of serious interest on his face. Here, there's no need for him to search or wait for the ghosts—the banshees are clearly visible in the dim light and they're very active. They're ugly, stunted things with bulbous heads, limp hair, and awful gaping mouths. Some of them have stick-like arms that they waggle about like little oars. Below their arms, their torsos all fade away into mucous wisps of ectoplasm.

Only a few of these banshees have anything even somewhat recognizable as a face. Some of the other tanks have better specimens that almost look human, but these are just the runts. Two or three of them have holes where their eyes might go, but on the others there's no room for anything beyond a single cavernous mouth.

I stand off to one side, not looking much at the ghosts. I look at Ethan instead. The banshees give off a glow that paints weird shifting patterns on his face. I can see his lips moving as he slowly counts them. Above my head, a speaker begins to play a recorded banshee wail. I shiver as it rises from a low moan to a piercing shriek that cuts right through my skull. It's been filtered and weakened, but it's still a mournful, hateful sound. Every banshee in the house is making the same cry itself, but happily all of the tanks are soundproofed. I move away from the speaker as the recording begins to loop.

I'm bored and nervous at the same time—anxious to avoid seeing too much of the ghosts, but with not much else to look at. Every now and then a heavy bass vibration passes through the building, almost too low to hear. It's the same sound that I hear directly before I wake up in a sweat some nights, the same sound I've been hearing off and on since I was Ryan's age. No one knows that I hear it—not my wife, not my doctor. They think it's stress that keeps me up at night. I've never told them that it's fear, and I've never told them about that sound. It's the sound of the rattling walls of the wraith's tank—rattling from the force of its stentorian roars.

That sound is the last thing I want to hear now. After it rumbles a second time, I look for something to occupy my attention. Besides the tanks themselves, there's nothing except some printed information about ghosts. As I read, I keep watch on Ethan out of the corner of my eye.

"What are ghosts?" asks one of the placards. The answer to this question is several paragraphs of small type. I know it almost by heart, having read it a hundred other times while ignoring ghosts of all descriptions. The card explains that ghosts are no longer thought of as the spirits of dead persons, but are rather thought as collections of "persistent waste energy" routinely given off by living things. There's more to the explanation, and I read it all again, but I don't really pay much attention to it.

I follow Ethan as he makes his way through the banshee house. Although he's meticulous in stopping at every exhibit, he's at least efficient in dispatching them. We're probably already three-quarters of the way through the building when I see that Ryan and Noelle have arrived as well.

"Been waiting long?" I ask.

Noelle shakes her head a little. Her eyes are wide and she looks very small among the glow of the ghosts. Ryan looks from his sister to one of the tanks. A banshee rears inside of it, its torso puffing out into a rippling frill. "We just got here," he says.

"You want to go outside with me?" I ask Noelle.

Noelle tugs one of her pigtails and pauses a moment. "Okay," she says.

"Watch your brother," I say to Ryan. "I think he's almost done."

Ryan doesn't answer, but I know he'll do it. I'm surprised when he stops me from leaving. "Wait, Dad," he says. His voice is half that of a child and half that of a man. I'm still not used to its new sound. "I want to see the wraith." Although the wraith has been silent for some minutes now, I expect to hear that rattling growl at the mention of its name. Instead, the silence continues.

"Ryan," I say. My voice is sharp. I know they'll let him in to see it, but only if I go with him. I hadn't been expecting this—not from Ryan. I'm not sure how to answer him.

"I won't be scared, Dad," says Ryan. "I promise I won't be. I'm old enough to see it." There's something in his eyes that looks almost like desperation. I think of the boy I saw talking to him and his friends, the one by the kiosk. Then I think of the boy who told me about the wraith years and years ago. I had been desperate to see it too, and all the more so because the mere thought of the thing scared me to death. "Come on, Dad," says Ryan. "You know I'm old enough to see it. The sign says so."

Irritation washes over me. I can tell that Ryan thinks I'm purposely withholding this from him. He doesn't think that I might be the one who's scared. I wonder what would happen if I just explained that to him, if I told him that I'd rather not go in. I'd have to tell him why. I'd have to admit to him that I'm frightened.

I turn to Noelle. "Do you want to see it, too?" I ask. Noelle shakes her head quickly, looking down. I'm upset at myself for bringing her into this. She looks just as frightened as I feel.

"I want to see it," says Ethan. He's just now wandered over, and I doubt that he even knows what we're talking about.

"You can't," says Ryan. He sounds almost pleased to share this. "And

neither can Noelle. You have to be thirteen.” I know that he’s said this mostly for my benefit, and my annoyance grows. I’m so annoyed that my fear evaporates, and I suddenly decide to let him have his own way. A sort of perverse callousness shoots through me. After all, I already have nightmares about the wraith. What would it matter if I saw it again?

I turn to Noelle. “Take Ethan outside and wait by the information booth. We’ll be out in a few minutes.” Ethan protests a little, but I hardly pay attention.

Ryan says nothing as we make our way toward the wraith exhibit. Despite what he said, I can tell that he’s afraid. I wonder if he can see my fear too. I try to focus on being angry instead. If Ryan were to notice me, I’d rather that he see me that way.

The entrance to the wraith exhibit is a corridor lit with red lights, its mouth guarded by a single attendant. She says nothing and makes no movement when Ryan and I approach, only looking us over briefly. The bad lighting twists her bored expression into something more like menace. As we pass, she turns away and purposely looks in a different direction. I take some of my anger from her as well. Every little bit helps.

Once in the corridor, panicky apprehension condenses in my stomach. The closer we get to the wraith, the less I’m able to think about anything else. It’s hard to stay angry when all my thoughts are about one thing. Instead, I simply try to breathe without vomiting. I remember the first time I was here. The fear is even worse now, since I already know how bad it will be.

The end of the hallway approaches too fast, and I feel far less prepared than I felt five minutes earlier. I want to turn back, but Ryan is already pushing on ahead. I want him to stop—or at least slow down—and the anger comes back in a great wave that takes me around the last corner.

We come to a large room. It looks almost exactly the same as I remember. The far wall is entirely taken up by an enormous window that looks in on an equally large tank. With an internal explosion of dismay and regret, I see that the wraith has taken up a place in the tank directly in front of the glass wall, glaring down at the onlookers from such a height—and with such a size—as to consume the entire room with its presence.

Unlike the other banshees, the wraith doesn’t have a single face. Instead, it’s more like a great ball of boiling energy, with an endless stream of howling mouths always rushing to the surface. They swoop out of the wraith’s murky innards and then leap forth at the edge before bursting on themselves and disappearing again. The effect is such that, even when it’s standing still, the wraith appears to be running you down.

There’s hardly anyone else in the room, and it’s too dark to see clearly the few people who are. Suddenly, I notice that there are no lights, and that the dull glow

pervading the room is coming from the wraith. Under this eerie light, Ryan takes a couple of steps forward. The expression on his upturned face is impossible to read—it looks utterly blank, as though his face were nothing but a surface to reflect the glow of the wraith.

Slowly, my grip loosens on whatever little anger I had left. I feel naked, as if the most vulnerable parts of me are being exposed one after another. Soon there's nothing except the terror that I feel—a fresh, insistent, and ever-renewing terror that washes over me as regularly as if it were pumped out of some organ of my soul.

This terror is the natural effect of the wraith on anyone who sees it, and it's the reason why the exhibit is limited to adults. As terrible as the sight of the wraith is, this fear is inflated out of all proportion to what it ought to be. Having experienced it once before, I know it'll wear off as soon as we leave the exhibit, but knowing this does nothing to calm me so long as we stay here. This overwhelming fear wipes out every emotion and every concern that I have. All of my irritation, all of my pride, and all of my self-consciousness are gone. I'm open only to fear, and a new one grips me as well—the fear that my anger will come back as soon as the terror is gone. Standing with Ryan now in front of the wraith, it seems like a petty and stupid anger. It seems like an unjust anger.

An array of thin protrusions—something like tentacles—extends from the periphery of the wraith, grappling with the walls of the tank. As I watch, two or three of these tentacles grope their way to the glass partition. The individual limbs pull taut and melt together into a single thicker cord as the wraith strains along them.

Suddenly, the wraith surges forward, its face devolving into a single great mouth. That bass rumbling follows, the walls of the tank trembling as the wraith howls in its rush. It seems almost as if the wraith has jumped into the room, and I turn away too fast in the face of its lunge. Ryan suddenly clamps his hands onto my arm, and pain shoots up to my shoulder. This sudden contact, and the inadvertent support that it provides, is all that keeps me from completely losing my balance.

“Dad,” says Ryan, looking up into the face of the wraith. He only says one word, but his voice is unmistakable. All the traces of manhood have evaporated from it. It's only the voice of a child now.

Ryan and I stand a moment longer together in the full fury of the wraith. Even though the edges of my soul shrink back, I feel different than I did when I was a boy. The more deeply Ryan's fingers dig into my arm, the more sure I am that the wraith cannot touch the center of me. I'm aware, lucidly aware, that this is only a moment. It's a moment of terror, but it's a short one. It will pass, and when it does, I need not take it with me. I raise my eyes to the mouth of the wraith.

“I'm scared, too,” I say. The words sound tiny and empty, but they carry out of me all the anger and resentment. The fear and nausea remain, but so does the feeling of separation from that fear. The wraith roars for a few seconds longer, and

then it collapses, spent. The moment ends, and Ryan and I remain.

As the wraith recedes from view, the pain in my arm dulls. Ryan has a grip near the inside of my elbow, and his fingers dig into the soft tissue there. His teeth are clamped tightly shut, his cheeks gaunt. Ryan doesn't move or release my arm until the wraith is fully out of sight. When nothing remains of it but a faint reflection of its glow on the ceiling, I break into a cold sweat. As my fear dissipates in the darkness, the desire to vomit goes with it.

The lights are raised, and Ryan and I both look toward the exit as soon as it seems safe to move. We walk out of the exhibit like a couple of old men. The other onlookers seem equally dazed, and we push away from the slightest touch of strangers with revulsion. I have a hard time adjusting to the sunlight and the warmth outside. Ryan sees Ethan and Noelle, and I follow him over to the information booth.

I can see that Ryan is shaking off the experience more easily than I'll be able to. We still haven't spoken more than those few words to each other since we argued in the banshee house. Our only communication was that moment, facing the wraith, when Ryan fiercely gripped my arm.

Now Ryan stands quietly near his brother and sister. Ethan sidles up next to him and sights his chin along Ryan's thigh while he quizzes him about the wraith. Ryan answers Ethan's questions quietly, but I can hear the confidence returning to his voice. Noelle watches her brothers with wide eyes, but doesn't move away.

I look at my children for a moment, waiting to see if the anger returns. It doesn't, and it seems strange to me to think that it should. I wonder again what would have happened if I had told Ryan that I was frightened of the wraith before we'd gone in. I wonder what would have happened if I'd admitted as much when I first saw it as a boy. I'd still have nightmares—that wouldn't change—but they might have been fewer and shorter. They certainly wouldn't have taken the same shape.

I turn to my children to ask if they want ice cream. At the mere mention of the words, Ethan detaches himself from Ryan's leg and throws himself at mine. "Ice cream!" he yells. He has one arm wrapped around my calf while the other waves in the air above his head. I take him by the wrist and pull up gently. Ethan squeals and lets go of my leg, skipping a little ways toward the exit of the park. Ryan chases him down and ends by sweeping Ethan off his feet and tucking him underneath his arm. Now upside-down, Ethan is still half yelling and half laughing.

Noelle still hasn't said anything. I turn and look at her. "What do you think?" I ask. "Get some ice cream?"

Noelle raises her dark eyes and smiles a little. "Sprinkles?" she asks. I nod, smiling now myself. Together we follow Ryan and Ethan into the parking lot. I'm still thinking, still curious to know what my nightmares will look like tonight. I'm

curious too to know whether I'll describe them to my wife. They're strange questions that I've never thought about before. I don't know yet what the answers will be.

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