

Atticus

by Jennifer L. Lopez

His name was Atticus. Yes, *exactly* like that other Atticus you're thinking of. Though it was more to do with his mother's unnatural obsession with Gregory Peck and less to do with a love of classic novels (because Lord knows she scarcely read a thing that didn't have an evil bat-baby on the cover and a dozen ads for psychics inside) that he came to be named Atticus F. Blakely. And if you need more than one guess at what the *F* stands for, you might have more in common with A.B.'s eccentric mother than you ought to admit.

That's what everyone calls him, by the way, *A.B.* No one ever called him Atticus if he could help it. It was embarrassing! If he had been blessed with the velvety voice and dashing good looks of Peck's on-screen alter ego, that would be one thing. It might even be amusing then, or flattering, when someone called him Atticus. Alas, he did not live in a black and white movie, but in modern-day Baltimore, and his voice was far from velvety. Especially when he sang along (if *sing* is indeed the correct verb for what he did) with his favorite Earth Crisis album. If you've no idea who they are, A.B. would probably say that's unfortunate. I'd say you're pretty normal.

See, he's a punk rock misfit of sorts. Though you might never guess it if you met him in his work clothes. The long-sleeved white shirt concealed another sleeve - one of intricate and colorful tattoos on his left arm. (If you ask nicely, he'd probably tell you the story behind each one.) Only a tiny patch of bleached mohawk at the nape of his neck was visible under the black cap his uncle made him wear. It made him look like a chauffeur. The cap. Not the mohawk, of course. Even the barbell that pierced the top of his ear in two places wasn't enough to give away his true personality. No, in his somber dichromatic uniform, he seemed as plain as you or I.

On the day this story begins, A.B. had just finished seeing old Mrs. Porter off. He talked to her as he drove - idle chitchat, mostly. But as he left her, he asked her, if there was such a place as Heaven,

to say hello to his mother when she got there. He was fairly certain that's where Mrs. Porter would end up, if it existed (because what could old ladies possibly do to end up in Hell?) And strange though his mother had been, he felt sure she had been good enough to earn a spot there, too.

My goodness, that is an odd expression you've twisted your face into! Is it something I said?

Well, perhaps A.B. did inherit some of his mother's quirkiness, but I assure you, his conversations with the dead have nothing to do with mental defect.

Oh, didn't I mention it? No, I suppose I didn't.

Well, it so happens that our friend A.B. drives a hearse.

