

# Invalid Ghosts

by Michael Barela

It was just a blob. It was a blob that blocked everything from sight that it covered, and it was a blob that refused to remain in one shape or size, but it was just a blob. It wasn't the first time that Krieg had seen these things, and probably not the last. He didn't know what to call them, so he just let them be blobs. There was no reason to fear these things; they only observed, just like Krieg did in his dreams. Often they stood side by side, never acknowledging one another, just staring off into whatever scene unfolded before them. There was no joy in watching the scenes of lovers' intertwined souls delicately moving through a harmonious dance that beautiful frequencies resonated through.

There was also no terror in watching a crowded theater be destroyed by equally harmonious, however unsettling, explosions and screams. Cries for mercy and help teasing the tendrils of frantic piano flourishes that Krieg visualized from his view point at what felt like the edge of the universe. Flames licked the lonely marquis stand in front that read, *one night only, Charles White*, as explosions rumbled from within; explosions that demanded more wails and cries from the helpless people locked in with the mad pianist.

Krieg understood everything that was happening in there. Krieg knew that Charlie, the conductor of the discordant music and overwhelming destruction was only making his art, his masterpiece. The people who scurried to each locked exit, being pelted by shrapnel and letting loose piercing howls that brought harmony to this beautiful act of terror were unwilling participants in this orchestra of mayhem. But each voice was a string that needed to be plucked; each cry, a life that needed to be touched.

He knew that only a handful of these people would survive this chaos to tell stories of the terrorist musician. He also knew that two people out of that handful of survivors would recognize this night as the night that Charles White let his passions consume him and everyone around him. His masterpiece involved more sacrifice

than any other musician would ever be willing to carry out; he had to use his audience as an instrument.

For the first time in one of these dreams, Krieg felt something; tears rolled down his gaunt cheeks. He wasn't sure if they were tears of sadness for the loss of life and suffering in front of him or tears of ecstasy; empathy for the conductor of all this chaos.

That spark of emotion appeared to be all the blobs needed to recognize him. As if he had been invisible every time before and only now have the blobs recognized his presence, the blobs collectively shifted their focus from the chaos unfolding in front of them to Krieg. He was frozen in terror, not sure of what to expect. Suddenly the separate blobs melded into one boldly dark form. Krieg couldn't tell what it was, but it wasn't a passive blob anymore. Whatever it was, it reached out its tendrils and wrapped them around Krieg's face. It was in control now, and it did not have the best intentions for him. The thing wrapped another set of tendrils around Krieg's chest and began to squeeze. The harder the thing squeezed, the tighter Krieg's lungs felt, until they were on the verge of popping.

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Krieg gasped in the air around him as if he were holding his breath for hours. He quickly reasoned that he had another nightmare, even though he couldn't recall it; however, he noticed his heart was still pumping thick blood through his veins at an alarming rate. He reached for his alarm clock to check the time and, just as he suspected, it was three A.M. The past three weeks had him waking up at early hours and unable to resume sweet sleep. As if a switch was flipped from inside his mind, he was suddenly awake and thinking at full pace, unable to take a beats break and let him breathe. He took a deep breath and pushed his body up from its place on his bed.

A faint shadow crossed his vision as he exited his room and headed for the kitchen. He didn't pay any mind to this brief hallucination; he figured it was just another strobe effect from the lack of sleep. Krieg knew he didn't need any coffee to wake up; it

was out of habit that he even made coffee or drank it at all. Why did he have this habit? It never interfered, but it never helped him any. On his way back to his room, he was left alone with his thoughts. For the next few hours he would contemplate the reason he could never get a decent night's worth of sleep. As usual, he never reached a conclusion. When he finally decided to get ready for the day, he laid out his work clothes and prepared his shower at five A.M.

After a tortured, but otherwise leisurely shower, Krieg dressed up in his suit, and poured another cup of coffee, this time with an extra kick of whiskey and much less coffee. He was never much of a drinker until he started having those strange dreams. He felt so alienated from the world that the warm buffer of alcohol between himself and reality was his only comfort anymore.

As he watched the sun rise from his living room window he drank greedily from the coffee mug. Krieg took one last look in the mirror before heading off to work, and slammed his fist against the door frame, splitting open an old scar. He didn't care anymore; every day was a tedious cycle of work, eat, sleep, repeat. A scar, new or old, gave him a story to tell.

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The walk from his rental unit to the metro was long and cold. Even so, Krieg stopped at the entrance to finish smoking his cigarette, trying his best to smile at the people who passed by him with no response. *Why do I even fucking bother*, he thought to himself as he flicked the glowing butt into the window of a passing car. Krieg was so wrapped up in his feeling of isolation that he never heard the screeching tires, blaring horns, or collision of metal on metal; although, had he heard it, he might have cracked a smile.

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Krieg focused intensely on walking down the stairway to the subway platform, trying not to stumble down the steps. He paused to think of how ridiculous this seemed, he was obviously depressed and didn't care enough to stay sober throughout the day, so why should he care if he made it down the stairs safely or not? The consideration caused him to pause.

*Fuck it, he thought, I don't have shit going for me. Besides, where am I going? Work? I hate that place and those fucking people.* Krieg didn't figure the fall would actually kill him, but he could hope for that one in a million chance that he landed on his neck and end his tedious existence. Just as he decided to throw himself limp, he saw multiple strobes of black clutter his vision until everything was opaque. He was suddenly blind.

*"FUCK! WHAT? HELP!"* Krieg screamed out desperately, after trying to blink his vision back and failing. *"I CAN'T FUCKING SEE!"* This was the most that Krieg had said in what felt like ages, at least in public. His voice felt foreign to him, even resonating within his own chest. A strange burning sensation began to build up behind his eyes, one he couldn't name, but he was familiar with it at one point. *"IF NO ONE FUCKING HELPS ME,"* he began to shout, falling short of a conclusion to his clause. "Someone... Anyone..." he sobbed like a child. The burning behind his eyes swelled to a crescent and tears began to flow freely from his eyes. "Please... help... me..." he cried out in exaggerated gasps.

Krieg heard a sole pair of heels clicking on the marble tile that lined the platform. "What will you do if no one helps you?" The strange voice attached to the clicking heels asked. "You didn't finish your thought. You just started crying like a little girl."

*"I CAN'T SEE! WHAT DO YOU EXPECT?"* Krieg spat out.

"I expect you to be the tough man that you project, so cold that nothing fazes you. I didn't expect you to break down so easily just because you can't see." The voice teased Krieg in his frightened misery.

"I... I can't be that." Krieg admitted, feeling more broken and defeated than usual.

Just then he felt a hand gently touch his forehead and his sight was restored. The teasing voice that dripped with malicious intent belonged to a stunning female form that almost defied definition. Krieg could see that she was wearing all black, but details remained fuzzy; even though he could clearly see that they were no longer in the stairwell, but rather in the middle of the platform

which looked abandoned. "*JESUS, FUCK!*" Krieg cried out in surprise as he instinctively pedaled backwards away from this strange woman that constantly shifted in and out of focus, "WHAT? Why are we..." his voice began to calm down as he felt her hands caress his face. He looked up, hoping to see what this woman looked like, but could only see more strobes of darkness.

"*Be what you need to be.*" Krieg heard the voice whisper to him as she faded back into darkness.

He opened his eyes, in the same place that he was when the dark lady spoke to him, but there were people on the platform now. He knew he could consider this a delusion or a significant event. Krieg chose to believe that meeting this dark lady meant something important.

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Krieg didn't find it surprising that the people hustling through the metro platform didn't pay attention to him as he got up off the floor and dusted himself off, his favorite way to describe his loneliness was to say that he was a ghost. No one noticed that he looked particularly confused and lost. He watched the people file out of and load into the K car, heading to the fancy area of downtown; those people never paid attention to people like Krieg. Soon the G car came zooming into its stop, unloading another stream of busy-bodies and taking in a new shipment of people fighting against the crowd like salmon to get to their lucrative careers in the up-town section of town. Even the homeless man, Sully, who frequently panhandled at this particular platform didn't seem to notice Krieg as his tried to swim through the crowd of people to catch the L to his dead-end job in the still developing area of town. Krieg didn't mind not being noticed as much as he hated that the mouth of his flask kept getting knocked away from his thirsty lips.

Krieg made it onto the train and began to feel the familiar dread of going to his all-too familiar workplace. The usual thoughts of skipping his stop ran through his mind. He dreamed of reaching the Greyhound station, emptying his pockets, and taking a bus ride to wherever he can afford. His mind teased him with fantasies of

maybe making it as far out to the sunny coast and finding someone who wouldn't ignore him; someone who would make him feel like his life held significance to anyone besides himself. He quickly pushed those dreams out of his mind. Krieg knew that if he entertained those stupid dreams too much, he would get that sinking feeling in his chest, and his eyes would start burning again like they did in his...

*Was it a dream? Did that happen at all? Was he losing it?*

He tried to focus and remember where that thought came from. He figured it wasn't a dream because he almost never had dreams. He felt like a fool when he realized that the "dream" had just happened a few moments ago, on his way to the train he was currently riding. After the embarrassing feeling subsided, he recalled beholding beauty that made him want to cry, but he couldn't remember what this person looked like, if it was a person. He could only remember fragments of an image in a mosaic that didn't fit the form he recalled, and that it *was* a person; a ghost, just like him. Krieg's heart seemed to skip a beat, whoever this person was, Krieg knew he had to find her. She might be able to do what nothing ever has before. She might be able to make him feel like a complete person; to feel loved.

Just as Krieg began to think of his dark angel, his vision began to strobe in and out of darkness again. When the blinking effect wore off, Krieg saw that the people who were also in the car with him lost all features; they were simply black figures against a dark background, discernible only by their opaqueness. He felt strange and out of place, but it was nothing new to him. He drew a deep breath and began to look around to find any other oddities.

As he walked by the dark figures, he could feel that they were screaming at him, trying to scare him away. Krieg was too focused on finding the heart of this madness to be scared away by figures of nothing that couldn't move. What was this dark place that seemed to exist side by side with his normal existence? He continued to the door to the next cab when he felt something come up behind him. Krieg figured it wasn't one of those icons of nothing,

since they seemed to be tied to their place. He felt a pair of hands slide under each of his arms and hold his chest and a distinctly feminine figure press up against his back. One hand slid up his chest and began to caress his face; the other began to slide down his stomach and under his pants, all of this as he felt this woman lick the lobe of his ear.

"Who are you?" Krieg asked, sounding as if the breath was being sucked out of his lungs. "I'm what will make you complete, Krieg. I'm what waits for you at the end." Krieg's eyes had been shut the whole time, waiting for this strange woman to do more than just rub his dick and play with his hair, but when he opened them, he could see a glowing white box under a seat where one of the void figures stood guard. "What's that?" "That's the bridge to our love. That's what is going to bring us together. Go get it, and come to me." She said.

Krieg felt her grip loosen as he moved to the small box that emitted such bright light. The dark figure that seemed to guard it seemed to protest Krieg's actions in its deafening silence. It was just a box that held all of this piecing light. "I don't understand." He said monotonously. "Open it up and find out, Krieg. But hurry, I need you soon." The dark woman's voice urged him on.

Krieg held the small white box as if it were dangerous, but he knew he had to open it. He knew he had to be united with this woman, he knew that she would understand him, she wouldn't ignore him. Krieg quickly opened the small, single hinged, white box eagerly.

The light seemed to pour out in beautiful cascades, blinding Krieg and replacing the dark people with real people. Before he could register that the frozen figures were now flesh and blood people, Krieg was worried about his love disappearing. She seemed to disappear and was nowhere to be found. Krieg felt like he had searched the entire car looking for any woman that gave off that same comforting, dangerous, and arousing energy before noticing the change in his surroundings.

*The box! The box has the answer!* Krieg thought to himself. He might have thought out loud, but no one even gave him a second glance, despite his madman appearance and demeanor. Krieg opened the box and found two unmarked red pills, nothing else.

*So much for answers.*

Despite the strangeness of the whole situation, Krieg didn't think long before he decided to swallow the pills, hoping he would at least catch a buzz before work.

The train finally arrived at his stop, and Krieg had already convinced himself to file out with the rest of the crowd. Feeling more despondent and alone than ever, he quickly made his way to the stairwell. He was half way up to ground level when he felt a rush of cold wind whip his face. Krieg felt as if the cold had knocked him down, but he trudged his way up to the surface. To keep the cold wind from hurting his eyes, he kept them squinted and kept his forearm bent in front of his face to block as much wind as he could. When he reached the top however, he felt the wind stop howling in his face and could not believe what he saw.

"You're... You're her, aren't you?" He sheepishly asked. For the first time in years, Krieg felt intimidation, "what's wrong with you? Why can't I see you? I mean, I see you, and I know you're beautiful, but you're in all sorts of pieces." The womanly form in front of Krieg seemed to look at her own arms and down at her own body. "*I sup-p-p-ose. Y-y-y-you wouldn't under-r-r-r-stand.*" The woman replied. Suddenly, more frightened than excited at the prospect of finding his other half, Krieg blurted out, "why is your voice all chopped up and what the *fuck* is going on?!"

The female figure gave Krieg an immediate and blunt response, "*Look behi-i-i-i-nd you. It didn't wor-r-r-r-rk the way we ex-x-x-x-pect-t-t-ted.*" Driven mostly by curiosity, he did as the woman told him and saw a crowd forming around his own lifeless body. In his shock, all Krieg really noted was that only now, when he was apparently dead, croaked out of nowhere, have people noticed him. No doubt they would look at his scars, find his flask, and figure



that he was some boozing bruiser looking for trouble when all he really identified as was a scared little boy, angry at a world that never seemed to listen to him. "At least I have you. What happens next?"

*"You fai-i-iled. You are usele-e-e-e-ess."* Then the figure that Krieg identified only as the dark woman disappeared into nothingness. Krieg felt a cruel dagger of betrayal pierce his frozen, and now dead, heart. He had been baited into a strange place with promises of no longer feeling alone, but now he felt more alone than ever and surrounded by darkness.

Krieg's eyes began to burn and pour out tears again as he bawled like a lost child. Surrounded by shadows and invalid figures of darkness that remained stationary, but somehow seemed to be hungrily clawing at him, Krieg could only repeat his thought, *they paid more attention to me in death than when I was alive.*

