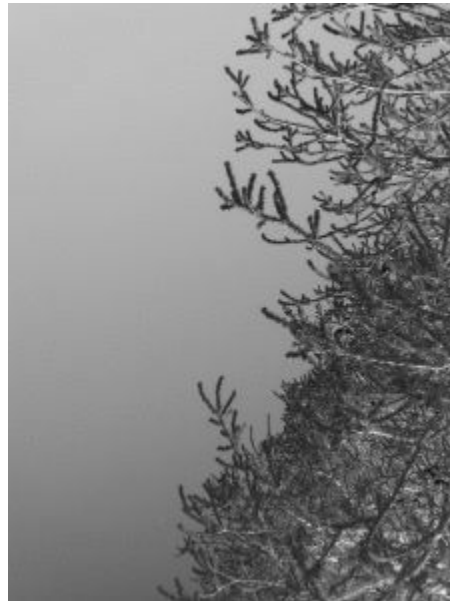




Things with the Same Name

by *Nina Kiriki Hoffman*



My name was Charlie, which might have been my biggest problem. I died in one of those storms people called the Storm of the Century.

Right before I left my mom's house, I had a fight with my mom. It was like every other fight we'd had, only worse. She always begged me to visit her, and then by the end of every visit, she yelled at me. This time, she told me she didn't care if she never saw me again. This time, I figured she meant it.

I left her house and stomped along the road under the drumming of snow, steaming at first, then cold, because I'd left without stopping for my hat, gloves, or down jacket.

I tried to figure out what I could have said that would have made it end different. I went over and over it in my mind. Mom had called me a lot of names, "shiftless no-good parasite," "waste of good dirt," "a burden," "an idiot without the brains God gave a sofa," same stuff she'd been saying to me all my life, though I figured she was really talking to my dad, who stole the TV and slipped out the window when I was three.

So I was slushing along the main street of this small town where my mom lives, Ridgeway, Colorado, with my hands shoved deep into my pockets and my shoulders hunched, trying to keep my ears warm.

A woman stopped to pick me up.

If I'd been thinking, I would have wanted to go home to my one-room apartment in Ewell. But I was still steaming and not thinking. I didn't care where I went.

I liked the way the woman looked—she was upwards of forty, at least twice my age, but she had nice eyes, dark blue in the dome light of her Chevy Nova, sad eyes though. Her hair did a Doris Day flip thing I had only seen in movies, and it was the same color of white as Doris's, not old white, but just a little tan around the edges, like pulled taffy. She had kiss-me lipstick on, dark red.

I knew women put out these signals that don't mean exactly what you think they would. You think it means Kiss Me and she thinks it means I Look Nice.

She was dressed warm because of the weather, but she didn't look too big or too small inside all those clothes, more just right.

We drove for a while without saying anything. We got way out of town and up into the mountains. We were going north, which was not a direction I usually went when I left Ridgeway.

The car was warm, the seat was comfortable, the windshield wipers were plowing the snow off the window in powerful strokes, and the sandy patter of the flakes falling into the plowed sweeps of windshield made me sleepy. If I was sleepy without even having to concentrate on the view, I figured the woman would be even sleepier trying to look past all those snowflakes, so I talked to help keep her awake.

What I really wanted to do was tell her about my fight with Mom, ask her if she thought Mom was right, but we don't ever air our dirty linen in public in my family, so I asked her questions instead.

Maybe the woman was like my sister Sarah, looked at me and saw Boy, Man, whatever, and thought of some Boy or Man she hated. All I did was ask her if she was married, and what kind of man her husband was. What did he do? Did she like her in-laws? Did they have kids?

Guess she didn't want to talk about it.

She asked me a question too. What was my name?

"Charlie," I said.

She stopped the car and told me to get out.

"But—" I looked at all the snow bucketing down out of the sky. I couldn't remember the last house or driveway we had passed. All I could see was a smothering of snow and the dim dark shapes of trees beside the road.

"Get out. Just get out," she said, and she didn't sound anything like Doris Day. Her voice was low and angry, the way Mom's had been right before I left the house. "Get out of my car."

I got out of the car, and she drove off, snow spinning out from under her rear tires, car slipping on the road, straightening, zooming off, following its headlights and leaving pale snowy darkness behind.

I knew there was nothing the direction we had been coming from—I'd been in her car a couple hours' worth of slip-and-slide snowblanket nothing already—so I

walked on the way we had been heading, and found a lot more nothing. Okay, there was snow, trees, and snowy road. That was it.

I trudged until the snow sneaked into my shirt and soaked my socks and froze again, till snow mixed with my hair and froze into a hat. I trudged until I couldn't feel my fingers or my toes, and my face felt frozen hard.

I walked a lot, but I couldn't tell how far because everything looked the same. I walked until I was too tired and cold to do anything but sit down. Then I sat. Then I couldn't get up again. Kept thinking I should stand, but couldn't get up the gumption.

Finally I lay down on the snow beside the road. By that point I couldn't feel much of anything. It was like going to sleep, only colder.

When I woke up, the snow had made a blanket over me, covering my face, even. I sat up. Suddenly I was looking at that snowy sky above, but there was no feel or sound of snow moving off me. I looked down and saw that everything of me from the waist down was still under the snow.

I leaned to the side. Didn't disturb the snow at all.

This puzzled me for a minute. Then I went into complete and total panic, jumpy as a cat on a griddle.

I leapt to my feet.

I was standing on top of fresh snow without making a dent.

Beneath me, stretched full-length, was a me-sized lump in the snow.

My body, and I wasn't in it anymore.

I must be dead.

I must be—no!

No. That couldn't be it. Dead? Dead? Maybe I was dreaming? I —

A snow plow came along and gave the body a better burial. The snow it piled went right through me, till I was standing there, up to my neck in snow, or the snow was up to my neck in me, and I couldn't even feel it.

This was dead?

My mind spun around with nothing to stop it.

Eventually I slowed down and tried to puzzle it out.

At least I didn't feel the cold anymore. I wasn't hungry or thirsty or tired. I couldn't figure out how I felt.

I was on a mountain pass road, in the middle of a very snowy night, in a big high snowbank the snowplow had pushed over on top of what was left of my body. I couldn't see my breath. I could barely see myself.

Was I supposed to do something? Was that why I was dead but still here?

I walked out into the road and looked down at myself. I looked like me.

Snowflakes hissed and sizzled down thick and right through me. I waited through some long patches of quiet. Two cars drove past, didn't slow. I wouldn't have known what to say if they *had* stopped.

What a stupid time to walk out of Mom's. If I had thought, if I had waited, if I had packed, I could have used the return part of my bus ticket and gone back to my apartment in Ewell. I could have been warm and safe instead of dead.

Then again, how could Mom hurt me now? I thought about drifting back to Mom's house. Maybe I could scare her now. Even if I couldn't scare her, at least she was more entertaining than trees. She would watch TV, and I could watch it too. She even liked some of the shows I liked.

I walked toward Ridgeway and Mom. Presently I started to feel drifty. When I looked down at myself, I saw less of me. My hands were almost gone, and my legs below the knees. I walked some more, saw the me fade.

Why was I here, if I was just going to fade out?

I turned and headed back up the mountain.

When I looked, I saw my knees had returned, and then my calves, my ankles. Finally my shoes showed up at the ends of my legs, right where they belonged. The closer I got to where I had left my body, the more of me was there.

Was I tethered to the body, which I wasn't even using anymore? It was stupid. But I wasn't ready to evaporate yet, so I walked until I got as much of me back as I could.

I wasn't sure where I'd come from. It wasn't like I had left footprints. Even if I found myself, I wasn't sure what to do. Nobody was going to find my ex-self buried under all that snow.

Might as well try to find my body anyway. If I was a ghost, I could go through things—and I already knew they could go through me. I tested it. It was sure enough true. I walked through some snow and a couple trees.

I headed back toward where I thought I had left my mortal remains and dived into the snow bank, and discovered that even though I could go through things, I couldn't see through them. After a few inches it was just plain dark under there. I swam around in it trying to see if any of it felt different. Sometimes I'd swim out into air; in the undersnow dark, in the absence of gravity, I couldn't tell which way was up.

I found my body by feel. The feel was that my body sucked at me like a magnet sucks iron filings, this place in the darkness that felt different from everything else around. *Come on home*, it said. *Come back where you belong*.

I lay inside my body for a while. It was as comfortable as I could get in this state where I couldn't feel much of anything. The body held me almost the way it had in life, only there was less work to it. No breathing, no heartbeat, no brain activity, so what was I thinking with? I decided not to think about it.

I tried flickering a finger, twitching a toe, but no response from the body. It was just fooling with me, making me think I was at home inside it. It was sort of like

Mom. Come stay with me, but the whole time you're here I'll make you feel bad about who you are and what you do.

Presently I climbed out of the body and back onto the road, and just in time, too, because that same blue Nova came back. The snow had let up a little.

"Hey!" I yelled, waving at the driver.

She saw me. She stopped the car and rolled down the window. "Where did you come from? I'm been looking for you all night!"

I glanced up at the sky. Sure enough, it was pinking along one edge after a night of freezing cold and snow.

"I'm sorry I got so mad and told you to get out of the car," she said. "I wasn't thinking. I figured someone else would be along to pick you up, but I got most of the way home and realized only fools were driving in this damned blizzard. I've been back and forth on this stretch of road ten times in the past hour. Everything looks the same! Where were you? It's freezing! Are you all right?"

"I guess," I said. Maybe I shouldn't tell her I was dead. What if she went away again and left me here?

"I'm so relieved. I know it was awful to leave you out here, no matter what you said."

"I don't even know what I said that got you so mad."

"Come on back in the car," she said. "I don't want to let any more heat out." She rolled her window up.

I went around the car and climbed in right through the closed passenger door. I mean, I tried to open the door, but my hand slipped through the handle and I fell into the car. And sat in the seat. Heck, if I could sit in the seat, why couldn't I touch the door? It made no sense. Maybe I could touch stuff if I didn't think about it too hard. Hadn't worked with the door handle, though. I had practically forgotten I was dead by the time I tried it. What a pain in the butt it was to be a ghost.

In the meantime, she noticed. She screamed. She sat there staring at me with her eyes really wide, round as pickling onions.

"What?" I said. Maybe if I talked fast enough she would forget I was strange. I wondered if I could get away from my body in a speeding car without dissolving. This road in the middle of nowhere was one of the most boring places I had ever been. Even if I did dissolve, maybe it was better than staying here. "What? What?"

"But you—but that—but you—what happened?"

"Maybe you're tired. You've been out driving around all night, through a lot of snow," I said. I had never been a very good liar while I was alive. Maybe there were advantages to being dead. "Maybe you fell asleep and had a really short dream."

She swallowed. "Stop it," she said. "Tell me the truth. You never opened the door. What are you? Are you a vampire?"

So I was a lousy liar even after death. "Naw. I'm dead."

"Oh my god! Oh my god! How did it happen?"

"I lay down in the snow."

"Oh my god," she said a few more times. I wondered if she was ever going to put the car in gear and kick us out of there, whether I would be able to go anywhere with her. "It's my fault!" she said. "It's my fault. I killed you."

I thought about that. I'd been walking through the outskirts of Ridgeway when she picked me up. The fight with Mom had driven all the smarts out of my head, and by the time I came halfway back to my senses I was walking through heavy, blinding snow and feeling too cold to be sensible. No way was I going back to Mom's. I never wanted to see Mom again.

I could have picked someplace warm to go to. Could have gone to the all-night grocery store and offered to help the guys offload groceries. I had about two dollars in my wallet. I could have gone to the Bluebird Café for a six-hour cup of coffee. Could have gone to the bus station, waited for the morning bus back to Ewell. At least I wouldn't have frozen to death.

The woman had picked me up. She had driven me into the wilderness. She had kicked me out of her car.

But it was the cold that killed me.

I didn't know if I should tell her that, though. What if she kicked me out of the car again?

What was it I had said that had made her so mad?

I asked her.

"Your name," she said.

"Charlie?" I said. "*Charlie* made you throw me out of the car on a freezing snowing blizzard night?"

She started crying. She leaned her forehead on the steering wheel and snorted out some sobs, her hands gripping the wheel beside her head. "I am going to Hell," she said after a while of choking and sobbing and tears dripping down into her lap.

"Let's get out of here," I said.

She sat up. She rubbed her eyes. She looked at me, away, at me. She started the car and drove away, and I did not dissolve. I still felt the magnetic attraction of my body, but it faded as we went. Maybe I was sticking around to do something connected to the woman. I could live with that. Or whatever I was doing. I was glad the car seat was pulling me forward and I could rest my feet on the floor.

The snow had stopped. Even though the snow plow had been through here earlier in the night, there was new snow on the road. As the sun rose, everything sparkled.

The woman drove pretty well for someone with no sleep and a ghost in the car. I watched her to see that she stayed awake. Even if she fell asleep and crashed the car, it wouldn't make much difference to me. Maybe that was what I was supposed

to do with my afterlife, kill her somehow. Maybe that was what she wanted me to do; maybe that was why she didn't kick me out of the car.

But I didn't want her to die, no matter how guilty she felt.

"What's your name, anyway?" I asked a while later. We were down in a valley again. Still a lot of snow on the ground and plowed up beside the road.

"Lorna."

She knew somebody else named Charlie, but I had never met anybody named Lorna before. I guessed she could just be whatever Lorna meant. "Where are we going?"

"Home."

Did she want me to live with her, or whatever the verb was that I needed now? I didn't want to ask her. I didn't want to hear an answer that might be "no."

We came to a town. Gold Falls, the sign said. Population 3,451. It was pretty the way everything is pretty after a fresh snowfall, all clean and white in the morning sun. Low buildings, most not above three stories tall, with lights on inside, small framed scenes of warm life in the midst of all this cold, people shopping, secretaries typing, people sitting in a coffeeshop drinking coffee and reading newspapers, a man standing in a kitchen window with steam rising around him, maybe doing dishes or making coffee.

Lorna drove to the other end of town and pulled into a snowed-over driveway behind a little red sports car, also frosted with snow. It was just the kind of car I would have liked, only I figured if I really wanted one I would have known what kind it was. I got confused in my head about this and wondered if being a ghost made you forget things. I had bought a couple of car mags and read up on the kinds of cars I would have bought if I had any money, but it was a dim memory, not sharp like the ones of Mom.

"Charlie," said Lorna. Sounded like she was talking about rotten food.

I looked at her.

She was staring at that car.

"He's home," she said.

So, the other Charlie. Maybe her husband, the one she hadn't wanted to answer questions about.

I said, "Did you expect him not to be?"

"I told him to pack his things and get out before I got back from the medical center in Ridgeway," she said. "I even reserved him a room at the Timbers. Bastard." She sat straight-backed in the driver's seat, her hands gripping the steering wheel, and she stared at the house. It was still morning, barely, according to the dashboard clock.

"We going in?" I asked after a while. She was breathing shallow and fast.

"I never want to see him again."

"Up to you," I said. I was happy. Being with her, I got a change of scenery. I didn't care if we went in the house.

She turned and stared at me. "You sound like him. You even look like him," she said, her voice low and mean and hopeless. "I don't want to see you anymore either."

This was it. She was going to kick me out of her car again for being a thing with the same name.

We stared at each other for a while. So I had the same name as he did. Maybe I looked like him. I didn't say anything. I watched her and waited, teetering on the edge of another uncertain future, and at last her eyes dropped.

She glanced at the house. "I wonder what he's doing in there. He knows I was supposed to get back sometime late last night. He's been there a while, if there was time for snow to build up on the car and not be melted by the engine heat. Damn it!" She pounded on the steering wheel with her gloved fist. "I have to go in. You come with me, okay?"

"Sure," I said. Not that I thought there was anything I could do. "Is this guy mean? Do you have any kind of weapon? Maybe you better take something with you."

She really looked at me this time. "I don't know if he's dangerous. He only ever hit me when he was drunk, but he's been drunk a lot these past few weeks. I need for him to get out of my life. I don't know if I could hit him, though. How about you go in first and find out what he's doing?"

"Okay." I slipped out through the door and turned to glance at her. She had her hands on the wheel. Steam and exhaust clouded from the tailpipe of her car, melting a hole in the ice on the driveway. The engine grunted and shuddered.

I looked at the house. It was a redbrick one-story with white trim. The pale curtains were closed in all the windows. A curtain twitched.

It looked like a nice house, not exactly the same as every other house on the block, but not very different, either. The trees around it had lost their leaves, but there were some that looked like they would be a riot of green and flowers in the spring. A broad cement step led up to the front door, sugared with snow and scarred by a stir of footprints, a line going in that did not come out, with later snow inside the prints.

I thought about going up to the front door, then thought, what the hell, and walked through the wall with the biggest window in it, the one where a curtain had twitched. Maybe it was just the furnace switching on that had moved the curtain, and maybe he was inside looking out.

Beyond the wall was a comfortable living room with big sprawl-on furniture, the kind I liked to test when Mom and I went to Sears, though she always bought the other kind, uptight and prissy with flowers on it, not furniture you could get comfortable on. This furniture was the perfect brown color you could spill on and no one would notice, though it was kind of slick-looking, too, so maybe you could wipe off whatever you had spilled.

At first I was knee-deep in floor. I jumped up until my feet rested on floor. Who knew houses were so high off the ground?

He was there. He looked like a wreck, big smudges under his eyes from tired or drink, his skin pasty and his lips cracked, his mouse-brown hair spiky with sleeping sideways on it or not washing it and tugging at it. He was thin. He had a mustache that looked like it hadn't decided to actually show. He was wearing a red-brown leather jacket over a dirty white shirt, and jeans, and black cowboy boots with tooled curlicues on the toes, and he looked like he hadn't showered or slept in a week. He stood there and stared at me while I looked back.

Lorna thought I looked like that?

"Whaddya—who—" He swung an arm up with a bottle at the end of it, and splashed himself. I couldn't smell it or taste it. I read the label: Jack Daniels.

So maybe he was me. We had the same name. Only he was twice my age, and I was dead at nineteen. Maybe I was lucky I never lived long enough to turn into such a loser.

"What are you doing here?" I said. "Aren't you supposed to be gone?"

"Says who?" he asked.

"Lorna."

"That bitch! Who's she to be ordering me around, huh?"

"What, you want to mess the place up and yourself, too? Why?" I knew one reason: when you felt worthless, you might as well make everything else worthless to match. Mom had told me I was worthless often enough. Until I managed to leave, move to Ewell, find myself a job, even if it was just stockboy at the supermarket. Well, she still said it, but I knew what I was worth: minimum wage, forty hours a week, cost of living increases, occasional overtime when other people called in sick; and that was something.

Except now I couldn't do my job anymore, so was I really worthless?

"Got nowhere to go," said Charlie. He took a swig from the bottle. "What are you?"

"What do I look like?"

"Some stupid punk kid from nowhere," he said, "going nowhere."

"Guess that's what I am."

"Whatcha doing in my living room?"

"Checking it out. You leaving?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Told you. No place to go."

"Go to Ewell. You can have my old job. I don't need it anymore. I have a room, number 32, in Pine Lodge, 515 North Fifth Street. You can have that too."

"Ewell? I used to live there twenty years ago. Things sure were simpler then."

"Tell the manager at Everett's Supermart you're Charlie Hudson's big brother, or his old man, or something, and you want my job."

"But I've got a job."

"So why can't you get your own apartment?"

"I don't want my own apartment. I want to stay here."

"You're messing up too much to stay here."

He shook his head. He shook his head some more. He grabbed his cheeks with his hands and managed to stop shaking his head, and then he groaned "Such a headache," he said.

"Charlie, you gotta get out of here."

"But I don't want to. I want to lie down."

"It doesn't matter what you want," I said. "Go on. Get out of here." Then I thought, why am I helping Lorna? A woman. Like Mom was a woman. Here was me, Charlie, and some other Charlie together in a living room full of furniture I liked. Outside, a woman in a car. Why didn't she just go away?

"I'm sorry," said Charlie, "but I gotta lie down." He crashed down on the big couch and lay still, half his face smashed into a cushion. He started to snore.

I went back out to the car and slid into the passenger seat. "He's passed out on the couch," I said.

"It took you this long to come and tell me?" she said.

I looked at her and saw Mom. Women! I had been doing the best I could, and all she did was gripe at me. "He was awake and talking when I first got in there," I said. "I told him he had to leave, but he passed out instead."

"Oh," she said. She turned off the engine. She slipped out of the car and I followed her up the front walk, across the stoop, and into the house. Charlie lay where I had last seen him.

She looked around the living room. Crushed junk-food wrappers, dirty dishes, empty bottles. A litter of life I hadn't even noticed the first time I looked, because I liked the furniture. "Could be worse," she said, and bent to pick up crumpled papers. "Guess I can call someone to haul him out of here."

She wasn't Mom. She was just Lorna, in a place Charlie had messed up. He had hit her, and she was mad at him. That was a problem with worthlessness, wanting to pass it on like a present. You didn't want to keep it, but what could you do with it?

I stood there and watched Lorna walk to the kitchen and pick up the phone. I wondered why I was there at all.

I looked at Charlie, lying on the couch.

I thought about my body calling me home, and then I went and lay down inside of Charlie. Why not?

If he had a ghost inside, it didn't even squirm or wriggle when I got there. Maybe it had gone to sleep too.

* * *

When I woke up, my mouth tasted terrible and my head pounded. I lay on something hard and listened to my lungs pulling in air, felt the throb of heartbeat in my ears. I flickered a finger, twitched a toe. Everything ached. Everything was tired. Horrible smells and tastes lay on my tongue and in my nose.

I lifted my eyelids, could almost hear them creak like rusty hinges. White walls, and when I rolled my head, bars. Beyond the bars, people in the distance, talking to each other in low voices and whines. Smells, strange and wild after the scrubbed-free, tasteless, odorless snowy night and day I had spent dead. Wrinkled, sour humanity. I rolled my pounding head again and saw I wasn't alone. Benches lined the walls, and men lay on the benches, moaning.

I'd been drunk before, and I'd woken up feeling mighty sick before, and wishing I were dead.

At least one thing had changed.

I sat up and went to the bars and asked for water. A woman brought me a big plastic cup full of water and I drank it. She gave me a couple aspirin with my second cup. "You feeling better?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah," I said.

I went back and lay down and thought about Lorna. Sure. She wouldn't want to see me again, that seemed pretty certain. Charlie had a job, but I didn't know what. Whatever it was, I wasn't sure I could do it.

I was forty now. I thought about my job and my room at the Pine Lodge in Ewell, and I thought about a shower, how good it would feel to wash away all the smells Charlie had left on himself, and start being me instead.

That mustache had to go.

Mom might look for me, but she'd never find me in here, and I'd never have to visit her again. I wondered if this Charlie had any relatives he had been visiting because he had to. They would never find me either, not if I just went to Ewell and left everything Charlie owned behind. I thought about that little red sports car, and I let go of the idea of it.

I lay there inside of Charlie-I-didn't-even-know-his-last-name and thought, Hey. I can change my name if I want to.

Everything hurt, but I was happy.

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