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Ghosts in the Machine

(One-Act Version)

By

ERIC COBLE

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Ghosts in the Machine

(One-Act Version)

CHARACTERS

PELS: A rough-and-tumble girl.

SHAWN: A duuuuude boy.

ZELDA: A free-spirited girl.

TAYLOR: A high-achieving girl.

MELISSA: A shy, disappearing girl.

ANTHONY: A quiet, athletic boy.

CODY: A pissed-off girl.

SETTING: A mostly bare stage representing areas in and around a high school.

TIME: Now.

PRODUCTION NOTES

All roles can be played by actors of any ethnicity and gender with slight changes to dialog. Set and props are to be suggested and kept to a minimum for maximum flow between scenes. Theatricality is encouraged in staging, if not in performance. Technology terms and texting language may be updated as needed.

Ghosts in the Machine

(One-Act Version)

(Lights up on seven high-school juniors and seniors, each in a separate area, all holding their cellphones, facing the audience.)

MELISSA *(hesitates, to audience)*. The part I know is that I was finishing lunch a few days ago and I got a text. I eat lunch in Mr. Collins' room. He's really nice. It's quiet there and you don't have to talk to anyone or answer questions. I was just reading my book and I, um, I got this text.

(The words of the text glide across the floor and walls: "Who do u know whos got some?")

MELISSA *(cont'd)*. And I didn't know what it meant. And I don't recognize the number, and I should just ignore it, I know that now, but—I don't get a lot of texts and I just replied, I don't know why, I—

(She types on her phone—her text slides over the wall and floor: "Some what?")

MELISSA *(cont'd)*. And I waited. I sat there staring at my phone. And it was, like, um, kind of exciting? This never—these things don't happen to me. I waited what seemed like a long time, I got ready to go to chemistry—

(Text slides over the stage: "Ingestible mood-altering substances")

She pauses.)

MELISSA (*cont'd*). And my first thought was, “Some friend is playing a prank on me.” Except I don’t really have any—the only people who text me are my mom and my uncle and my cousins. And they wouldn’t think this was funny, so—

(*She types fast, Text appears: “You’ve got the wrong #”*)

MELISSA (*cont'd*). And I went to chemistry. But I kept wondering why my first thought was that it was a friend. Where did that come from?

TAYLOR (*to audience*). The first one I got— (*Scans her phone.*) I erased it, I was *not* having that nonsense on my phone. But it said:

(*Text glides across stage: “Heard u sell from ur car”*)

TAYLOR (*cont'd*). And I’m like, “What?” A) who is this? B) heard from who? C) Is that a typo? Like you meant *selling* my car? ‘Cause I’m not, it’s my parents’ car, and it’s perfectly fine it’s only like five years old, and I just had the tires rotated.

(*Text: “But maybe the narcs are onto u?”*)

TAYLOR (*cont'd*). Oh, “Sell from my car,” drugs, yeah, I’m totally cooking meth in my spare time in the lawnmower shed and selling it out of the trunk of my dad’s Honda Civic. *Breaking Bad* is based on my life.

(*She types: “you are mistaken”*)

SHAWN (*to audience*). So I’m toweling off after gym, getting dressed, and my phone buzzes—

(*Text across the stage: “Hey sexxxxxxy, looking devil cute”*)

SHAWN (*cont'd, hesitates, looks around*). There's, like, twenty guys in here ... and some of 'em are texting ... but no one's lookin' at me—but ... and I'm like, "One of my bros yankin' my chain," but I don't, like, *know* them that good that I can just ask—so I, like, I'm a little creeped. Not that I'm homophobic or whatever, I got no problems with that, but I totally got a girlfriend, but I'm cool with tolerance, but if someone's checkin' me in the shower—and it's probably a joke, right? But I'm a little weirded out—

(He types, Text appears: "Thx")

Another text immediately slides over the stage: "Think I want those sweet lips on mine"

He freezes. Looks around.)

ANTHONY (*quietly, to audience*). So I catch the bus to work after practice. The 42C goes out by my uncle's place. I wash dishes and bus tables and whatever he needs till close. But on the bus I mind my own business. Or actually everywhere, you know? (*Shyly grins as he puts in his earbuds.*) Earbuds in, I'm good.

(His phone buzzes, he looks at it. Text flows over the stage: "Do you really think you're helping anyone?")

ANTHONY (*cont'd*). And I'm like, "What?" You know? "Who is this? I never said I helped anyone." 'Cause I don't know the number, but it has to be someone on the team, like they got my number from Coach's texts. So I'm goin' through faces, you know, like who would say that, you know?

(Another text: "You have so many gifts. Use them for good!")

ANTHONY (*cont'd*). Same number. So now I'm thinkin' this has gotta be an adult 'cause no kid talks like that. Definitely not anyone in soccer. But it's not Coach's number. I've had teachers be like, "You really take command on the soccer field, Anthony, why don't you speak up in class?" But it's like in soccer, I know the *rules*, you know? I know what we're aiming for. Everything off the field—it's like, I better get quiet and just watch, you know? Keep your head down and you'll be OK.

(*He types. Text: "Who is this?"*)

Beat. He waits. Watches his phone ...

Text: "You know."

Lights shift as ZELDA steps forward looking at her phone.

Text rolls across the stage: "You know you can tell me anything")

ZELDA (*to audience*). That's what the first one said. "You know you can tell me anything." And I'm like, "Cool!" I'm like ...

(*She types. Text: "Who's this?"*)

Text response: "An ear to listen. A shoulder to cry on")

ZELDA (*cont'd*). And I'm like, "Niiiiice." Not that I need like a shoulder to cry on, 'cause I don't cry, or not never, I cry at Pixar movies and/or when my mom slaps me, which isn't even that often anymore, but when I cry it's private and I don't think you *want* me crying on your shoulder, 'cause then your shirt's wet and there might be snot or even drool and I don't know, and you don't want *that*, I don't want the guilt of ruining your blouse or whatever—but an ear to

listen, that's cool. Is this some kind of anonymous app like E-Priest or like "Counselor-in-a-Box" or whatever, except I think *I'm* supposed to be anonymous and not the counselor? But I'm like, whatever, this could come in handy—

(She types. Text: "Thnx!!")

PELS *(to audience)*. No way, man. I knew it was B.S. from the start. I was hanging out by the bus zone after school, "The Un-designated Smoking Area." I don't smoke, or not that much, but I got way more in common with those guys than anyone else, you know? And we were all—or *they* were—I just hang, you know, they're not my *squad*, you know, I just—I was just there. It's cool for me to hang there. But they were all laughin' and doofin' on Mr. Collins, like, *(In a stiff voice.)* "Students, I will take those electronic social media devices away! It's in the handbook!" And I get this text ...

(Text: "You are SO good for this school. You are my hero")

PELS. And I'm like, "Wait! This is *irony*! This is what Mrs. Vallejo was talking about!" But I didn't know the number and, like, none of the burn-outs were texting and I looked around and didn't see anyone watchin' us, except we were outside so anyone could have been lookin' from the windows of the school, and I was like, "Whoa, who's watchin' me? And how'd they get my number," you know? And then I'm like, "Wait, is this person makin' fun of me? Or do they actually *mean* I'm their hero?" 'Cause that makes 'em either a dirtbag or McNugget stupid. Either way—

(She types. Text: "F. U.")

Lights shift to CODY in her army jacket and jeans, scowling at the audience. Moments pass.)

CODY. Of course you think I did it. “Dangerous Loner.” “Always kept to herself.” “It’s always the quiet ones.” (*Holds up her phone to the audience.*) Except I got ’em too, OK? Except mine weren’t the happy cheery rah-rah crap the others got. Mine were ... more like cries for help. Which proves whoever sent ’em doesn’t know me. Back in middle school, like when I was still playing the game and my parents were like, “You just haven’t found the *right* friend yet,” there was this boy named Leon. And he got picked on in gym and was crying in the hall, like trying to hide. I went up to him. I put my hand on his shoulder, I saw that in a movie or something, I said, “Leon. Don’t let ’em get you down, man. Think about Old Faithful. You know, the geyser in Yellowstone? That sits on top of a massive unexploded volcano, and in a few years it’s gonna blow the world’s biggest hole right in the middle of our country and instantly kill pretty much everyone you know today. And the ones not killed instantly will starve to death, unless they escape to Europe or Asia, except global warming is gonna screw the seasonal patterns and either flood out or starve everyone there too. So these jerks like Tobias and Jason and Stewart—they’ll be dead soon enough.” And he just cried harder. So I was like, “Screw helping people.” So when I got the texts—

(Text flows around her: “I need to tell someone”)

CODY (*cont’d*). And then a different one:

(Text: “Why can’t anyone understand me?”)

CODY (*cont’d*). I was like, *clearly* you don’t know who you’re talking to. Jerk.

MELISSA. But I started, um, checking my phone? A little more often. Not that I wanted the person looking for drugs to get me again, but it was ... different. I guess. Like my world got a little bigger, just for a second. I didn't tell anyone. It was just my secret. (*Quietly.*) Like my little piece of danger. Sort of. It's stupid. I know. But I checked more and more. And then I got one ...

(Text spills onstage: "Are you stalking me??")

MELISSA (*cont'd, recoils*). I hadn't even typed anything! I was just looking! I almost fell out of my chair. And I text back, not even thinking—

(She types. Text flows: "NO!")

ZELDA. Oh, absolutely, I reached out to Melissa. But that's 'cause the universe told me to. I was walking to class, math class, and I was still thinking about "you can tell me anything," and I was thinking, "What should I tell them?" That I eat Duncan Hines vanilla frosting right out of the jar with a spoon? But they could probably guess that. Or that I actually kind of *like* the way my feet smell after I've run a long way? That's gross and odd, right, that's a good confession!

(Her phone buzzes. She looks. Text flows: "Other people have problems 2. Look around U")

ZELDA (*cont'd*). This was from a different number, but I was like, "Whoa. That's deep." And I step into math class and first thing I see is Melissa, except I didn't know her name then, she's so shy, you know, and she's looking at her phone, almost hopeful, and she kind of jumps! Like she's

startled, she almost falls out of her desk, and class starts and I keep watching her and she looks so sad and kind of scared and my heart just goes out to her, you know? I'm like, *yes*, she's got some problems. She needs a friend. So that's why—

(MELISSA collects books and starts out. ZELDA hops over to her and will continue following her as she walks.)

ZELDA (*cont'd*). Hey.

MELISSA (*taken aback*). Hey.

ZELDA. I'm Zelda. You're Miranda, right?

MELISSA. Melissa.

ZELDA. Melissa, right, how's it going?

MELISSA. ... Good.

ZELDA. I know we've never really hung out, but I was just like, I don't know, we should hang out.

MELISSA. ... Why?

ZELDA. Well, we're both students here, we only have a few decades on the planet before we're gone, right, let's suck the marrow out, right?

MELISSA. ... I'm not ... I don't actually suck the marrow much.

ZELDA. It's a metaphor.

MELISSA. I know.

ZELDA. So do you wanta hang out after school sometime, maybe get—

MELISSA (*quietly, earnestly*). Have you been texting me?

ZELDA. ... Nnnno.

MELISSA. Is this part of, like, a joke, like a prank?

ZELDA. I wanted to be your friend. Like I thought the universe was telling me to be your friend.

MELISSA. I have to go to class.

ZELDA. Me too. Totally.

(MELISSA walks away.)

ZELDA *(cont'd, calling out)*. Catch you in the triple back! I don't even know what that means! I just made that up!

(Lights shift as SHAWN steps over to MELISSA who is reading a book.)

SHAWN. Hey. Are you Melissa Yasinow?

(She hesitates ... nods. He shows her his phone.

Text: "Hey sexxxxxxy, looking devil cute"

"Think I want those sweet lips on mine")

MELISSA *(reading)*. What?

SHAWN. You can read, right?

MELISSA. Are you asking me on a date?

SHAWN. No way! You were comin' on to *me*.

MELISSA. I'm reading my book.

SHAWN. You're playin' somethin'—acting all sweet and "La-de-da, Who me?" and then sendin' this hookup crap while I'm in the locker room.

MELISSA. I did not!

SHAWN *(shows her his phone again)*. BOOM! Who's phone number is this?

MELISSA *(reads)*. ... Mine.

SHAWN. BOOM! Red-handed!

MELISSA. I never sent that!

SHAWN. Oh, someone borrowed your phone?

MELISSA. ... No. I don't think so. Please stop.

SHAWN. Then maybe you got a virus.

MELISSA. Maybe. I have to go.

SHAWN. Or. You got some kind of Jekyll and Hyde thing goin' on, split personality and you don't even know it!

MELISSA. Shut up.

SHAWN. Or do you know it? Are you, like, hearing voices and stuff?

MELISSA. Stop it, this isn't funny—

SHAWN. I never said it was.

MELISSA. Whoever's doing this, I don't know what you're trying to do, or you think this is a good joke, but I never did anything to any of you, so stop it! Just stop it!

(And she charges out.)

SHAWN turns to ANTHONY who is walking by.)

SHAWN. Anthony.

(ANTHONY stops, a little confused.)

SHAWN *(cont'd)*. Hey, man, how you doin'?

ANTHONY. OK.

SHAWN. Listen, man, I think maybe you got, like, a virus.
(ANTHONY stares at him.) On your phone.

ANTHONY. I don't think so.

SHAWN. I got a text from you I don't think was from you.

(He shows his phone.)

ANTHONY. Why would I text you?

SHAWN. Well, like a joke.