

THE PHANTOM'S AGENT

幽靈代理人

In Taiwan's answer to the Thai horror film Senior, a good-for-nothing boy and the ghost of a policeman work together to solve a case.

The narrator of *The Phantom's Agent*, a boy who lives alone, is skipping class at home one day when he is startled to discover himself face-to-face with an imposing-looking ghost: a former cop who has received special dispensation from the King of Hell to return to the mortal realm and seek out the murderer who killed him. Since he is only able to assume corporeal form and manipulate physical objects in this youth's presence, the ghost cop is forced to try and coerce him into helping.

Eventually the youth reluctantly agrees to help assist in the investigation, only to discover himself facing a series of increasingly difficult challenges: taking care of the cop's old drug sniffer dog, who consumes (and excretes) on a massive scale; climbing through a rat-infested ventilation duct; and confronting a boss of the underworld who can see and hex ghosts (and is prepared to inject him with a dangerous quantity of cocaine if he says the wrong thing). He may need an increase in pocket money allowance – and perhaps an extra life or two – if he's going to survive.

The Phantom's Agent is a series of five novels about a pair of utterly incompatible partners. The case they are investigating is a serious one, but the friction between ghost and human is a source of constant entertainment.

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Pepper is an elusive novelist with a knack for portraying male romance. *The Phantom's Agent* is her best-known work.



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By Pepper

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It was the first time I'd ever seen a ghost. And it might not have been a very impressive specimen, but I'd still managed to get rid of it.

Was there something special about today? A full moon causing a surge in negative energy? A conjunction of the planets distorting the Earth's magnetic field and knocking *yin* and *yang* out of balance?

Then again, fortune-tellers had always been telling me the Earthly Stems and Heavenly Branches weighed heavy (an extraordinary seven ounces, to be exact) on my fate. Powerful *qi* surrounded me. By rights any ghost should be fleeing my presence, not attacking me.

No matter how I tried I couldn't make sense of it. But nor was I getting back to sleep, thanks to that ghost. I looked at the clock: only 6 am. No point in phoning my dad to ask what was going on yet. There was a one in a hundred chance of him picking up.

He was a businessman, my dad, so his phone was never off, or even silent. But he'd see it was me and not pick up. At least I could spoil his sleep, though. And as I was toying with that idea I heard something from the window behind me.

I lived on the eighth floor. The stupider birds – pigeons or sparrows – sometimes flew all the way up for a change from pecking about, amusing themselves by disturbing those of us enjoying a quiet night's sleep. I twisted round to shoo the pest off.

As I turned I saw what was really outside my window. I froze, my mobile clattering to the floor.

A deathly pale face, hanging upside down, smiling balefully at me.

My mind sought explanation, however ridiculous. A special agent on a Tom Cruise-style impossible mission, climbing head-first down my building? But what would a CIA agent be doing grimacing at the blameless residents of an ordinary apartment building?

No, this was no person. This was another ghost. Not that he had "I'm a ghost" written across his face, or that blood was dripping from a caved-in skull. I just knew. It was an intuition.

And just as a taxi driver knows not to pick up a female figure clad in ghostly robes on a deserted street, I knew this was bad news.

Another ghost, so soon after the first!

At least I was calmer this time. I wracked my brains: what to do? Unfortunately, I'd not used my brains much these last seventeen years and they weren't up to the task.

This ghost seemed to be coping fine with daylight though. Clearly it was more powerful than the other one. It was time for the last resort – flee!

But fate seemed to have other ideas. My feet remained fixed to the floor, ignoring the orders of my central nervous system. All I could do was stare as the ghost walked in through the window – yes, walked. It had feet, even if they were on the ceiling.

It continued over until its face was suspended in front of mine, its nose a mere ten centimeters away. I shook, a cold sweat pouring down my forehead. "Mister...Mr. Ghost, I think

you've got the wrong person. I can't have done anything to hurt you, I'm just a high-school weakling. And I've been a bit bad now and then, but nothing to deserve this...

"If...if you want money, I'll burn ghost money for you, I promise. I'll burn paper mansions and paper Mercedes....Oh, that other ghost...Was he a friend of yours? I didn't know sunlight would do that.... I really didn't mean to destroy him, to prevent him ever rising again...."

I went on for some time, my hands pressed together in supplication, all but kneeling. Would my obvious sincerity persuade him?

Suddenly his mouth opened and I braced myself for what was sure to be a deathly howl emanating from the very bowels of hell.

"Why would I be scared of sunlight?" he asked. "I'm not a vampire. Don't you know anything?"

And to be honest his voice was actually entirely...normal. Which was so unexpected I stood there in shock, unable to respond. He sounded like he had dropped in for a casual chat. No dragged out vowels, no terror-inspiring tones. A little patronizing, maybe.

He became impatient with my silence and sneered as he swung down from the ceiling, landing in front of me.

Still too scared to move, I could only gaze on as he leaned closer.

"Sorry if I scared you earlier. I just had to see if you were up to it." He stared at me a while longer. "Haven't you realized that other one was me as well?"

Well, of course I hadn't recognized him when he was upside down! But this was even more terrifying. I thought I'd destroyed him!

Seeing how bewildered I was, the ghost went on: "That was just to see how brave you are. And you were as much of a coward as I'd expected, of course. Which could be a problem."

He continued, muttering to himself, indifferent to my confusion: "But I need a favor, and I can't take no for an answer."

He waved a hand in front of my face. When I didn't react, he started to extend a single finger towards me. "Why so quiet? Scared stupid?"

As his finger approached and made to poke into my shoulder, I...well, I drooled a bit and then...and then I don't remember.

The next thing I do remember was a splitting headache and wondering where I was as I forced my eyes open.

It all came back in a rush and I leapt out of bed. Wait, why was I in bed? Shouldn't I have been inelegantly sprawled out on the floor?

"You're awake?"

The voice came from behind me.

My hair stood up and gooseflesh crawled its way from toes to head. It wasn't a dream; the ghost was still here. I turned around. Nothing. Not even the shadow of a ghost.

"I'm here," the voice said.

I looked at where the voice seemed to be coming from but there was nothing.

"You can't see me now. It'll be easier to talk without you fainting." He was sounding somewhat impatient. "Anyway, now that we've got to know each other, let's talk business."

I took a deep breath. He was right though, it was less scary when he was invisible.

I still stammered as I spoke. "May I ask, Mr. Ghost, what you might want with little old me? If it's money, I promise I'll burn a whole truckload of ghost money for you. You can go back to wherever you should be and stop bothering me. I have a weak heart, I really shouldn't be getting scared like this."

Begging like this was demeaning, but this was no time to worry about self-respect. Survival was more important.

He refused immediately. "I don't want money. It's not worth anything outside the Underworld, so it's no use to me."

I pressed my palms together and implored empty space: "Mr. Ghost, perhaps your family could help you with whatever the problem is? I'm just an ordinary student, I can't do anything for you. Or maybe I could introduce you to a psychic or a spiritualist or something? I'm sure they could help with whatever you need."

"No," the ghost sighed, resigned. "It's all very unfortunate. You wouldn't have been my first choice, and it's no job for a hopeless high-schooler like you. But as things stand, you're the only person who can see me."

Who was he trying to fool!? If nobody could see ghosts, where would all those ghost stories and all those spooky photos come from. Were they made up!?

I masked my anger with a laugh. "That can't be true, I know lots of people who've seen ghosts. Dozens of them, a hundred even. You just need to find people with the right Stems and Branches."

"No. You're not much good, but I don't have time to be picky. If any better options turn up I'll give them full consideration."

He was getting angry, so it seemed best to humor him. "Yes, of course, I understand. So, if I might ask, Mr. Ghost, what exactly is it that you'd like me to help with?"

"I need you to help me find someone."

"Who might that be? Someone you owe an unpaid debt of gratitude to? A lover you didn't get to say goodbye to?"

"My murderer."

"What!?"

"I was murdered, and the murderer still hasn't been caught." He sounded upset. "But I do know some things the police don't. And that's why I need you."

He wanted me to find a murderer? This was starting to sound dangerous. What had I done to be the only one unlucky enough to see him? And how might he punish me if I didn't help? What if he decided to have me take his place as a ghost so he could rest in peace?

"I understand your concerns." He was grave now. "I just need you to look a few things up and then report back to the police. You won't be in any real danger."

Oh, really?

He went on, voice flat. "I'm the one hard-done by here, only able to be seen by...the likes of you. But this is my fate, and I must accept it."

Damn him! Asking favors of me and acting like he's the one suffering. I wasn't happy about this. "So how do you know nobody else can see you? Maybe they saw you and just didn't scream."

Or do you make a point of trying to scare everyone?"

There was a long silence, so long I thought maybe he'd been reincarnated off somewhere else, before he spoke again. "I was passing your school yesterday and I got this strange feeling – I just knew the person I needed was inside. So I followed that sensation inside and saw you coming out of class. And to show my good intentions I helped you out with that problem you had, and tested whether or not you could sense me."

It took me a moment, but I realized he must have been the one who passed me the toilet roll in the cubicle yesterday! And he was calling *me* hopeless? I was going to have to find a really powerful exorcist and make sure this guy never got reincarnated.

"I'm not going to scare you into cooperating with threats. That's not me, and anyway it's against the rules. I'd be sent to the Eighteenth Hell if I killed an innocent. I only came back to find my murderer. I have no interest whatsoever in hurting you."

Hearing all that, I breathed a sigh of relief. "Well if you can't do anything to me, why should I do anything for you?" I laughed. "I quit."

I stretched out on the bed. He was so much stupider than I'd thought. He wasn't going to scare anyone showing his cards like that.

And then a hand landed on the back of my head and sent a chill washing over me. I shrank from his touch as the cold reached into my bones.

"I must ask you to reconsider. I'm not used to rejection."

"Find someone else. I'll burn some ghost money for you. You leave me alone."

I pushed his hand away as I spoke and felt as if I'd been plunged into freezing water.

I stared at my hand until the cold retreated to my fingertips. I'd touched him. I really had touched a ghost who, logically, should not have had any physical presence.

I turned slowly to see his face close behind me, a mirthless smile on his lips. "This is how it is," he said. "If you don't agree, I've got ways of dealing with you."

The sudden sight of his face left me terrified once more.

He walked away from the bed and sat on the sofa opposite, folding his hands in his lap. He looked somber, his face no longer the terrifying visage of earlier.

"I don't like to manipulate people, to threaten or bully them. So I honestly do hope you agree."

I sat up and looked at him – he was almost translucent. But when not speaking, he looked almost like a real person.

I took a closer look. He was actually quite good-looking. No rotting skin or pointed teeth; no bulging eyes or twisted mouth. A typically handsome face: melancholy eyes, strong nose, full lips. The type women go for, from ages eighteen to eighty.

He was tall as well. Wearing a well-pressed suit. A successful businessman, perhaps. I already hated him.

It was a long time before I spoke. "How come you can touch me? I thought you could pass through walls and all that?"

Sat there on the sofa, legs crossed, he explained: "I haven't been able to touch anyone before, it's only happened with you. I can only touch people who can see me...and that's you. And I can touch anything inanimate."

I thought it through. He could touch me, but he couldn't hurt me. And so, I really didn't have anything to worry about.

"Like I care who you can touch!" I snarled. "Get out, I'm getting bored of this!"

"You're really not going to help me?" he asked, cold.

"Go ask the devil for help!"

"Oh," he sighed. "In that case, I'll have to haunt you."

"What are you going to do? Throw vases about and all that?" I mocked.

"That's one option, but a little old-fashioned. I don't think so. You'll just have to wait and see," he told me, disappointed.