

Tribocharge: *A type of contact electrification in which an object becomes electrically charged after coming into contact with another object.*

Lightning bolts wounded beautifully, but they healed ugly.

Peter Borley knew this. He saw it a little more every day in his grandpa, Alexander, whose light dimmed just a bit more every morning as his tungsten veins reignited and his skin – pink and shiny, rippled from the current – showed through.

Poltergeists began life as one of nature's most fearsome forces and lived as great deadly vortexes, but as they aged, their essential psychokinetic energy would lessen in bounding and rebounding exponents of the speed of light. And their light would dim. And matter – scarred skin, breakable bone, elderly organs – would be created in its place. As a younger poltergeist rife with energy, Peter had no corporeal form, but moved as a weighty ghost: an electrical spirit held into shape by the earth's magnetic pull.

The first time Peter really recalled seeing human skin was on a television show; some horrible movie that should not have been on in a home with a toddler, but he had wandered into the living room and the television set turned on and he didn't know how to count, so he couldn't dictate the channel. Little Peter, only two years old, watched in terror as a black-robed and bearded Shaolin monk appeared only to tap an enemy warrior on the jugular with two gnarled fingers.

The armored enemy crumpled in a curling swirl of CGI graphics, and Peter sat frozen on his plastic chair, absolutely certain of only one thing as the cathode tubes in the TV exploded.

Poltergeists like him were right not to touch.

Ever.

Of course, as Peter aged and ventured out into the world of humans, he realized that the rest of society was bombarded by touch; handshakes, hugs, kisses.

On his first day of preschool, Peter was terrified by the way the other children clung to their parents' hands as water dripped out of their eyes. They were definitely alive, considering how much noise they were making, but Peter had no idea how that could possibly be.

Water was lethal... wasn't it?

The entire classroom had plunged into darkness when Miss Weir held her hand out towards Peter, a kind smile on her young face. He hid behind Alexander's legs and wailed until Miss Weir rushed down to the utilities room to check the fusebox.

When she returned, looking confused, she had no time to pay any mind to the little brown-haired boy sitting in the corner on the floor behind a tall Lego wall of his own making and wearing a plastic brace to which Alexander had fastened a note reading, "HEALING CLAVICLE FRACTURE. Please don't touch me!"

Because he was quiet, the other children quickly lost interest in Peter and he was left to watch the world rush by around him in a crush of connection. Preschool kicks and pokes developed into fist-bumps and

flirtation. Places where skin was revealed, skin met skin, in high-fives and shoulder-rubs and slow dances.

Peter wanted to understand skin more than he could express.

* * *

Angie Kesstler leaned forward in her seat and a little strip of brown peeked out at me from between the hem of her blue cotton shirt and her bottlecap belt.

Sitting in the desk next to mine, Sean Brambogue stretched out his tattooed arm and poked at the sliver of Angie's skin. She jolted away and then, inexplicably yet predictably, turned to smile at Sean.

She had a nice smile.

After she twisted back to look at the board again, pulling the hem of her blue shirt down over the top of her jeans so I couldn't see her skin anymore, Sean –my best friend – caught my eye and smirked.

Angie Kesstler, he mouthed. *Nice*.

Sean believed that I was jealous of the physical attention he received from girls... which he kindly recounted for me. In great detail. But... I wasn't jealous. Not in the way he assumed I was, anyway.

I just wanted a girl to want to talk to me *without* trying to touch me.

It puzzled me every time I saw an incongruity in the way people reacted to touch. Angie had moved away from Sean's touch abruptly at first, the same way I had seen people pull their fingers from hot pans or sharp knives... but then she smiled!

She was happy. Even though she reacted as in pain, she liked that Sean touched her. After four years of witnessing dodgeball, hair-pulling, shin-kicking, noogies, and swirlies, the revelation that humans required touch – brought by fourth grade's torture chamber of "Our Changing Bodies" – was... shocking.

No pun intended.

I barely had time to process that information before the fifth grade Sock Hop, twelve invitations to dance that I turned down and Sean graciously accepted in my stead, and later, his lewd explanations of exactly what kinds of touch he was looking forward to in the years to come.

All extraneous issues regarding touch aside, I still wasn't sure I'd been ready for that.

The bell rang and suddenly Physics was over. I couldn't say I was disappointed – I had never found physics to be all that relevant. Life as a poltergeist violated plenty of its so-called laws. In physics, potential energy is like stored energy, like a ball on the verge of rolling down a hill. The greater the potential energy stored, the greater the expenditure of kinetic energy. But in my world, potential energy was the same as potentiality, desiring and waiting for one huge thing, and all of that pent-up need converted into a steady thrum of psychokinetic energy. As potentiality was achieved, the psychokinetic energy lessened.

Objects stopped flying around rooms, fabrics stopped charging with static electricity, compasses slowly migrated back North.

Bones formed first, then organs, and skin.

And in the very last moment alive, poltergeists were completely content and 100% human. I knew that I would fizzle out in my own stable, normal home, with someone finally holding my hand.

* * *

Poltergeists, as a species, desire unlimited things: justice, absolution, normalcy, love. But each poltergeist individually desires but one unattainable ideal, and Peter Borley desired connection.

When Peter was five years old, he found a small turtle scooting its way across the rocks of the overgrown garden at the far boundary of his family's property.

Fascinated, Peter sat down on the dry grass and watched the turtle's meanderings for nearly three hours, because Peter was a quiet, patient boy – he had to be, to keep away from the roughhousing play of the other children his age. Every day at recess, he sat in the corner of the blacktop, rubber soles of his trainers firmly grounded against the dirt, reading books and pretending not to notice the sounds of tag and Power Rangers and even midweek games of house.

He was the only kid exempt from cootie shots every Wedding Wednesday.

As he watched the turtle, he became fascinated by the way its wrinkled green feet moved, like it was marching, and the fans of yellow –shaped like lightning – across its dark, ridged shell. It had a wise, silly face that made Peter giggle, and that glee felt good.

The turtle moved so slowly and cautiously, like he did, examining each sunbaked stone before stepping stolidly onto its surface. Peter hunkered down into the dry dirt, feeling pleasantly calm and grounded, set his elbows on his knees, and rested his chin in his hands, watching the turtle walk so clearly and with such little purpose.

As the sun reached the high point in the sky, Peter heard rustling behind him and glanced over his shoulder to his grandfather, who crouched down beside him.

"Hi, Grampop."

"That's a sweet little turtle," he observed.

Peter nodded. "It's my turtle. I'm going to live out here."

Grampop nodded sagely. "What happens when it rains?"

Peter's brow furrowed. "Do you know the forecast?"

Grampop laughed. The turtle turned its head to look at the pair curiously, or as curiously as turtles are wont to be. "It's gotta rain sometime. I can't let you stay outside in the rain. You know what'd happen, right?"

Peter sighed and slouched further. "I'd short out."

Grampop – Alexander Thornton – smiled down at his sulking 'grandson,' finding the strong resemblance that Peter had to his mother to be precious and unprecedented, given that poltergeists' family groups were not really determined genealogically.

"Well," he said, "That would just be a tragedy. What would I do without you to keep me on my toes?"

Peter smirked a glowing, yellow-white halo. "I am pretty important."

Alexander chuckled. "That you are."

He paused, watching the turtle sniff at a blade of grass curiously. Peter looked delighted by the contemplative nature of the turtle, and Alexander felt a few more electrons near his palm transmute quietly into raw skin, because all Alexander desired was to shoulder the responsibility of influence, to be the grandfather he posed as in their pseudofamily.

They were quiet for a long while. Peter watched the turtle with single-minded intensity, his small brow furrowed and periodic puffs of light sprouting from his ears, while Alexander just enjoyed being outdoors on a dry, warm day.

Suddenly, Peter scrambled to his feet and ran into their house. A few minutes later, he was dragging a plastic end table twice his size across the lawn, settling it back near the thicket where he found Pokey Charles.

Peter sat down beneath the table and beamed out at his grandfather, a happy orange fluorescence illuminating the space below the table and casting weird shadows around the little garden. "Grampop! Now I have a house to protect me from the rain. I can keep my turtle!"

Alexander shook his head sadly. "I'm afraid that won't work. What will happen when the ground turns to mud?"

"Grampop," Peter scowled. "I want to keep Pokey Charles."

Alexander chuckled. "Is that what you named your turtle?"

Peter nodded, his eyes still glued to the deliberate movement of the curious turtle.

"Why Pokey Charles?"

Peter shot his grandfather the sort of withering, disparaging look that only a child can manage. "Because slow-pokey. And his name is Charles."

Alexander considered this and nodded seriously, amazed at the small moments that Peter seemed to be nothing more than any other fallible human child, curious and self-assured and petulant.

“That’s a mighty fine reason,” agreed Alexander, and Peter beamed, sending out little furls of bright white light over the tops of the dead grass, singeing it black.

* * *

The bell rang and everyone jostled out of the Physics classroom while I stayed seated at my desk, rubber soles planted firmly on the ground, waiting for the traffic jam at the door to dissipate. High school sucked.

Finally the room had cleared enough for me to leave, and I found Sean leaning against the water fountain, talking to Angie. He splashed her with the little jet of water, and I wondered if she even noticed the translucent webbing between his fingers when the water hit them.

I never understood how he managed to be so cavalier around humans when he was an *adaro*, but he said that they had a high propensity for the willing suspension of disbelief. They would just as soon decide to think that he hadn’t sprouted gills to win the meet or that his skin wasn’t scaly on rainy days than admit that it was true.

“See you Friday,” said Angie, smiling at him.

Then, as she walked away, she touched his back, undulating her fingers across it like she was playing piano. On television people always laughed at this, but I didn’t see what was so funny.

What if when Angie touched Sean, she had killed him?

What if she incapacitated his Golgi tendon and caused a claspknife muscle spasm? Or spinal-cord injury? I had seen enough episodes of *Law & Order: SVU* to be pretty damn sure that humans killed each other – a lot – using only their hands. I couldn’t fathom how people so freely allowed others to touch them, knowing that death could be so imminent.

Wasn’t Sean worried about his spine? Spines were very important in skeletal beings, even those with cartilaginous frames like him.

“And I got Angie’s phone number,” Sean crowed, falling into step beside me as we left Dieppstromer’s classroom. His arm was three-point-five inches away from mine. He glanced at me. “And chillax man, she just tickled me. We talked about this. It’s lethal like, 0.042% of the time or something.”

“I just don’t see what’s so funny.”

Sean rolled his eyes. A tall guy with black glasses knocked into his elbow and Sean didn’t even flinch.

I sighed wanly. “So you finally got Angie?” *She hadn’t smiled at me since sixth grade when she asked me to dance and I had to say no.* She hadn’t taken Sean up on his offer then, either, back then. “Maybe you should take her swimming.”

Sean took a step back. Behind him, a pair of talking upperclassmen swerved to avoid a collision with him as he moved without looking, and I winced, imagining the bruises that would form if they'd run into each other.

"Hey, yo, ouch." Sean put up his hands in surrender.

One of his teammates in a letterman's jacket misinterpreted the action and slapped his palm in a 'high-five' as he passed. Sean turned to punch his fist.

Punching faces was a sign of hatred. Punching fists was a sign of friendship. Corporeal beings were freaking weird.

Once Travis was gone, Sean turned back to me. "What's eating you now? You want Angie's phone number?" His generally boisterous demeanor softened. "You could take her bowling or something. Nobody wants to touch anyone bowling, there's always crap in the ball and it's weird wearing someone else's stanko shoes."

My fingers flexed as I lost control of some electrons in my annoyance. I heard the telltale exclamation of "Ouch!" from all along the hall; all of my classmates' metal lockers shocked them at once.

Did I want Angie Kesstler's phone number?

Was I jealous that Sean would, undoubtedly, date her and he'd take her to CinePlace Twelve to sit in the back row like he did with every girl he dates. He'd sweet-talk her into putting her hand on it – and for Koenig's sake the guy had brothertrucking webbed fingers and toes, and he *still* got girls like Angie Kesstler to touch him. And he got to touch them. He got to want to touch them. Understand wanting to touch them.

He hurt Angie Kesstler with his finger, and she jumped to get away.

"No," I mumbled, scuffing a foot along the floor and feeling the sparks I dredged up become swallowed by my wrecked rubber soles. "I don't want her phone number."

The bell marking a five-minute warning sounded.

"I got a copy of Dragstrip Riot," I said. Sean and I shared an affinity for campy old movies. We'd already watched all of the B-grade horror films we could find, so biker films were the new thing. Sean really wanted a motorcycle.

Grampop said that a Sean needed a Harley like a fish needed a bicycle, and I pointed out that was basically the same thing. I think Sean almost punched me when I said it, but he stopped himself at the last second.

"Fay Wray," Sean said appreciatively. "Nice."

I felt my wattage go down as I relaxed. I understood that in physical beings, this was called "blood pressure," which was kinda nasty. I was barely OK with people having skin; I really didn't want to deal with anything underneath it.

Sean cleared his throat. "But I'm all booked up today. Regionals this afternoon," Sean said cautiously. "I asked coach to call Madison about the bleachers... they're aluminum. Sorry, man." He paused. "You... want me to, like... call you after?"

I sighed. "If you win."

Sean laughed. "I got gills, what are the odds I won't win?"

"I still think that's cheating," I grumbled, but I wanted to smile.

"Oh, yeah, and blowing up the projector so we didn't have to learn the life cycle of frogs last year wasn't cheating?"

I smirked. "Well, I thought you'd appreciate my elimination of amphibio-exploitation from the syllabus. I know how up-in-fins you can get about starving tadpoles."

Sean's eyes narrowed. "Sometimes, dude, I really, really wish I could hit you."

A girl with long blonde hair passed by an inch too close and her ponytail frizzed up into a halo around her head.

"I know."

* * *

Peter stared at Pokey Charles, examining the turtle's big, golden-brown eyes as its yellow neck stretched around to stare back at him.

"How can I keep my turtle if I can't live out here?" Peter asked Alexander, restless again on the dry brittle grass. He frowned. "Could Pokey Charles be my dog?"

Alexander was puzzled. "Pokey Charles is a turtle, Peter."

Peter looked withering. "I know. On TV sometimes people bring a animal into the house and it lives in the house and they call it their dog. Could Pokey Charles be my dog?"

Alexander laughed heartily and felt the seam of his fresh skin sizzle against the strength of his glow. "Those are called 'pets,'" Alexander explained, ignoring the fact that 'pet' was in fact the verb for the physical comfort of cuddling the animals, of forging a contact. "The animal you're seeing then is a dog. But if you want to keep Pokey Charles..." Peter held his breath. "Then you can."

A spindly anvil crawler of lightning stretched in a ribbon from the crown of Peter's head up into the yard, catching the nearest oak tree and splitting a branch neatly.

Alexander looked at him sternly. "You need to be more careful."

"Yes, sir!" squeaked Peter, though neither the smile nor the yellow halo of light left his face.

Alexander sighed. "You're going to need to set him up for the night in a shoebox, and I can take you to the store tomorrow to buy a terrarium, which is like a little turtle house."

Oblivious, Pokey Charles stepped off the edge of his sunning rock and into the puddle-like pool of water at the very edge of the poltergeists' property.

Peter froze. Alexander knew that if he had a heart, it would be breaking for the small boy.

Then Peter scrambled to his feet, a look of determination blazing in his charcoal-gray eyes. "I have to go talk to somebody. You stay here and watch Pokey Charles, I'll be back really soon."

* * *

Around ten o'clock that night, Sean knocked at my door. I took it as a sign that he'd be sleeping on our couch again, but there was no telling. His meet ended four hours ago, so I knew before hearing a word that he'd won and as usual, the team had gone out somewhere in celebration to eat and be rowdy and annoy everyone.

"Open," I called, fishing around in my popcorn bag and popping the damn duds at the bottom of the bag. I didn't need to eat, given that I didn't quite run a Krebs' cycle, but I could eat if I felt like it and generally felt that I must have a pretty kickass metabolism to expend the energy I did. I felt justified always eating extra salty popcorn while watching movies and whole bags of chocolate chips. I doubted there were any fat poltergeists.

Sean let himself in and glanced at the TV. "Dragstrip Riot?"

"Nah, The Wild Angels was on TCM."

He nodded appreciatively. "Nancy Sinatra. Nice."

I snorted and a popcorn kernel broke free of the bag to skitter across the floor. "That's just your default answer if I say the name of any female, ever. Mother Theresa? *Nice*. Queen Elizabeth? *Nice*. Maman Brigitte –"

Sean tossed one of his rubber athletic shoes at me. "Not so nice, you prick."

I ducked, grinning, and pointed to the medal, glinting in the TV's glare, that hung around his neck. "So you won. Congratulations, man." I smiled wistfully. "I wish I coulda been there."

There was a pause broken only by a commercial for five-dollar sandwiches.

"Hey, if all my medals are actually made of metal, could you, like, melt them down into bullion so I could buy a Ducati?"

"I thought you wanted a Harley."

"Dude, I have about a million medals. If they're actually worth anything, I'm gonna go bigger than a Harley."

I shook my head. "I'm pretty sure that they're all just shiny plastic. It's not the Olympics."

Sean grinned widely, taking up a seat on one of the chairs facing the television. All of our furniture was actually patio furniture, made of slatted white plastic, but Sean never complained about it. "It's not the Olympics yet, my friend. Yet."

I rolled my eyes and focused on the TV set to turn the volume up a few milliamps. "When they do your eligibility physical, they're bound to question the gills and flippers. I hope you know that."

"Whatever dude, you probably fart lightning."

Silence.

Then I threw his shoe right back at him.

With only fifteen minutes left in *The Wild Ones*, Grampop came shuffling in from his study. He'd recently developed bones in his knees, but the cartilage had yet to catch up.

"Oh, I thought I heard you," he said, acknowledging Sean. "Nice medal. Congratulations."

"Thanks, Gramps," Sean said, not looking up from Nancy Sinatra (*nice*). "I'm just gonna crash on the couch."

Grampop shook his head. "Be nice if either of you asked permission for anything anymore."

I rolled my eyes and the channel skipped up one to loud, static snow.

"Hey!"

"Sorry," I said. Then I looked at Grampop again. "Have you ever not let Sean stay over?"

"Nope," he admitted affably. "But it'd still be nice if you asked once in a while."

A commercial was playing again and Sean turned to look up at Grampop with a facetiously pleading expression. "Alright, Grampop, may I crash on your couch?"

Grampop shook his head. "What would you do if I said no?"

Sean shrugged and turned his focus back to the television set. "Probably just stay anyway, at this point."

Grampop laughed and began to shuffle towards the stairs. "I'm going to bed. Make sure you feed Charles before you go to sleep."

"Pokey Charles," Sean and I corrected at the same time. "And I won't forget."

Once the movie ended, Sean stood up and yawned, rolling his head on his neck. I heard the sound of synovial fluid cavitation in his cervical vertebrae, and I wrinkled my nose, trying not to spark the TV back on... but it was just such a gross sound.

“Alright,” he said, as though he’d just psyched himself up to win another race. “Let’s go feed that smelly turtle.”

“He’s not smelly,” I argued pointlessly. “He’s got a good filter. That swamp smell went away like, a year ago.”

“Maybe to you,” Sean mumbled, taking the stairs two at a time.

When we got to my room, he crossed to the table where I kept the 25-gallon tank that housed Pokey Charles.

“Hey little dude,” he greeted the turtle who still – after nine years – retracted swiftly into his shell at the sight of Sean. Then he tossed me the pair of HAZMAT-ready rubber gloves that hung on a hook beside the table. “Let’s get this show on the road, I’m beat.”

I pulled on the heavy gloves as Sean’s webbed hand fished Pokey Charles out of the tank. He patted him down carefully with a terrycloth rag, scrubbed his shell with a toothbrush, and put him down on the desk, where I picked him up, huge yellow gloves insulating my hands.

Pokey Charles was so small and the gloves were so thick that I couldn’t feel him at all – but he was there.

“Hey, P.C.,” I said as Sean cleaned uneaten lettuce out of the filter and added clean water.

Pokey Charles tentatively peeped his head out from his shell. His glittering gold eyes met mine, and I grinned.

“So I had this thought earlier – ”

“Impressive, let me call the paper.”

“Shut up,” Sean said amiably. “Anyway, I had a thought while I was at the meet. Coach was talking on the way down about how it sucks that all the yearbook photos are just of me standing around with my gold medals – ”

“Your life must be so hard.”

“Will you stop interrupting? Anyway, so I was thinking, like, that there should be some action shots, right? And whoever took them would have to be watching from like, somewhere that isn’t sitting on the bleachers. So then I was thinking...” he paused and motioned for me to put Pokey Charles back down on the desk so he could be transferred to the tank again. “I was thinking that you could do it, and then you could come see my meets. And we could like, hang out on the bus. And stuff.”

I watched Pokey Charles sink to the bottom of his tank as he refused to come out of his shell until Sean’s webbed hand retreated.

“What if I get splashed?”

Sean shrugged. “Just stay back from the water, wear rubber soles... and cameras flash. You can pretend the light was the flash.” He postured a little. “I personally think that it’s a pretty kickass plan.”

I nodded. Pokey Charles finally emerged from his shell and started to swim frantically around the tank, making up for lost time. “I think I agree.”

Sean grinned and we headed back down towards to TV. “You know me. I just wanna help.”

* * *

Nearly half an hour later, Alexander heard not one, but two small voices carrying into the thicket in his backyard.

“You promise you won’t eat it?” Peter was asking someone, sounding very suspicious.

Alexander turned to see Peter beckoning another small boy forward. While Peter was fair and brunet and skinny, the boy following him across the lawn was stockier and had dark cinnamon skin and a mess of curly dark brown hair. He had goldenrod yellow eyes set into his round face, and Alexander chuckled softly to himself at Peter’s logic.

Need someone to go into the water to get your turtle? Find the neighborhood adaro.

“Yeah, I promise,” the little adaro said. “Turtles are too much work, with the shell and everything. I don’t want to eat it, I swear. Not if it’s your pet.”

Peter stopped walking at the edge of the yard near the spongy water. He gave the other little boy a hard look. “OK. Well, Pokey Charles fell in there.” He pointed to the water, then seemed to remember suddenly that Alexander was still seated on the dirt, keeping watch. “Oh, this is just my Grampop,” he explained, as though the boy had asked. “Grampop, this is Sean. He’s in my class. He’s good with water.”

Alexander smiled. “Nice to meet you, Sean.”

Sean grinned and stuck out his hand. “Nice to meet you, Grampop.” He waited for a moment, then retracted his hand, scrubbing it through his hair. “I guess you’re a poltergeist, too, huh?”

“That I am.”

“That’s pretty cool,” Sean said, nodding. Then he moved past it, the way a kindergartener does. “Is Pokey Charles still in the puddle?”

“Yes,” reported Peter. “He fell in the water.”

Sean laughed, walking up to the edge of the small pool and reaching towards the water’s clear, shallow surface. “He didn’t fall in, turtles like the water.”

The moment his fingers dipped below the surface, thin brown webbing became visible between his fingers and his skin took on the roughly shimmering look of scales. Pokey Charles was plainly terrified, and swam surprisingly agilely in the opposite direction, but there wasn't far to go and Sean scooped him up.

"You got him!" cheered Peter, jumping from one foot to the other and sparking small beads of light like an earthbound Chinese rocket. "Is he OK?"

"I'm sure he's just fine," Alexander said. "Sean was right; turtles need water to live."

"Yeah," Sean said, holding Pokey Charles close to his yellow eyes, staring down the smaller reptile. Pokey Charles retracted into his shell like a shot, perfectly round and still in the little boy's drying hand. "How are you gonna take care of him if you can't clean his terrarium and feed him and stuff?"

Peter's brow furrowed and the shower of golden sparks dimmed, fading into a low glow of burnished red. "I don't know. Do turtles need to eat?"

"Yes," said Alexander, watching the exchange carefully.

"If you want," Sean said timidly, "I could help."