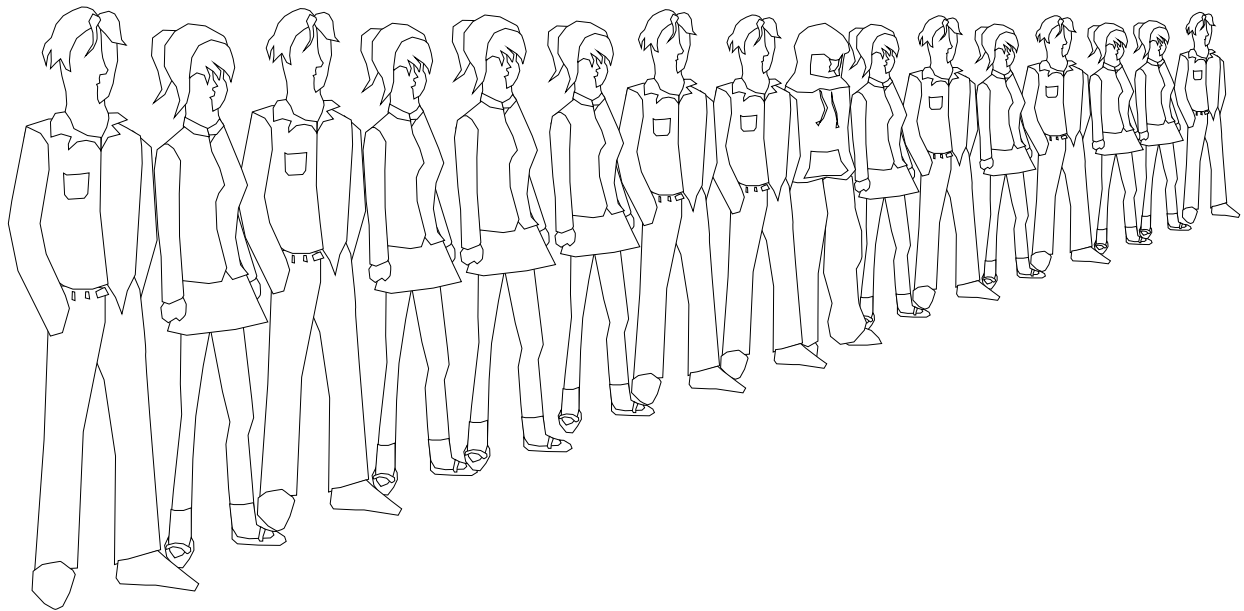


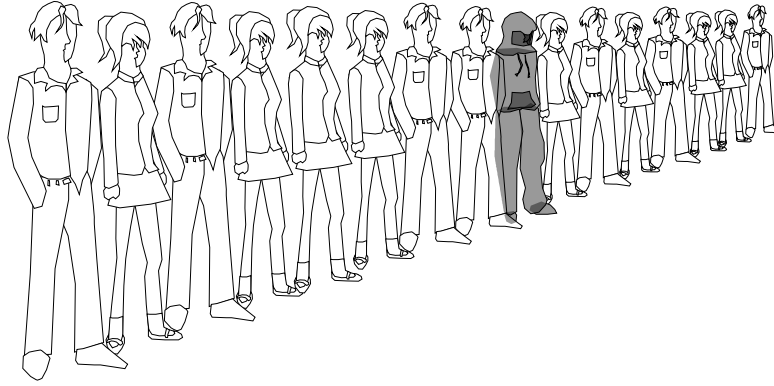
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thief of ghosts: a song of life  
— A COLLECTION OF VIGNETTES —

by  
yousefamustafa  
[pinkbluebibliofreak]



“thief of ghosts: a song of life”  
a collection of vignettes

by  
pinkbluebibliofreak  
“yousefamustafa”

"Vignettes, pronounced vin-yets, are short stories that form a whole picture. They could be read individually, but a sharp eye could establish a link between them."

- a person of quality,  
perhaps Hulga Hofstra

## a prologue to life

It was a hued and highlighted orange afternoon, so bright, it lit up the empty classrooms. All the students had gone home, but two students remained.

'Can I share with you a secret?'

'.. Sure, I suppose,' he hesitated as he gave his answer, 'but why me? We've never even talked before, just attend class together.'

'It's because .. I've never really had a friend. No one really talks to me and I thought since you're also alone ...'

'...'

'Anyways, so can I tell you my secret?'

He smiled and replied, 'sure. You can trust me.'

'I'm a time traveler.'

'Yeah right.'

'Alright, To prove it, I will take you ten years into the future, okay?'

'... I dunno .. I kinda have this test to study to ...'

'What a lame-ass excuse! Live a little! Where's your passion for experience? It's not every day a time traveler offers you a trip!' Then, after winking at him, the time traveler added: 'Besides, I could bring you back sometime before today so you could have more time to study.'

'Well .. I suppose that's alright,' he replied in his hesitated voice.

Seating him on a chair, the time traveler stood behind him and

placed both hands on his shoulders. Then, they waited. They waited for about a minute in that awkward position. Bored, the student opened his mouth.

'Ah .. I -'

'We're here.'

'Yeah, I know.'

'No, I mean we've arrived at our destination.'

'What?'

The time traveler remained still, awaiting him to realize the truth.

'You mean we just traveled through time?' He replied in a cynical tone.

'Yes.'

'But we didn't even move!'

'In space? No, it's true, we didn't. But in time, we have.'

'Yeah right.'

'I'll prove it to you. Shut your eyes for a minute.'

'Yeah right,' he repeated.

'I wanna show you something, in fact, it could very well be the best lesson you could ever learn, a secret, no, the secret - the secret of life. But I can't show you anything if you're eyes are open. You can open them again, but only when I say so.'

'Okay, fine.'

'But you can't open your eyes until I say so,' the time traveler repeated the warning.

'Okay, okay, just do it already.'

With his eyes shut, he waited for over three minutes. Each time he wanted to interrupt, he didn't. He believed his colleague. However, boredom soon struck. He started calling out his classmate's name.

No reply.

With the passing of another minute, he opened his eyes and looked around.

The time traveler was gone.

He noticed that his own backpack had disappeared as well.

His colleague had stolen his notebooks.

1.  
14<sup>th</sup> of February, 2008

'Man! Look at those two. They make me wanna puke.'

'You sound jealous.'

'You kidding, right? Of them? Man, I can get any honey I want.'

'You still sound jealous,' he insisted with a rising smirk.

'Man, shut up.'

He did, but only in words. His smirk went on living.

As one student managed to annoy his friend, the two passing couple left the school grounds and off into the streets. They were, in fact, madly in-love with each other. Their public display of affection stated this fact clearly. When they were ogling each other smilingly, the 16 year-old schoolboy had his arm wrapped around the 15 year-old schoolgirl's neck. No one has seen love of this scale. They enrolled in the same classes together, ate at the cafeteria together, and arrived then left school together. They became the gossip of everyone in school, students and teachers alike. No one had seen this kind of love before.

'My appointment with my accountant is within twenty minutes,' he reminded her - beaming out of love and affection towards her - as he looked her in the eyes and crossed the streets simultaneously.

'And I already told you, silly, I'm coming with you,' she replied as she clung on his arm in the way he loved, gazing right back into his eyes as he did hers.

'But it's a twenty minutes walk from here,' he argued softly and smilingly, 'I don't want you to get tired.'

'Then we'll get tired together.'

And that was the end of their argument. Talking about nothing and everything in a constructive way, the two reached the bank in no time and took a number. Sitting together on the waiting bench, a hooded person in a dark disguise came storming in. Drawing out a handgun, he started shifting its aim from one head to another, then defined the episode with a cliché.

'Yo, this is a stick up - don't nobody move!'

All complied and did not move a bit, only trembling in their places. The two couples, like everyone else, shook. The way how they clung onto each other attracted the robber to them.

'What do we have here? A couple of love birds?' He commented with a smirk across his face as he waved his gun at them.

The robber eyeballed the schoolboy as if he expected an answer from him. The boy remained intact with his girl. The robber stepped

closer towards the boy. By now the couple's fear had drove them to quiver as if the temperature of the lobby had fallen to subzero.

'You deaf, boy?' The robber shouted in his face. 'I said, do you love her?'

'Yes,' he replied shiveringly.

'That's a load of bull,' he announced. Standing a foot away from the boy's quaking face, he elaborated: 'Love's bull. You think it's nice to be in-love, so you've fabricated this ..' he paused for a second as he searched for the right words, 'illusion of being in-love so you can tell yourself that you're happy.'

'If you say so,' the boy replied, unconvinced of what he had just been told, but not wanting to argue. He just wanted the hoodlum to stop this conversation.

'But it ain't real. It's not going to last either.'

'I'm sorry you think that way.'

Hearing his response, the robber smirked then pointed the gun at the boy's forehead.

'Do you love her?'

'.. ye-' he replied whisperingly.

'I said do you love her?' He shouted.

'Yes!' He shouted back.

'Enough to die for her?'

The boy was silent.

'What if I said you could walk out of here. Untouched. The only thing you have to do is watch me put a bullet through her skull. What will it be? You, or her.'

'Take me,' the boy whispered again.

Seeing the robber squeeze on the trigger a little, the boy realized the realness of the moment and shouted out: 'No! Take her! Please .. I don't wanna die.'

The robber, smirking, removed his piece. Seeing that he got his message delivered, he stepped back.

'Do I hear police car sirens coming from a distance?' The hoodlum lied lousily, and obvious to some extent, 'well, gotta run,' he said to everyone as he fled the scene without taking any money, as if teaching the schoolboy this lesson of choice was the main purpose of this act.

Eventually the police did arrive. After a short inquiry, everyone was allowed to leave the premise. For the couple, they found it hard to do so jointly as they have always done. In fact, they found difficulty in looking at each other let alone hold arms. They stood at opposite sides in front of that bank. They stood in the dying orange afternoon, regretting that they had lived to see this day.

2.  
14<sup>th</sup> of October, 2011

'Hey dude!' He greeted excitedly.

'Hey dude.' He replied tediously.

'Where've you been today? I've been looking all over for you -'

'Not at school,' he replied interruptingly.

'- First I went to the bio-lab, and you weren't there. Then I tried the cafeteria, and you also weren't there -'

'Gee, that's a shocker, seeing that I skipped school and all.'

'- Then, I tried the library, and guess what, dude? You also weren't there!'

Sometimes he wondered if his roommate was really stupid, or just pretending to be this way to annoy him. He didn't reply. Instead, he continued reading his novel, almost as if he was trying to convey a message to his roommate. But he wasn't. He really was into what he had bought late last night. The book hadn't left his eyes since.

'So, whatchya doing?'

'Piloting a plane. What the 'F' does it look like I'm doing?'

Coming over, his roommate sat on the couch next to him and tilted his head to read the title of the book imprinted on the cover.

'"To Jack a Joe"?''

'Ah, man - this novel's totally out there. I know you don't read, but if you ever start, you gotta read this one.'

'Dude, you say that about all your books.'

'It's because I have an eye for good books.'

'Yeah? So what's this one about.'

'Don't know really. Haven't gotten that far ahead into it. So far, it's about this mugger who holds up an everyday guy in the streets at nighttime for some quick dough, right? And he's expecting to get something from him, except the funny thing is, it turns out this ordinary guy's poorer than the thief is.'

'Huh,' he said in comprehensive tone, taking in what his roommate had just rapidly said.

'Ah, man - I'm totally downsizing it. Dude, I'm not doing it justice, but believe me, it's better than what I just summarized.'

'Yeah? Then what happens?'

'Then they win a million dollars and get married.'

'Wow. Really?'

'No, man! How am I supposed to know? Why do you think I'm still reading it? I mean, hello?!'

'Alright, already. Jeez. Someone woke up on the grumpy side of

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the bed this morning.'

He whispered: 'Haven't went to bed last night,' but his roommate didn't hear him. He thought he had just ignored him since he went back to reading.

'Where are you going?' He asked as his friend headed towards the door.

'Out.'

'Out where?'

'I dunno, just out.'

'But you just came in.'

'Yeah, but that was me returning from school. Now I'm going out. You know, for fun.'

'Oh, okay. Have fun with the Asian girl.'

'I'm not going to hang out with the Asian girl.'

'That's what you always say before hanging out with the Asian girl.'

'I'm not hanging out with the Asian girl. I'm hanging out with friends.'

'Oh, okay then. Say hi for me to the Asian girl and her boyfriend.'

'Dude, I told you - And stop calling her the Asian girl!'

'Why, you do?'

'She just has freaky Mongolian eyes, that's all.'

'Whatever dude.'

Before he left the apartment again, he added: 'Oh yeah, just before I forget, Hulga Hofstra stopped by my table today at lunch. She said to tell you not to miss school again. Whatever that was about.'

After he left and shut the door, his roommate stopped reading, screwed his eyes towards the door with distorted thoughts, then shouted: 'Whoa- wait. Who's Hulga Hofstra?'

3.  
February the 31<sup>st</sup>

It was late after dark, perhaps at the infamous hour called midnight, that she was returning home from her part-time job as a waitress at a local diner. Her shift ended hours earlier, but on this day she felt too sad to care about returning to her lonely apartment on time, so she offered to stay and close up. Only when she noticed that the streets were practically empty did she feel the urge to rush back to her place. Walking down the streets, she felt like being tracked. She didn't have stalkers, but she was young and pretty, two qualities which are bound to get any girl into trouble. Tilting back her head in paranoia was the first time in which she caught a glimpse of a hooded person walking in her direction. The hooded person was completely covered by what he wore that none of his flesh was revealed, and it became impossible for her to distinguish his age, sex, race or any other distinction. Like most stalkers, she took some ridiculous turns just to test out her suspicions, and, to her fear, they were in place. The hooded person was following her.

Her second mistake was that she started running, because then the hoodlum started sprinting as well, and, even though she screamed, the hoodlum managed to reach her and snatch her off the main street and into an alleyway before anyone came to her rescue. Shoving her against the wall, the girl cried, knowing what the hoodlum wanted. While working at the dinner, she couldn't but overhear the news from the television. It went on and on about a rapist who's been going around and assaulting young women, especially schoolgirls like herself. All victims, she recalled the report, have yet to officially admit being raped, but from the trauma that is obvious in their appearance as well as their behavior, they are believed to have been raped. As she stood there, cornered, knowing that she would be scarred on this night, the hoodlum, after sizing her up, fled. She remained there alone, puzzled and confused and afraid to move. There were no police sirens, no interruption by bystanders, no external interference whatsoever.

'But then,' her mind ran, 'why didn't the hoodlum finish what he started? Why didn't he rape me? .. all his other victims were raped .. but not me .. is there something wrong with me?'

Sitting alone in the dark, she wasn't aware that she had started to slide into an horrifying episode. In fact, it would prove to be her worst nightmare in which her tormentor was a part of her. The more she thought, the more she fed it, the deeper she plunged into her own inner darkness.

24<sup>th</sup> of December, 2011

'I know, right?'

'Totally,' he replied.

'And then I told him "look, man, it's either this or that: you can't have it both ways." I was like, "dude, it's been three years already. If you want your sweet-cheeks back you gotta be a man. What's done is done, and there's no point in sobbing about the past. You gotta live the present".'

'That's deep, dude.'

'I know, right?'

'Totally,' he replied goofily.

'And then he said, in an all girly kind of a way, as if he's a gay dude who's in-love with this chick, "but how can I? After what happened? How can she ever look at me the same, knowing how limited my love is?".'

'Wow, this guy's a total chick.'

'Too much drama, right?'

'Totally. I know some chick who has more balls than this loser.'

'Hey! There are limits, you know. He might be somewhat of a softy, but he's my roommate.'

'You're the one who brought it up.'

'Ahh, just forget it,' he dropped the subject as he took a sip from his juice box.

'Anyways, applying red herring -'

'Dude, don't be such a dork and talk right. Say "changing the subject" or something. You don't have to show off with your rich vocab. I swear you're worst than my nerdy roommate!'

'Whatever. As I was saying, the other day when I was leaving school, you know, the day I left late because of detention, guess who I caught staying late after school.'

'Dude! Don't tell me -'

'Yup,' he replied. A smirk had made its way across his goofy face.

'Ah, man! That little twerp! He's probably staying in doing a little extra time so teachers would see him studying hard and give him extra marks or something. That little weasel!'

'I don't think he stayed for academic privileges.'

'Whattaya mean?'

'That's not all what I saw. Guess who else was in that room with him.'

'Who?'

'Hulga Hofstra.'

'Wait. Where have I heard that name before? Sounds familiar ..'

'Anyways, so I was like, what are they doing in there? All alone with no supervision?'

'.. Hulga Hofstra - what an ugly name.'

'You think so?'

'And you don't? And when I said ugly I mean make that double ugliness. I mean Hofstra's a pretty fucked up name, but Hulga? Why in the world would someone do that to their child?!'

'I suppose you have a point there.'

'But I suppose it's not all that bad. I mean, usually people grow up into their names, you know? But with her, she turned out alright. I mean, it could've been worse, right? With a name like that, she could've been ugly as a blobfish or something.'

'Dude!'

'What?'

'Don't remind me!'

'What?'

'I had a blobfish once.'

'You did not!'

'No, for real, bro.'

'Get out. You? Ate a blobfish?'

'It was a dare .. plus it was a free meal.'

'No such thing as a free meal, man.'

'I know, right? I mean I totally paid the price. Sat on the john for at least an hour.'

'Wicked!'

'Yup. Blobfishes'll do that to ya. Anyways, I gotta run.'

'What? Where? It's only five in the afternoon.'

'Yeah, I know, but I got a paper due tomorrow. Can't keep putting it off forever, right?'

'Suppose not. Guess I'll see you around, then?'

'You know it. And say hi to your girly roommate for me.'

'Hey!'

Satisfied with ending their chat with a quick tease, he rushed off out of the mall goofily. However, once out of sight, he reformed. He casted off his goofy smile and wore instead a darker face of a serious nature. Smirking sinisterly, he walked into the orange afternoon not to do his assignment as he told his friend, but to alter someone's perspective on life.

5.  
22<sup>nd</sup> of September, 2012

'Hey, what's this talk about the finals' striker? Have you heard about him?'

Wanting to learn, he asked the person whom he met recently. They weren't friends, and neither of them had the intention of becoming friends. But for now, this student had something he wanted. This student, on the other hand, had nothing to gain from answering his question or conversing with him, but thought it would amuse him to have this chat, so he smirked and talked. It was an orange afternoon.

'Yeah, the one who tricks naïve students into believing he's a time traveler only to steal their notebooks? Sure, who hasn't? He had become something of an urban legend around here. He got his name by being known to always strike when the finals are coming.'

'That's odd. Wonder why?'

'That's the mystery, my friend,' he said automatically, as if he used the term "friend" loosely.

'You know, I bet if he focuses all that energy into studying, he wouldn't need to steal a poor nerd's books.'

'Nah. I don't think it's about the books.'

'Oh?'

'Never mind. But I suppose it's true what they say, students would sooner get creative before getting their homework done.'

'What?!' He shrieked, 'who says that?'

'Everybody.'

'They do not! I've never heard anyone say that other than you.'

'Shows how much you keep your ears sharp. Bet you're gonna get conned by the finals' striker,' he predicted with a rising smirk.

'Yeah right.'

He looked him straight in his hesitant eyes, then, while smirking intensely, added: 'Bet you already have.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Don't you know? Even when a student gets conned by the finals' striker, there's no certain way of knowing who he is unless you've seen it happen. That's the beauty of it. The finals' striker tricks students individually so that he could do it over and over again and no one really knows who he is. Those who are victimized are too humiliated to admit that they have been conned, so they keep their mouths shut, and so, no one's been able to I.D. the finals' striker.'

'That's ridiculous.'

'Is it? Suppose so, but then again, so is the need of

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highschoolers to keep their school rep. I don't know, you tell me.'

'Wow. Seems like you really know a lot.'

'Really? I don't think so. It's not like I know the secret of life or anything,' he laughed. 'I'm just like everyone else; I'm just a highschooler trying to get by. Just using what I learned in highschool really. All I know is, that person's a genius.'

'Sounds like you admire him.'

'Only a fool wouldn't.'

'He's a thief! How could anyone respect that guy?!'

'Come now,' he replied calmly, smirking gently as if he knew a great secret, 'no need to get upset.'

'Because you're defending a criminal.'

'Criminal? Really? Nah! Criminal is such an ugly word. I mean he does return the notebooks eventually in tact and all, and in fact pays up rather generously, I mean with the morals he delivers. Well worth any book if you ask me. If I were to put a label on him, I would call him .. an artist. Like a musician, yes, what he does could be interpreted as musical - like in a melody, for example, what makes it greater than other pieces lies in its sadness. The sadder the tune, the greater the melody .. oh, sorry. Seems that my mind went off wandering. Never mind.'

'So .. this finals' striker .. could be anyone?'

'Anyone within the body of students, yes,' he replied with a sly tone while his smirk kept flashed intensely, as if he meant something in specific. The freshman's look grew odd as he stared at him. Understanding what his look meant, he hurried in adding: 'oh, don't worry, I'm not the finals' striker,' he replied in his smirk, as if what he said was suppose to be taken as the solemn truth - as if there was no doubt or error that could emit from his words. 'I know what you're thinking, what a likely thing to say, right? Well, I'll let you on a little scoop, since you're a freshmen and all: I think the real reason why every victim has seen the face of the finals' striker and kept silent about it is because they are too ashamed to come out and say that they've been conned by a girl.'

'A girl?'

'That's right.'

'The finals' striker's a chick?' He confirmed the answer with a silent smirk. 'No way - there ain't no way a chick could con all those students and get away with it.'

'Careful now. You wouldn't want to get on her bad side. Anyways, I gotta run. I got something to take care of. See ya around?'

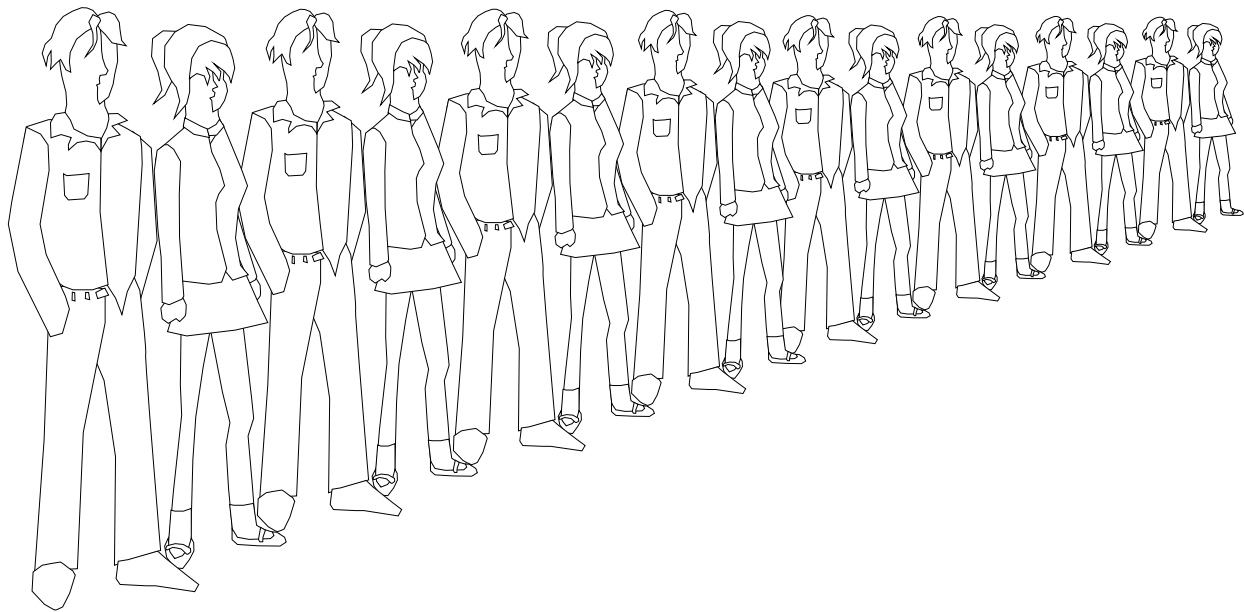
'Yeah, sure.' he said hesitantly.

As he walked away from the freshman, he, while maintaining a rising smirk, yelled calmly: 'have a good first year.'

## Take a step into an orange afternoon ...

Welcome to a world of confusion, where truth is no longer an abstract notion but a reality taught at highschool by highschoolers; where your mortal enemy, whether it aims at fracturing you psychologically or emotionally, resides within you.

In the prologue we meet two characters; in the first vignette you are presented with five, then in the second to the fifth you have two more in each. That sums up to a total of fifteen characters, not to mention the only named character, Hulga Hufstra, who doesn't make an appearance throughout the stories .. or does she? Are the six pieces really separate stories, or are they merely one? Are there really fifteen characters, or only five? What other illusions does this orange world casts? And who is it who really runs the highschool?



THIEF OF GHOSTS: A SONG OF LIFE [ToG:aSoL] is a short story composed of vignettes by Yousef A. Mustafa "pinkblueBiblioFREAK". Editing is done by Mohammed A. Mustafa. All of the portrayed characters and events featured in the text are fictional and products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual people or events is completely coincidental. The illustrations are drawn by yusefamustafa therefore belong to pinkbluebibliofreak. For more information regarding this text or any other works of art by the author, send an email to pinkbluebibliofreak@gmail.com - With the permission from the critic, his or her sent comment(s) might be added on the front or back cover page within quotation marks and a reference to that critic by name. All pinkbluebibliofreak work of fictions are licensed under a creative commons attribution-noncommercial-no derivative works 3.0 unported license. Why? Because Hulga Hufstra says so. Some rights reserved. To understand the terms of the license, visit: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0> - Kuwait, Hiteen; 2011 - 2012