

Directions to the Shellback

Ours is a ghost story, one I've never told anyone, not even you. I've had it all to myself for almost forty years, poring over every detail to try and understand what it is I'm supposed to do. It hasn't been easy. Live with a secret long enough and it changes you, separates you from everybody else in a box of little lies and omissions as clear and hard as glass. Despite all my sacrifices, I can't imagine a life without it. It led me to buy my long-rented condo, avoid relationships, and hang on to my job at the Shellback for so, so long. In a way, this story has been my closest companion—and a far better one than you, my dear, who for all these years refused to speak to me.

Until today.

For a long time—since sometime after the burlesque—I thought I knew how our story would end. An oceanfront room, pricey scotch and fancy steak, a length of sturdy rope. Now it feels too soon. Like so many old men, I always thought I'd have more time. Yet here we are. There may be no room service, but at least and we—or to be fair, *you*—got the oceanfront room right, and it's a perfect night for a ghost story.

Far out over the Atlantic, a storm throws forks of blue-green lightning from cloud to darker cloud. Even four floors up I can hear the crash of waves through the open balcony door, and the wind hints at violent weather. Before the skies open and the storm arrives, let me tell you this story of ours. I promise not to lie or leave anything out, and once I've finished you can tell me your side if you want. As for mine, it begins, I'm sorry to say, with another woman.

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I moved to Coquina Beach from Ohio thirty-eight years ago, the summer of 1984. I was twenty-two, outfitted with a shiny new BA in English and twelve grand of debt. The first in my family to go to college, I assumed you read the books, got the degree, then collected your briefcase and a small yellow house with towheaded children in the yard. Perhaps not as simple-minded as that, but close. As graduation neared, my father suggested I go to law school, and I likely would have it not for Abby.

I'll spare you the delirium of early-twenties love, the eight-millimeter memories of holding hands by the reservoir, kissing in the snow. True love? Maybe. I know she was better at living than me, easy going and immune to doubt and regret. Am I cautious to a fault? Sure, and certainly too content with routine, whereas Abby used mishap and randomness like trail markers leading her from one adventure to the next. As my college days neared their end and I needed someone to take me in some—hell, in *any*—direction, she pointed us south.

A week before graduation we were driving back from Kroger when she plopped her dirty bare feet on the dashboard of my '72 Datsun, studying the sunflowers painted on her toenails.

“I want to get my feet brown and keep them brown,” she said. “I want to eat coconuts for breakfast and bathe in the sea.”

And so, our move to Florida was decided.

We drove it straight, no hotels or restaurants, just rest stops and candy bars. I remember mountain tunnels in West Virginia and seeing my first palm tree in South Carolina, the fetid swamp-stink of hot Georgia air. The entire drive I kept peeking in the rearview, waiting for our belongings—bags and boxes full of clothes and kitchenware and books I’d never read again—to slip their bungees and take flight off the Datsun’s roof. Beside me, Abby smoked skinny Benson & Hedges menthols and sang along to college radio songs, her voice deep and Chrissie Hynde cool. From time she time, she called out what wondrous opportunities Florida held in store.

“We could open a little cantina on the beach. Start a charter fishing biz. Become surfing instructors!”

“We’re from Ohio.”

“We can *learn*.”

Two months later, I had an entry-level job at a fair-to-middling hotel, and Abby had moved to Key West with Aldo, a scuba instructor from Argentina who had rented the condo next door. I came home from work one day to find our relationship dissolved in a note scribbled on the back of a TV Guide.

I’m chasing my happiness south, it read. There’s green curry in the fridge.

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Knock knock knock. “Minibar service!”

From July of 1984 until today, I have been the fulltime Minibar Attendant for the Shellback Seaside Resort. My duties: check the inventory in all the rooms' little fridges, replace any missing stock, and deliver the bills to the front desk. Six days a week I have pulled a rolling wooden cabinet full of tiny liquor bottles and overpriced snacks up and down four floors, in and out of 146 nearly identical rooms, close to forty years.

Knock knock knock. "Minibar service!"

At first I was miserable and thoroughly disappointed with my life, still waiting for the briefcase and yellow house, though it became a bit more tolerable once Abby left.

Embarrassment and disappointment are easier borne alone, I think. Anyway, it passed the time, and I felt uncompelled to look for anything else.

Knock knock knock. "Minibar service!"

November 22nd, 1984 was Thanksgiving, the first one I'd ever spent alone. I had my routine down by then, and with the hotel more than half-empty, the shift was quick going. I opened 416, a corner oceanfront room normally full of morning sun, to find someone had closed the heavy drapes, bathing the room in cool, dark shadows. Opening the minibar, I saw by its dim blue light that I wasn't alone. A woman stood by the window, one foot slightly in front of the other like a mannequin posed for balance and tropical leisure in a long, floral-print skirt and loose green t-shirt.

I remember being more startled than I ought to have been, dropping my clipboard, fumbling it again when I tried to pick it up, though she showed no sign of noticing. She looked early forties, five-foot seven and lithe. Her short-short haircut made her look surprisingly (so I thought back then) athletic for her age, her face pretty in a melancholy sort of way, like a dancer who had just lost a part she desperately wanted.

You.

When I asked if I should leave, you stared through a slight part in the drapes with your mouth open just the littlest bit, mesmerized by something on the horizon.

“Housekeeping.” I turned to see Widelene (one of the few Shellback employees who’s been here as long as I have) grinning through the door. When she saw me in the faint light, her usual glare returned. “You,” she said. “We turned this out already.”

“Hey, you got your walkie?” I crossed the room to her and leaned close so you couldn’t hear us. “I need the MOD. I think there’s something the matter with her.”

“The matter with who?”

I turned to find the room empty, just a neatly made bed and a thin, vertical line of daylight parting the curtains. Widelene scowled and rolled her cart down the hall, a stream of Kreyòl insults bubbling in her wake.

I went to the window and opened the drapes, as if more light would reveal your hiding place. I knelt to look under the bed, checked the closet, raked back the shower curtain in the bathroom. With each passing moment my heart thudded faster in my chest, my entire body vibrating in a strange but not unpleasant way.

Every time I recite this part of our story to myself, when I close my eyes and relive it as best I can, I still feel that morning’s fear, somehow equal parts dread and giddy anticipation, the initial spark of what would become my life’s obsession. On that warm Thanksgiving, maybe for the first time ever, I felt alive the way Abby was alive.

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The next time I saw you was that New Year's Eve, another holiday alone. I signed up for a double, covering for one of the food runners in Turtle Cove, the Shellback's restaurant, after my minibar shift was finished. Jenny Machado, the F&B manager who hired me, had done a fair bit of advertising to court Coquina Beach locals to *Ring in the new year at our fabulous beachfront Bar & Grille!* It worked. The restaurant was packed, and people swarmed the patio bar and drink tents stationed on the sand.

As midnight neared, Jenny sent me and a few of the others out to the beach with champagne flutes. It was impossible to tread through the sand with a tray held elegantly aloft, so I carried mine with two hands, balancing it against my stomach like a cigarette girl in a black-and-white movie. As a middle-aged couple took my last three flutes (the husband grabbed two for himself), I saw you.

Same long skirt and green shirt, same wan expression and statuesque posture, standing at shore's edge. I remember the improbable joy I felt at the sight of you, like running into an old lover in an airport years after the affair.

"Happy New Year," I said. I followed your gaze along a silver carpet of moonlight that lay atop the ocean's dark. Cold water seeped through my work shoes, soaking my socks and the cuffs of my pants. I stood as close as I dared, as if you were some fragile bubble that the slightest touch would burst. There was an electricity to your presence, the heat and the weight of you so close, and it felt just we were like holding hands.

The surf sounds drowned out the celebrations and countdown behind us as fireworks began, sparkling arrays of red and blue, green clusters that spread like palm tree constellations over the Coquina Beach pier. When the cracking ceased and the black-powder smoke rolled

stinkingly along the shore, I didn't need to look to know you were gone. I had already felt your hand melt away.

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I'm not sure how often I've seen you, perhaps a dozen times a year on average. Sometimes you would appear two or three times in a month, but then whole seasons would pass without a glimpse. The duration varied, too, from a few seconds to nearly half an hour. I have seen you blink out of existence or slowly dissolve like ice melting in warm water. If there was a pattern to any of this, I never figured it out. But you always wore the same outfit (once the internet happened I looked it up—a *hibiscus-print sarong*), your short-short hair never grew, and your sad little face never aged a day.

Once I found you waiting for me in the service elevator. I pulled my cabinet in and let the door close without selecting a floor, relishing the confined intimacy without speaking or much wanting to. When the car finally descended, I watched your feet lift from the floor as you floated slowly up and up, melting through the tile ceiling as if called to some miraculous ascension.

I came to understand then that you were no more in control of our moments together than I. Ghosts don't haunt people or places; they are glimpsed quite by accident and apparently unawares. And what I managed to see was not your will but one moment—the *same* moment—of your life transmitted across the veil or whatever, over and over again. Why that moment, and why did you look so sad? Were you on the cusp of some grim decision? Lost in a bittersweet memory?

What I do know, what I've chosen to believe—and this is as close to faith as I've ever been about anything—is that all this, *we*, aren't meaningless. Something has attuned us, two strangers one to the other, beyond even life and death. And what is a man supposed to do with faith like that?

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Mine is solitary work, just a man alone with his cabinet of wares on a carousel of ever-revolving guests. On rounds I nod at the housekeepers, try to stay out of the kitchen staff's way, exchange pleasantries with the front desk clerks. When I was young my coworkers thought I was awkward or just shy. In my thirties and forties, I'm pretty sure I was considered a bit of a reclusive weirdo. As an old man I doubt I'm thought of much at all, no more than the fountain that has stood useless and bone-dry in the lobby for as long as I've been here.

Ten years ago—it was 2012, when we were all terrified of Hurricane Sandy before it veered toward the Northeast—I came as close to making a friend as I have since moving to Coquina Beach, a young man named Darius Gamal. Working six days a week meant training new employees to cover my one day off. He was early twenties, about the same age I was when I started, a chatty kid with huge, Scrabble-tile teeth and an easy way that even a fifty-year-old me found infectious. It didn't hurt his cause, either, that he volunteered to pull the cabinet all day.

“So we go in every room?”

“Every room.”

“You even check when no one's been in there for like days in a row?”

“Every room, every day, unless they leave a DND on the knob.”

“Damn.”

We were two hours into the shift and already I had learned he’d been born in Cairo but moved to south Florida at twelve, loved Pitbull and DJ Khaled (pop stars, I gathered), and had taken this job to save up for some sort of mechanic’s certification.

“Ever walk in on something weird?” he said.

“Not really.”

“Liar!” Darius flashed his winningest smile. “You’ve worked here, what, fifty years, Papa? What’s the freakiest thing you’ve ever seen?”

I had stories, sure. I have barged in on people Jazzercising naked or snorting coke or weeping quietly in a heap of sadness on the bed. I have interrupted more than a few couples during sex, and once I stumbled upon a small film crew hovering around a man and woman who sat smoking on the foot of the bed in Shellback bathrobes. A woman with cat-eye glasses snapped a dumb slate in my face and barked, “Closed set, asshole!” before sending me on my way. None of this, however, felt appropriate to share with my young protégé.

“A ghost.”

I was aghast to hear myself spill this long-kept secret, which had shot out of me without forethought or warning, as unbidden as a sneeze.

“Right,” he said. “Bedsheets and chains? Or was it more M. Night?” He put on a look of mock concern and whispered: “Do you see dead people, Papa?”

“That was a joke.”

His brown crinkled skeptically. I knew he hadn’t believed me when I said I saw a ghost, but now he didn’t believe me when I said I hadn’t.

“Yeah, ‘cause if anyone here’s got jokes, it’s you.”

After training was through and he assumed his Room Service duties, we still bumped into each other occasionally. He would roll his table beside my cabinet, bothering me with questions that other coworkers had long since stopped asking.

“You ever get married, Papa?” he once asked. “I see no ring, but did you ever?”

“No, Darius.” He let this hang long enough for me to become uncomfortable. “Came close once.”

“When?”

“A long time ago. Before you were born.”

“And since?”

We continued down the hall in silence, my cabinet’s back wheel squeaking, the glass salt and pepper shakers dinging together on his rolling table.

Knock knock knock. “Minibar service!”

I waited, hoping a guest would answer and rescue me from the conversation. After a moment, I knocked again.

“OK, here’s what we’re going to do. Tonight, you’re meeting me downtown. The Bomb Shelter, 10:00 PM, on the corner of Coquina Ave and Amberjack.”

I searched for an excuse but found nothing.

“I’m too old to chase girls.”

Darius laughed. “No shit! We’re not getting you laid. We’re going to sit and drink and speak as men do. Besides, you don’t have a choice.”

“I don’t?”

“Nope. I’m a pharaoh, and this is my desire. Besides, it’s either that or you finally come clean about your ghost, Papa.”

I watched him trundle down the hall with his table, wondering when I'd come to like being called *Papa* so much.

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When I saw the crowd gathered outside the bar, I couldn't imagine any place where I'd fit in less. It was like stumbling upon some nightmare carnival. All the women wore risqué costumes, wasp-waisted corsets and fishnets with garters, their faces warm with deep, dark rouge, their arms and legs erupting with brightly colored tattoos. The men wore old-fashioned suit coats with wide lapels, spats and penny loafers, skinny knit ties and bolos and carnation boutonnieres. No one looked over thirty.

At last I saw Darius leaning against a brick wall, engrossed in his phone. Behind him a giant poster advertised: *October 23rd, 2012. The Bomb Shelter's 3rd Annual Autumn Burlesque!!! \$10 Cover*

"What is this?"

"Yeah, sorry, I didn't know." His grin told me he didn't much care if I thought this was bullshit or not. "But hey, they still sell beer," he said.

We made our way inside. On a barely raised stage, a three-piece band wrung boozy dirges out of their violin and stand-up bass while the singer played a washboard with heavy spoons. We pushed our way through a tightly packed crowd of sweaty hipsters all the way to the bar. There was only one vacant stool, but Darius spoke to a spectacularly fat man with Civil War sideburns who swiveled, looked me up and down, then gave me his seat with a heavy hand on my shoulder, as if to offer it along with his condolences.

“What did you say to him?” I shouted.

“What?”

I waved off the question and left him to jockey for a bartender. The one who finally served us was a petite woman whose head had been shaved straight-razor clean. She was powdered—head and face, arms and décolletage—in white with corpse makeup, her mouth an oblong smear of black lipstick. Somehow, Darius made himself understood, and she poured us draft beer in two ridiculous steins. I’ve never been much of a beer guy, but it was cold and felt good on my throat, the bubbles scouring away all the smoke I’d swallowed. When I reached for my wallet, Darius rebuked me with a stern finger wag.

“Tonight’s on me, Papa.”

Between the band’s songs, various acts took the stage. A middle-aged woman in a pink housecoat and matching slippers demonstrated how to fold a fitted sheet without once mentioning the man secured, hands and head, in a wooden pillory beside her. A ventriloquist had a one-sided argument with his taciturn dummy. A pair of twins—young, rail-thin Black girls who could have been twelve or twenty-two—pantomimed a knife-throwing act so intense and terrifying it quieted the crowd. I heard actual gasps when one twin slumped over and slid down the wall, pretend-dead after an invisible blade sank into her heart. Across the stage, her twin suffered a simultaneous collapse.

Darius ordered us a second round and slid off his stool. “Bathroom!” he shouted into my ear. I had a nervous moment or two, finding myself alone there, before coming to terms with the good time I was having. When the corpse bartender returned, I ordered another round and added a shot of scotch for me, which she poured with a wink that brought color to my cheeks.

While I waited on Darius's return, a rather plain-looking woman close to my age walked upon the stage in a black gown with an extraordinarily long silver train. The three-piece began a folkish melody as she wound the train around her, a tambourine held aloft, and swept across the stage in twirling figure eights. Her movements quickened with the band's tempo, her circles shrinking tighter.

The crowd began to clap in time. She shimmied, sensually at first, then almost convulsively, tilting wildly at the hips. We urged her to dance faster, faster, until the tambourine escaped her hand, crashing into the far brick wall like a piece breaking off some failing machine. When she at last collapsed, the band and crowd alike dropped into an abrupt silence. She lay motionless for what seemed like forever—you could hear people *breathing*—then slowly struggled to her feet. The crowd erupted into the night's wildest applause. Men grabbed women, grabbed other men, everyone sharing ravenous, open-mouthed kisses, as if some powerful pheromone had been released.

A strong hand took me by the shirt and pulled me over the bar. The corpse bartender kissed me hard, her long tongue spiced with gin and cigarette smoke. She released me with something between a pat and a slap on my cheek before returning to her work.

I suddenly felt too warm, nauseous, choking on air that had been greased with marijuana smoke and a haze of spilled beer, my mouth oily with black lipstick. There was no sign of Darius. I slid off my stool and stumbled outside, the sidewalk empty now, all the other shop windows dark.

I found a bench nearby and closed my eyes, happy to discover the world wasn't spinning. When I opened them again you were there, of course, facing the street, the sarong hanging straight off your hips despite a steady downtown breeze.

“Hey,” I said, my voice still Bomb Shelter loud. “Hey lady, who do you think you are, huh? All these years and you still won’t look at me? Won’t speak to me?”

I stood, stumbling a bit, and marched toward you. An inch away from your face, staring directly into your eyes, I knew you didn’t see me. I continued shouting absurdly, angry for the first time since slamming Abby’s farewell curry into the trash. “What do you get out of torturing me? Is it fun for you? Are you just dumb and ageless and bored?”

Blame it on the booze, the rare night out, the stimulation of the Annual Autumn Burlesque, but the truth is (I told you: I won’t lie) my outburst remains as much a mystery as everything else about us. Why, after years of being content just to see you, would I curse you? Why, when those quick glimpses had become the only chapters of my life that mattered, would I say what I said next?

“I’m done, OK? So you can just leave me alone now. Please, please, just leave me the fuck alone.”

“Whoa, what’s up?” Darius appeared, walking through you like a parting fog, his face twisted with concern. “You OK?”

I was suddenly sober, my head pounding with rage and an instant hangover. I was breathing heavily, and I remember being worried, for the first time in my life, about my heart.

“What’s going on? And what’s all that black shit on your mouth, Papa?”

I walked past him, my shoulder crashing into his narrow chest as I fetched my keys from my pocket.

“I’m not your Papa.”

For months afterward I went to work every morning sick with remorse, fearing I had driven you away for good. I tried telling myself that one day, when I least expected it, you would return to me, in a guest room, in the laundry, the garage. I explored corners of the Shellback I'd never been in before, made up excuses to sneak into storage rooms and electrical closets, but it was all in vain.

The burlesque show, the last time I saw you, was ten years and two months ago.

I beat myself up over it for many years, knowing that, unlike Abby, I deserved losing you. As those months bled into years, I decided how our story would end. If, as it seemed, I had indeed lost the right to see you in this world, then I would have to seek you out in yours.

How wasn't a hard puzzle to solve. When the time came—a bad diagnosis, forced retirement, or maybe when I grew just too goddamn tired of it all—I would rent an oceanfront room here at the Shellback. I would order up Chateaubriand and a bottle of fifteen-year-old Balvenie to savor on the balcony as night spilled over the horizon. Maybe I would say a little prayer, maybe not, then I would make my way to you. After nearly a decade alone—really alone, for the first time since the Thanksgiving of '84—there was peace in that decision.

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Which brings us to today.

A typical shift, I nodded to the young ladies at the front desk, bid good morning to Widelene as I passed her on the second floor, receiving her customary grunt in response. I rolled

my cabinet into the service elevator, nursing a knee that had gone stiffer than usual of late, and went up to the fourth floor to begin yet again.

Knock knock knock. “Minibar service!”

I worked my way from the top floor to the bottom and back again, same as always. I saved 418, the Executive Suite, for day’s end. If it’s empty I like to linger there and enjoy the hotel’s most spectacular view, its massive bay window as vivid as a drive-in movie screen, which, on this early winter evening, featured dark and threatening clouds. I pulled the cabinet in behind me and closed the door for a few minutes of privacy. Dutifully, I opened the minibar and was shocked to find Styrofoam boxes mixed in amongst the liquor bottles and little jars of macadamias and red pistachios. Through an open doorway into one of the suite’s bedrooms, as young and beautiful as ever, you stood at the window.

“Oh!” you said.

You *said*.

“I didn’t hear you come in. Guess I was kinda zoned out. I had a headache all morning and was gonna nap. I should’ve put the thingy on the door.”

All I could do was nod as you stepped into the common room.

“We didn’t take anything,” you said. “But I moved some stuff around to fit the leftovers.”

The minibar door closed harder than I’d meant it to. I drew a zero on the bottom of the tally sheet, tracing it again and again until the paper began to tear.

“Hello?” you said.

My mouth was dry, my mind on fire.

“I get it now,” I said.

Your smile deflated. “Excuse me?”

“The glimpses I’ve had of you. I know why they’re always the same, and why they’ve always been here, at the hotel. And why, the one time we were somewhere else, I nearly lost you.”

“Look, sir, I don’t know—”

“What I’ve seen, over and over, I get it. What I’ve been seeing is now.”

“I want you to leave,” you said, but there was no command in your voice, as if you were just playing a part without any real conviction.

“It’s always been now.” I was understanding too much too fast. The solution to a decades’ old puzzle thundering inside my skull. “It’s why I stayed here, for this very moment. Your ghost had to make sure we met before you died.”

I forgive you for trying to run, just as I hope you will forgive me for how I had to stop you.

It’s funny, but now that I’ve really seen you—seen you talk, seen you move, seen you fall—you look slightly different. While you’ve been stretched out so lovely on the bed, I see your shirt’s more aqua than green, your skirt’s patterned more with wave-like lines than hibiscus flowers. Perhaps closer to thirty-five than forty-five. Minor details, like how a face seems unrecognizable sometimes when paused on a video: People never look the same in still frame as they do alive.

Do you hear the wind, the thunder? The storm will be here soon, as will our story’s end. You have a little more time to tell me your version while I’m still here. If you can’t now, I’ll find you in the other place, but we better make it soon. One thing I’ve learned from working so long at the Shellback: no one rents the suite just for themselves. There’s too much luggage in the one bedroom and two small backpacks in the other.

Are you older in the other place? Will I be younger? I'd like to think the latter, that I'll be twenty-two again, perhaps forever. I believe the meaning behind all this is that what I've mistakenly called my life has really been one long moment of waiting, my instant of staring through a part in the curtains. All the rooms I've walked into and the people who have largely ignored me have been like windows on a passing train, fleeting distractions pulling away from our real story.

Let it begin.