

Phantom Smell

The scent of Prince Albert pipe tobacco struck me as I neared the top of the staircase. The house was actually two homestead houses coupled together to make one. My dad smoked Prince Albert in this very house but not generally upstairs and he'd been dead for 29 years and to my knowledge, no one had smoked in that 19th century homestead since.

The scent grew stronger as I neared a particular section of the stairwell. It seemed to emanate from through the wall. While trying to get a better sense of where the smell originated, I inadvertently pressed against a section of wall and had the sense of falling and spinning through a smoky haze and waking up in a place I'd never seen before, yet vaguely familiar.

There were tombstones littered all about the area around me. Tombstones as far as I could see, which wasn't considerable, because of the fog-like atmosphere engulfing me. A phantomesque figure, with a pipe protruding from its visage beckoned me with specter hand, motioning me to follow it. Afraid of what this ghostly figure might be and yet comforted by the familiar odor radiating from out its briar pipe, I followed it, albeit somewhat reluctantly.

We walked past several tablet shaped tombstones. Though I tried to see, I could not tell if any of them had an inscription. The phantom just kept walking, imploring me through gesticulation to keep on moving. It was as if these first few graves were of little importance.

With meaningful deliberation he stopped behind a stooped figure, crouched upon the ground in front of a tiny headstone, which stood beside a cedar tree. I recognized the cedar tree from my youth. The crouched figure was that of a little girl. It was my sister, my twin sister. And writing, mysteriously appeared upon the tiny tablet of stone and it read Lollipop. That was my sister's pet kitten. I remember how sad she was when it died. I helped bury it there beside the cedar tree. I tried putting my arm around Dawn to comfort her but it slid through her phantom body.

And the ghost of my father walked on, continued beckoning me to follow him. I could not help but think of poor Scrooge from the Christmas Carol and wondered what reminders may lay before me, and what lessons I was to learn.

The next stop was beside an old pole barn. The red barn of my childhood, the one which burned down in a fire which nearly took the house as well, lapping at the base of the cottonwood tree beside it as the firemen hosed it out. There standing in the old oaken corrals was another sister, an older one, and she stood there weeping and staring at the reins of the bridal in her hands. Before her was a freshly dug grave. Dug by our phantomesque father with the blade of his Allis Chalmers D-7 Crawler. The stone read Shawnee. The name belonged to Julie's pinto, who had foundered with age and finally succumbed to that bastard death. Once again I tried to offer some condolence and my arms passed through her like a vapor.

And again I followed the specter of my father as we intertwined our way through myriad grave markers, stopping once again behind a figure which had collapsed completely to the ground and was sobbing with such force, that her entire body convulsed with each sob. This was the apparition of my eldest sister, Karen. The granite marker before her was orange, the same orangish hue as her cat, Randy. Randy was a most amazing cat. He could open the door to the stairwell by standing on his hind legs and grasping the antique door knob with his forepaws and turning it with enough force to open it. Their room lay at the top of the stairwell and to the right, not far from whence I first noticed the phantom smell of my father's pipe. Randy was a mouser and he earned his keep by ridding the house of vermin. And again I made the obligatory effort to comfort the distraught and again I grasped at empty air.

The smoking revenant continued walking and without being summoned I obediently followed. I found myself encircled by dozens of grave markers of varying sizes and color. I recognized the names on some of the stones and on others I could not remember having ever known their owners. In front of us stood yet another visitant. It was my brother. He was mumbling something which at first I could not understand. In his hands was our father's 30-40 Kraig, a rifle from the Spanish American War. I listened intently as he mumbled and finally I think I understood him saying, "I had to, I had to, I had to shoot them...they were suffering." And then I realized that these several dozen graves were inhabited by our fallen comrades, the diseased and dying cows, distempered cats and aged dogs, shot down, gunned down by my brother, because he could do what no one else could. I could read the agony in his ghastly face and his eyes stared darkly into the shadows and I then knew that he had never stopping grieving, this holy man; this pastor; this minister; this witness, was haunted—eternally haunted by what he had done, what he had to do and perhaps that is why he was a most compassionate man, a man of God in an immoral world filled with the need for compassion. For several minutes we stood there silently contemplating and remembering. I offered no comfort, just remorse for the pain and suffering my brother had endured, still endured and would forever endure until that fated day when death would offer up most welcomed reprieve.

Our next jaunt culminated in front of several grave markers set up like dominoes in a game of turkey-foot. A spectral lad with lowered head was walking amongst them and we followed. Soon I recognized the young boy as a doppelganger of myself. Before him were the final resting places of all the dogs we had know. Zingo, never came home from the vet...didn't wake up from the anesthesia. Duke got run over by the neighbor girl's boyfriend, an old rag sticking out of the hubcap of his truck, for our dog to grab onto. Pepper, who always turned our father's stomach, when she ate her own regurgitation, wandered away and was never found. We used to watch her run in her sleep as she dreamt of catching cottontails and jackrabbits.

I followed the wraith past several more tombs. We read: Butchie; Lynda; Lassie; Candy; Elvis; Cassie; Monster; Frankenstein; Lucy; Tisha; Pretty Girl and Barea. Then my former self knelt before a white marker with the name Harry emblazoned upon it in scarlet red. And we remembered seeing Harry's Welsh Corgi carcass floating in that awful sump-pump hole of the

basement of our homestead. Drowned, struggling to free himself, drowned because of his gimp legs—trampled by the cows, and we both cried, I and my younger double, as the specter of our father patiently waited, filling his bowl and relighting his pipe as we wailed over our memories of this wirehaired cur.

The lad continued on while I and our smoking patron followed. The boy stopped at the grave of Gus. And I remembered how Gus used to chase me. Frightened me and battered me with his gobbler wings. Somehow Gus knew that he scared me and even there in front of his hallowed ground I found myself shaking in fear of this decayed turkey from forty-five years ago. I noticed too that the young stripling before me quaked before our nemesis.

My ghastly liege beckoned me onward as we sojourned to what I believe was once my mother's garden. There I saw an ethereal being, dressed in glowing gardener's apparel, which strangely cast a light and no shadow. This being had the countenance of my mother. Mother strolled back and forth, between the rows of virgin-white slabs of alabaster, with her garden-hoe in her grasp. All the while she rooted out weeds of cocklebur and goats-head and the occasional sow-thistle. The garden was immaculate. White tiers of alabaster, surrounded by the deep dark brown earth of her garden, stood in stark contrast to the shadows beyond them. And she knelt as though genuflecting before each marker of alabaster and caressed them with her gentle arms, washing them with her cleansing tears and kissing them before leaving one for the next. This she did at each and every remembrance. And I read the names on these unblemished testaments. These were her lambs, her babies. They used to follow her like a chick does a hen. She loved every one of them, even the black ones—perhaps most of all. Suddenly, I began to weep, realizing that I too was her black-sheep, and I noticed the spectral head of my phantom father nodding approvingly. It made me wonder, was this the revelation he had meant for me? But he moved on.

Our trail meandered on, winding its way through a copse of willow trees. Before us loomed a steep hill. The path up the hill was narrow and straight, barely perceptible beneath the overgrowth in this shadowy netherworld. With slow methodically plodding steps, my paternal apparition climbed the steep incline with prolonged deliberation. After what seemed like nearly an hour of perspiration we finally arrived at a plateau to which I had been before. From it, you could have seen the countryside for miles around, except that here in this nether-region, even the shadows had shadows and everything about me was darkling most darksome.

Six stout silhouettes stood around an oblong encasement. With ropes they lowered my mother's casket into the ground. Bob, my boyhood best friend, stood silhouetted in his grey Stetson against the gray-scaled background of the horizon. Francis, my neighbor to the north, in his whitened beard, strained against the phantom hemp, as the chosen six slowly and carefully lowered my matriarch down. A horse, with Mom's saddle, stood neck bowed, grazing, beyond the circle of mourners. The ethereal being of myself stood looming bigger than Orson Wells in its black dress pants, white shirt, black tie and suspenders leading the singing as the spectral choir wailed funeral dirges.

As the ever present aroma of Prince Albert intensified, I witnessed the one who had summoned me, puffing intently on the briar reed of his pipe at seemingly predetermined localities, creating a cloud of aromatic incense as he circumnavigated the funeral grounds. And I could sense the seriousness, in his phantom eyes, as he witnessed the burial of his widowed wife and I could feel his pain. He trembled but did not weep. One by one the mourners left—even the shade of myself, and I turned to my fraternal eidolon and we ambled on.

A thick ashen miasma fell upon us as our pathway, descended from my matriarchal Golgotha. The foul maelstrom swirled around us, nearly masking the coveted scent of his burning ember. And darkness engulfed us, and I could not see beyond the lids of my eyes. But I could smell, oh so faintly, Prince Albert, as my father descended in front of me.

The ground gradually softened, turning into mud, as we continued our downward climb to a place I am certain I had never been before. Strange stygian noises amplified the void around us, like nocturnal swamp creatures from a Louisiana bayou. The black atmosphere was wet and cloying and dread began to infuse my entire being. A faint glow barely glimmered in the foreground and my father hesitated and stopped just inside the faint light of the final stone. He held up his phantom arm, a signal for me to stop, and eftsoons I obeyed the spectral signal of my father.

The marker before us appeared to be quite recent. The ethereal body of my ancestor impeded my ability to read that which was surely carved upon the stone. I attempted to move forward and again this most phantasmagorical spirit bade me to be still, and I watched and listened.

I watched as he slowly approached the tomb and I listened to the silence as the denizens of the swamp about us quelled. My father knelt on both knees staring at the monolith before him. He reached forward with his pipe and knocked the still glowing coal from out its bowl onto the edge of the stony tribute. Then I witnessed that which I had never before witnessed, not even in the wake of my grandfather's death. Slowly at first, and then with great heaves, his body did shake and barely audible at first, but with increasing intensity, did the decibels of his wailing increase.

I could withstand the tension no longer. I had to know what engraving could be so horrible that even this phantom double of my father would sob so vociferously over. And with trepidation I approached this exalted grave. I gazed open-mouthed over my father, read the epitaph upon the carved stone and wide-eyed I realized just how fleeting is time and fainted dead-away.

Then I awoke as if from a dream; in the background I still heard the faint sound of sobbing and the fragrance of Prince Albert lingered in the stairwell.