

A Cyberspace Carol

IN PROSE

BEING

A Ghost Story of the Internet

STAVE ONE: CHLOE'S GHOST

To begin with, I'd been living abroad. Fifteen years had elapsed since high school graduation and I'd spent the last five of them in the Far East. During those five years, separated by time and space, I entered a period of wistfulness in which I'd begun to miss my former classmates.

Oftentimes this wistfulness—a mix of homesickness and nostalgia, really—would manifest itself in my dreams, which became peopled by high school personae. Friends, acquaintances, even obscure peers with whom I had but peripheral contact would wind up on the oneiric stage.

The starlet of this stage, however, was indisputably Chloe. *Chloe*, a crush I had idolized for four years from afar. Ch-lo-e, her name rising melodically from the depths of the throat to the heights of the palate before freeing itself softly between the lips. Perhaps because my marriage was in something of a crisis, she was nearly a nightly presence in my sleep. This was no succubus, mind you. Our dream selves usually maintained the same cool detachment that defined our school-day association. But once in a while we'd interact, and through interacting connect in moments of strictly social yet totally empyreal consummation.

Though dreams are but an auxiliary to waking life, mine did much to enrich my days, since for a brief moment at night they unfettered me from the chains I had forged in marriage. Yet at the same time I'd be errant to ignore how much they tightened those very chains, for during the long hours away from sleep I felt bound, bitter, and full of remorse. And on top of it all, as the dream world dissolved into the real world on waking, I was inevitably left wondering: what ever became of Chloe?

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STAVE TWO: APPARITIONS OF THE PAST

One evening, while lying in bed with storm winds whipping the house, I saw that my bedside phone lit up with the angelic white light of a new message. The wall clock read twelve. Who, I thought, could be contacting me at such an hour? As it turned out—no one. The message was automated and merely recommended an Internet update.

But a flame was lit. The Internet! I hadn't thought of it until then, but my questions about Chloe could be answered in the strands of the World Wide Web. What is the Internet, after all, but a great book, a pageless tome in which anyone can record anything from anywhere? And great books, we know, instruct us with their wisdom. So despite having the qualms of a famulus peeking illicitly into his master's grimoire, I opened the Internet on my phone to begin a search on Chloe.

The bedroom being no place to perform my inquest, I first sought out the solace and privacy of the living room. There on the couch I met our vulture-eyed cat, but a cold snubbing of its affections sent it running with a clamor. My wife, thankfully, was sleeping like a shelf screw.

Now, if the Internet is a book, then a search engine is its index. So there I began, with a bare-bones Google search of Chloe's full name. Eponymous women aside, I was left with two viable results. Neither linked me to a social networking site, which Chloe steered clear of, but they were strong scents to sniff out nonetheless.

The first was a county record of her childhood home, where her parents still lived. With an address, one is but a single step from a curbside view, so seconds later I was standing there, virtually that is. Her home, as I suspected, was large with a landscaped lawn. Her dad, I think, was a doctor, her mom a country club regular. "So this is it, the *font et origo*," I said to myself, admiring the Alcottian environs where she flourished alongside her three sisters. If her youth was tainted in any way, its hardships could not be read here.

The second result was a dated article from our hometown paper. The article described the high school track team, state runner-up our senior year, and included a photo of the team sporting silver medals. Chloe sat cross-legged on the ground, her arms around her teammates. Was it just me, or was she somehow too good for any club or crowd?

Since I knew the Midwestern school where she had attended college, my search proceeded down that path. Almost immediately I came across a digital yearbook. Inside, page 42, there she was, as photogenic as ever... the same girl who—whether from genes or a wholesome diet—in all of high school never once had a pimple.

Digging deeper through the yearbook, I was mildly surprised but considerably delighted to discover her peering out of a sorority photo. The photo depicted a group of five girls in skirts and make-up. She stood left of center in a seductive Tribhanga stance. I knew the scene: doubtless her folks were in for The Big Game before taking her out to dinner and desert. When they went back to the inn, she went to her boyfriend's feeling a Saturday-night high that seems blithe in hindsight.

I was saddened. My own college experience was unremarkable. Few friends. Fewer lovers. Understandably, I fled the region after graduation, running in the opposite direction and eschewing all ties.

I also had a sense of the footloose adolescent years we missed out on together had we somehow hooked up: concerts, parties, beaches, drugs (the drugs whose scientific and street names we were warned against in Health Class). Oh, the life we could have led if I had approached her at sixteen, she svelte, sylphlike in the seat adjacent. But I lacked the self-esteem.... And now, ah, the open wounds she left... my weakened psyche, my social anxieties and insecurities.... No amount of regret can amend for such an opportunity missed.

Pained, I had to move past her college years. By inputting her name and university into a search box, I uncovered her job résumé on a recruitment site. Here her tracks were clearly marked: design internships in Chicago, a grad degree from Northwestern (no album, sadly), student-teaching in an Oak Park school.... The welcome frisson of the find was only offset by the disappointment of knowing what the résumé *didn't* show: books read, trips abroad, hearts broken, grey hairs, songs she danced to, beds she slept in.... These had to be left to the imagination. Below the résumé was a tantalizing, yet teleologically unthinkable outlet for my limerence: "Contact" a button urged. Only a click away.

The most recent item on her résumé had her working in an elementary school in Wisconsin, so I pointed my steps there. To my great fortune the school had a website, complete with teacher profiles. To my great dismay, the name on Chloe's profile was not as I knew it. Her surname, you see, was alien, for she now had a patronymic!

"Dreadful apparition!" I cursed. Inevitable as her marriage was, I could not stomach it and with my thumb endeavored to efface it.

“Internet, why do you trouble me?” I called out as I closed the search window. And since the phone itself looked guilty, I shut it down too and watched until the last of its living light was extinguished. I had seen enough.

In need of repose I went straight to the bedroom. I was sweating and groped for a clean shirt in the stygian darkness. Changing into it, I climbed in bed beside the contoured figure of my wife, and fell asleep upon the instant.

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STAVE THREE: APPARITIONS OF THE PRESENT

I woke from a snooze and sat with a start as the clock stroked 2:00. A storm still seethed outside, but apart from my wife, who was locked in a prodigious snore, the house was quiet. I could hardly recall my research of an hour before, but it swiftly resurfaced at the sight of an emerald light emanating from the den beyond the bedroom. Slowly I stood and went to investigate.

I couldn't account for it but my computer was on and the screen aglow. Bleary-eyed I approached and saw in the visual repast of colors that the screensaver was active. While it's true that I hadn't turned off the computer that evening, I *had* set it in sleep mode. Had our cat toyed with the mouse in the interim?

Causation aside, since Windows was loaded and I didn't feel drowsy, I decided to pick up where I left off in my previous labors. An hour of rest had been enough to reconcile me to the reality of Chloe's marriage. The question now became—to whom? Who was this Mr. *Faas* she yoked herself to?

A quick search of his last name at her university yielded a Chad Faas, two years her senior. A follow-up search said he was a practicing surgeon at a Madison medical center. A surgeon indeed! I expected no less. Add in St. Paul origins and cum laude postgrad credentials, and Chad's portrait for all purposes was complete.

I was able to find their wedding date from an obsolete bridal registry: *June the twentieth*. "How fitting," I thought to myself. Midsummer, the zenith of sun's shine. Let me guess: rural chic. Converted barn, floral bower... bosom bridal party, tearful speeches... a string trio melting into a jazz quartet into a five-piece band....

Knowing the husband's name and their nuptials, I had all sorts of avenues of exploration open to me. For the moment, however, I set aside the possibilities to return my attention to the school where Chloe deigned to work. Though it felt like haunted ground, I clicked again on her teacher profile. A few minutes passed as I studied her photo. She was as alluring as always, even with the roots of her hair blacker than the auburn ends (evidence of a cosmetic change of heart around her Saturn return?). Under the photo was a short self-introduction. Among her "Interests" she listed Pittsburgh professional sports. This struck me as strange. My wife, and most of the women I knew, rarely professed a love of televised sport. It was endearing though, if not disingenuous, and I imagined her making conversation with her father via the Steelers when she made her weekly call home.

She also expressed a love of "cooking, reading, and travel." The domestic picture of her preparing dinner was a pleasant one. And if her reading now leaned towards horses and herb gardens I wouldn't have held it against her. As for travel, she was better off with Chad. My pecuniary situation since college dictated that all I could have given her were road trips in Greyhounds, motorcycle rides in equatorial nations, and shared single-entrée orders in European capitals.

Back on the school's homepage I couldn't help but peruse the faces of her coworkers. They were mostly middle-aged women, but a handful of balding, stubble-cheeked men filled the ranks. Given Chloe's charms, I suspected all these men of eyeing and vying for her, particularly those in the art department. Even the women I mistrusted. Did they realize the nymph that had entered their lives, the Helen that had left her hometown to live among them?

I debated whether to sign up for the school newsletter in hopes of seeing a recent photo of Chloe on the job, but thinking better of it I turned my efforts back to the husband. Using their names in tandem, I located a list of their addresses since marriage: Ann Arbor, Central Chicago, Evanston, Oak Park... the history of their movements through space transcribed their maturation through time.

The most current address placed them in a Madison suburb. Aerial and sidewalk photos showed a two-story neo-Georgian house with a half-moon drive. At the time of the photos, sun beams showered the lawn. Cyberly I scouted the neighborhood around her house and came to the conclusion that her new Midwestern community was no different—*mutatis mutandis*—than the Eastern one we grew up in. In other words, she was leading the life of her parents.

And what a life it was. A neighborly street that granted privacy, a convenient commute to school, tree groves and park space... she was living the Usonian dream while here I was stuck in a foreign megalopolis. Without setting foot inside her home I knew that the kitchen was modern, the master bath sky lit and the basement furnished with a wet bar and billiard table. And, in a usurpation of my own tastes, it stood to reason that there were bookshelves built into hallway nooks and the headboard of their child-to-be's bed. (Was there a child? I paused to perform a side search.... Yes: according to an online baby-shower planner, a daughter had arrived in May. T_T)

Taking it all in at once, I could find no fault in her life. I wondered, was beauty or upbringing the key to her success? Or, was there some other secret that allowed her to flow through life with hardly a ripple?—to use a Zen metaphor I'd been meditating. Everything seemed in order, everything ideal. Even her friends, surely, were prospering, one's rise bolstering another's rise.

Was it not so? Her friends, the friends she leaned on all these years in my stead, they *were* doing well, weren't they? To complete my investigations I had to find out. And so, late though it was, my search continued.

Her best friend, Holly, I readily learned, was assistant concertmaster for the Austin Philharmonic. At the same time she chaired a contemporary string quartet with three other hip musicians, all while raising two kids and getting her MBA from the state university. Knowing Holly's childhood precocity, go-getting academic record, and beloved-by-all sociability, why did I even bother looking her up? Her accomplished career was all but assured. In a decade she'd be head of a major symphony orchestra, serve as its outreach and marketing coordinator and travel as a soloist. I did not tarry here.

But the success stories went on. Chloe's friend Daisy had become a clinical psychologist with peer-reviewed articles and co-written chapters in caregiving manuals. A former fling of Chloe's worked in the scouting department of the L.A. Dodgers. Another girl from her clique moved to San Fran to work in tech!

I could look no longer. All of them had such complete and comfortable lives. All had covered such ground since high school, while I... I stood by and witnessed a feast I could not share.

"Internet, show me no more!" I cried, lowering the lid of the laptop to snuff out the light of the screen. I then lowered my head. It was too much to bear.

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STAVE FOUR: APPARITIONS OF THE FUTURE

When I lifted my head the screen was on, though dimly lit. Images were fluttering across it of their own accord, as in a motion picture. The images were of Chloe and Chad together. At first they were young, lean and vital, in peak form, the bloom of youth. In scenes of courting they wore their best and brightest plumage. Calves and thighs were muscled, teeth blanched, tongues scarlet, their feet and hands like desert sand. Then began a time-lapse sequence, a slow and solemn aging: their eyes nesting, cheeks sagging, hair growing roan. Faces that wore the struggles of long nights and early mornings. Hands with lines and sunspots appearing. Hands feeding, then leading, then waving to children in a series of fleeting tableaux marking their middle years. Quickly, all too quickly, the two became late-age lovebirds. On a porch at twilight I saw them sitting, achieving ecstasies of sentiment by hand locking. They went inside as the crickets came out but before the mosquitoes, to look at old photos with shortcake and sherbet. When a story came to mind they turned the radio down and told it. A subsequent scene unfolded at breakfast. Another at bowling. An airplane took them to Vegas, a national forest, a family-filled Christmas. A final scene was set by a sunny window. Chloe was singing, Chad gloating for possessing wisdom *and* youth at once. Here their love was at a pinnacle, slow-ripened and invulnerable, buckled to a bygone past—

I turned away in a paroxysm of anguish.

“Internet!” I demanded, “Answer me one question: Are these images of things that *will* be, or of things that *may* be only?”

Before I had an answer I saw on the screen a last image surface. It was an image of myself, typing my name into an Internet search. The results were loading... loading... then, what I found was... what I found was...

Nothing! Not a single item... confirming, alas, what I long supposed—I was invisible. Untraceable. A spectator watching life go by.

Feeling myself in a fearful place, I closed my eyes and hid.

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STAVE FIVE: RESOLUTION

My head was in my hands when I awoke, hunched over at my desk. The computer was off and the lid closed as I had left it... I had been dreaming. Dreaming. The images on display—of Chloe and Chad growing old—had been but specters of my sleep. The future I had glimpsed on screen was hence not written in stone. Things could be different...

But did it matter? Now, on waking, I felt as though a curtain had been lifted and a theater door opened, exposing all my Internet findings for what they were—projections from a showman's lantern, shadows on a wall in cyberspace. Which meant the Chloe I had been stalking was nothing but a chimera, her life a figment of my longing, right down to my presumptions about her parents, who were perhaps not country-club types at all but the children of immigrants with a working class thrift.

Yes, there was only an ounce of reality to everything I had seen during the night, for pixels can never portray the flesh and blood of existence. In the light of reason I knew Chloe's life was far from ideal. She, too, like anyone, faced hardship and disillusion. She, too,

beat against a current of constant troubles and tracasseries. Who knows if her youngest sister ever answered her emails. Or if the elder, nulliparous, begrudged her baby. Maybe Chloe failed to breastfeed and blamed herself for it. Maybe she thought her neighborhood stale and stodgy, her colleagues a bunch of nudniks and Babbitts.

A change had come over me. Rather than resent Chloe's successes, I suddenly began to worry about her. Was she eating well? Did she get her exercise? Were her gods still sitting high in the heavens, or were they on trial for treason? Once the object of my desire, Chloe became the object of my compassion.

But the conversion did not end there. With the Internet's artifices now apparent, my attitude towards Chloe's husband and friends began to shift as well. I felt I'd been unkind in my initial judgments, and, penitent, decided to revisit their online lives in order to correct my cursory looks of an hour before.

Chad the surgeon, it turned out, was more accurately a dentist... a dentoalveolar doctor, in professional jargon. His specialties, according to the medical center's website, included bone grafting, implants and traumatic facial reconstruction. A PR advert pictured him standing next to his supervisor, a paunchy man in his sixties with a clownishly wide tie, a breast-pocketed pen, and eyeglasses strung on a lanyard.

Call me fatalistic, but it occurred to me that Chad was at risk of one day morphing into the mold of his supervisor. It's a slow transformation, and no grad school class will warn you of it, but laws of sociology determine that we conform to the mores of our chosen field. Dreams deferred and the demands of family, vacuums of want and excesses of indulgence, the vicissitudes of love and livelihood... these steal the impassioned gleam in the young professional's eyes and chisel into him the wearied visage of his seniors.

Though Chloe's best friend the concertmaster had her career in order, photos showed that corporeal matters were a different story. It wasn't obesity that beset her, but its

opposite—etiolation. Wane and frail, clearly bearing the toll of her achievements, her body had become an incongruous house for the robustness of her soul. Whatever perverse pleasure I may have found in this before, I presently felt concerned and hoped her husband made up for the time she missed with family.

From an ensuing search I learned that Chloe's dear friend Daisy, the psychologist, had studied in New York at the same time I had lived there. To think that our lives had overlapped before a circuitous course brought her back to Pittsburgh. I knew the clinic where she now worked as a counselor: the building square, plain, drab; the street full of fast food, car dealers and pharmacies. Funny how home recalls us, though we fervently renounce it in our younger days. Home, you might say, is a horizon. Fail to see beyond it and you end up just becoming yourself, nothing more.

Regarding Chloe's old suitor the Dodgers' scout, circumstances would suggest that he carried disappointments of his own. The tallest boy in class since age five, he was an elite pitching prospect through high school. A secondary search showed he was recruited by a Pac-12 university, and later saw the mound in the Rockies' farm system. Whatever it was that derailed his playing career, today he was desk-bound, sporting square-rimmed spectacles, fielding emails, and pitching proposals after sweating over advanced sabermetrics.

Chloe's friend in San Fran was a case of a radical mind absorbed into the progressive ethos of Silicon Valley corporate culture. I knew her well in high school and respected her for her free-wheeling individuality. And so my surprise as to why she'd prioritized her career over creative self-development. Rather than hit the road after college—traveling, wandering, losing herself in a foreign culture—why had she joined the lumpen mass of office workers, leasing her time and energy to earn a company dollar? Countless classmates of mine had. Together they formed the newest iteration of the clerks, copyists and scribes that dwelt in

Dickens novels, not crowded but cossetted into cubicles where they no longer pushed paper but pushed keys.

With all that I had seen, I came away dispirited by these latest *in*-sights into the lives of my peers. If you proposed such lives to them in high school, would they have consented? And yet, having witnessed the universality of imperfection and limitation, I was also gratified. Gratified that I had grown in understanding. As everyone else seemingly became more humbled and more human, so too had I. “The world breaks everyone,” I recalled Hemingway writing, the tension in my heartstrings for once in tune.

Coupled with this tuning came a sense of solidarity with my classmates. We were a cohort, after all, born and breathed into being at a parallel point in infinite time. As a matter of fact, this solidarity verged on love: not *eros* but *agape*. A selfless love, and a love ridden with sadness in the face of life’s brevity. For if the Internet taught me anything it was how short life really was. Fifteen years had come and gone since graduation, yet not long ago we were the foundlings of the nation. Soon our cohort would be senescent, and soon nonexistent. And, unless a world beyond were to bind us once more, we’d never be all together again.

Absorbed in these thoughts I shut off the computer, for I had learned my lesson. From this day forward jealousy would give way to sympathy, small-minded pettiness to all-embracing benevolence. And in learning this lesson I felt a newfound commitment to the life I was leading. Hell, if my peers saw a snapshot of *my* life, they’d think I had it good. And I did, all considered, if only I had the faith to see things through, rooting myself rather than shunning the path I tread.

And insofar that I was invisible, all the better. For are there not advantages to being *off* the Internet? To being an unlisted rogue whose story is without record? There hadn’t been a single classmate that I couldn’t find in the pages of the Web. Yet he or she must be leading the best life of any of us.

It was almost dawn. My phone was off. My computer was off. The cat had renewed contact. I went to the bedroom expecting a profound morning of rest. As soon as I lay down, however, I realized my shirt was on backwards. In the darkness I had apparently reversed it. Somehow this seemed like an apt metaphor for my marriage: I had to right it... or live in discomfort.

As for Chloe, I could let her go. While I marveled how the head and heart flew around the world for love, time and space were against me. Where they served as allies was right here and right now. In this very room, on this very night.

At peace with the world, so wide and enwebbed, I drifted off, falling asleep to the retreating sighs of the storm, and the scent of my wife's conditioner.