

THE GHOST (6)

Well, here we are again sittin' on my back porch and lookin' out across the valley happier than two fat ladies in a candy store. It's been one of them days that just couldn't be better. We've had a lot of rain so everything's green and lush and there's not a breeze blowing except maybe up at the top of the hill behind the house. And even there it's a real gentle breeze makin' the uppermost leaves whisper amongst themselves like matrons in church. That old silver maple at the corner of the lot down there is all one color, a sure sign that there ain't no wind. There ain't any prettier sight than that old tree flickering in a moderate breeze like a princess' evening gown in the lights of a dance floor.

The temperature dropped a little after supper and I'm just comfortable in my pullover with the funny alligator on the pocket. A friend of mine got it for my birthday. Ain't it a doozie? Anyway, my belly's full of meatloaf and baked potato courtesy of Miz Baker down the street a ways. She brought it up about four o'clock. Her husband Wayne passed away a couple of years ago and I expect that her bed's cooling down some. She's probably casting about for a new husband. I'll eat her food, but that's it. Never been married and don't plan to start at this point in my life.

Wayne was a decent sort. He was a couple o' years behind me in school; never did know him real well. His older brother, Teddy, came back from the war with a bunch of busted toys in the attic if you get my drift. He used to walk around town in ladies high-heeled shoes and a baby nipple hanging around his neck. They called it being shell-shocked in them days, but they got a whole bunch of new words they call it now; heard 'em on TV. Kids would make terrible fun of him; makin' loud noises behind his back and that sort of foolish stuff. They didn't mean nothin' by it, but it just wasn't right, you know.

Anyways, here we set with my cup o' coffee and I'm gonna light me a cigarette in a little bit and tell you about the ghost. Here that? Some kids are playin' kick the can down on Maple Street someplace. I must have hid under every bush and behind every house myself doin' the same thing as a boy. I got my first kiss from Becky Blanchard hunkered

under the back porch of the Salerno place playing that same game. It was along about the time they hung that red-headed fella come to think about it.

Becky died a year or two later of polio. She was one of the first in these parts. "Course we knew about the disease on account of FDR havin' it, but we never figured one of our own would get it. She wasn't the last either. Everybody was scared to death of polio, son, and Becky was such a pretty girl. Who knows, maybe if she'd have lived .

. . .

It was also about the time that I seen the ghost. Now, I know what you're thinkin', crazy old L.K. right? Aw, come on, it don't matter. I'm used to it. But I seen it just as plain as I'm seein' that old oak stump in the front yard down there. I wouldn't kid around about somethin' like that.

There'd been a lot o' talk about a ghost for a long time. Mostly grown men huddled on the porch talkin' soft while havin' a drink after dinner at a family gatherin' . . . that sort of thing. And there was people who claimed to have seen it, but in them days if you said something like that you were leavin' yourself open to a lot of razzing. I recollect that Clyde Baskin seen it about the same place as I did and he'd get real mad when folks teased him. And they found Elmer Watkins dead as last week's news layin' face up on the sidewalk across from the Jessup barn in '38. Folks said he died screamin' with his eyes all bugged out, but I know that ain't true. Only time people die with their eyes bugged out is in the movies. I've seen men die, son.

Anyways, the story goes that this fella, a salesman, climbed off the stage from Corning three or four years after the Civil War. A shoe salesman, he was, sellin' all kinds of leatherwork out of a chest-like thing with wheels on one end. Peddlers often rode the stage, stopping off at towns for a few days and sellin' their wares door to door before going on to the next town. Folks just didn't go store shopping in them days like they do now. They let the goods come to them.

Well, anyways, the story has it that this shoe peddler did somethin' stupid. He let himself be taken in by what they called a "lady of the evening" then and that he was murdered for his money by her husband. Don't know that

anybody ever proved it, but he wound up dead in a hotel room downtown and that's the way the story goes.

A few days later that same lady was standin' outside the tavern where the old Jessup place is now when the stage come rollin' in. Folks who saw it said it looked like she was suddenly thrown under the wheels o' that stage even though there was nobody around her at the time. It was like an invisible hand pushed or shoved her. The stage wheels chewed her up pretty bad and it took her two days to die. They say she suffered something awful. Shortly after that her husband's oars come out of the water and he was seen stumbling around town babblin' to himself and pullin' at his hair. Next thing you know he's found face down in the river just south of the town bridge. Folks figured he threw himself off the bridge. "Course, it didn't take long for folks to say the ghost of that peddler had done it.

Other folks had seen it too, the ghost, I mean. It was mostly around the Jessup place, but sometimes other places. It used to be a pretty lively roadhouse a hundred years ago before Emily Jessup's granddaddy bought up all that property and built that fine house down on Front Street all fenced in real fancy. The roadhouse faced Maple Street and he turned that into a stable after tearing down most of it.

Do you remember what the hell the point of all this was? One of the thrills of gettin' old. Oh, yeah, the ghost. Well, sir, like I said, I was about eleven, I guess. Hell, I know exactly how old I was. I'd got me a part time job sweepin' out old Mr. Goff's drug store; cleaning up the place and runnin' errands. Fine old gentleman, Mr. Goff. He could have swept the place out himself, but he took a likin' to me and he'd give me fifty cents for a few hours work. That was a lot of money in them days, especially for a lad like me. I didn't do it but once or twice a week, but it was money I could use.

Well, sir, Mr. Goff turned me lose that night about eight o'clock in the evenin' and I wasn't supposed to, but I sneaked into Silky's Pool and Billiards Hall next to the drug store and played me a couple games of eight ball with one of the hangers-on in the place before headin' home. It was summer and no school so Ma wasn't expecting me at any regular time.

After I left there, I was sort of dawdlin' like kids will when they got no place fun to go. I stopped on the

town bridge and chucked a couple of rocks into the river and then a little ways farther on I found a dead bird up near the Methodist Church and I had to examine it real good to try and figure out what killed it. I carried it up the short hill to the park before throwing it up on old lady Bly's front porch for her to find in the morning.

I crossed the park whistlin' with my hands in my pockets. As I left the park and crossed the street by the Presbyterian Church I noticed that one of my shoes had come untied and I stopped to tie it. The only light anywhere around came from a small bulb over a side door to the church so I tied it there. Beyond that single light and toward the Jessup barn it got really dark. It was kind of a spooky place because there was all kinds of thick shrubbery around the barn and, as you passed it, there was more bushes scattered around the Jessup's huge back yard.

Now I wasn't one to be scared of the dark, never had been. I'd walked this way a million times and knew every inch of them slate sidewalks on Maple Street. I was walkin' along with my head down and my hands in my pockets holdin' that quarter and two nickels I still had real tight. I can't really tell you when I first seen him. It's almost like he just appeared right there in front of me.

He must have been eight feet tall and he sorta floated a few inches above the ground. He was the color of concrete and his mouth was open wide . . . so wide that it took up most of his face which kept changing shape. His eyes glowed a faint red and he was reaching for me or pointing at me, I ain't sure which. It looked as though he was screaming, but no sound was coming out. He was no more than five feet from me and I just froze, stood there pop-eyed. My gizzard pole-vaulted up into my throat and I'm pretty sure there was a clunking sound as my asshole slammed shut.

He continued to float in front of me for what seemed like an eternity and we stood there lookin' and one another. He opened his mouth to scream again and I knew if he did I was going to go so far around the bend that it'd take a dollar to send me a penny postcard. Then he just disappeared! Poof! Just like that he was gone. All that was left was a funny smell, like sulphur, and the normal sounds of a summer night, crickets and the like.

I stood there a few moments. I really didn't know what to do; my mind wasn't working right. Then I got that sharp feelin' that he was *standing right behind me!* It took all the sand I could muster, son, just to turn around, but when I did all I saw was the trees in the park and that little light over the side door of the church. I turned back real quick, figuring he was there again, but he was gone for good.

Well, they say that fella Chuck Yeager busted the sound barrier right after the war, but don't you believe it. I did it myself that night in the thirties. Once I found out that my feet and legs still worked I took off right up the middle of Maple Street like that bird in them cartoons when the coyote is tryin' to catch him. You know, when you can't see his legs movin' and I didn't stop until I got to that back door right there. First thing I did when I got in the house was check in the mirror to see if my hair had turned white. It hadn't and I never told Ma about it.

But I did make a mistake. I told a couple of friends about what I had seen and, of course, they told a hundred other kids and I took a good deal of ribbin' for a period of time. Once, when I was headin' home, Orrie Baker jumped out at me from behind them same bushes wearing a sheet and screamin' and hollering. I knocked him flatter than piss on the Texas prairie and busted one of his front teeth. That ended the teasing for good.

Funny thing, though. I learned a good lesson from that experience. I took the ribbing and teasing because I had to and the nice thing about something like that is that it don't last long. There's always somethin' bigger and juicier coming along to take its place. Anyways, the people who razed me were enjoying my discomfort and havin' a good time doing it, but I could tell that some didn't have their heart in it. You know how I could tell? Their eyes; they was going along with the game, ribbing and laughing alright, but their eyes wasn't laughing. Deep down they knew I wasn't lying because *they'd seen something* too. While they pointed and jeered there was something in their eyes akin to fear.

And that's the valuable lesson I'll pass on to you, young fella. If you really want to know how somebody feels about you, don't just pay attention to what they're doin' and sayin'. Look into their eyes. Somebody once told me

that the eyes were the window to the soul and that's the damned truth! A man can hate your guts and be laughing and patting you on the back and telling you what he thinks you want to hear. But if he truly likes you his eyes will be laughing too. You mark my words; you'll be able to tell exactly what a man is thinking by lookin' in his eyes. Try it the next time you meet someone. Look in their eyes. And I'll never forget the eyes of that damned ghost . . .