

THE LIVES OF GHOSTS

Look. When the ferry makes this bend, I can see straight down the narrow stretch of road we drove that night. Memories rush back out of sequence, but so strong some days I hear myself saying them out loud here on deck. Passengers think I'm on Bluetooth, or look nervous and move away from the old guy leaning over the rail, talking to himself. I understand.

Most commuters stay in their cars the whole way over. I get out and watch until we pass the old house up ahead on Witherton Spit. Each time, I tell myself to turn my head, look the other way, but I don't. It doesn't matter. I'd see that same image with my eyes closed. It still haunts me, particularly on this day each year, searching for sense in nonsense, meaning in meaningless things. I have to find a way to shake it off.

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We could hear the commotion coming from Rock's room that afternoon as we entered the dorm. "Hey, what's happening?" He saw us in the doorway and called out over all the racket.

"Friday night, baby!" Dion said, stepping inside with a kind of funky dance step suited for the local hero he considered himself to be. Two years older than us freshmen, he knew where the parties were and sometimes, how to get in. I worked with him at the car lot that summer, straight out of high school. When fall semester started, Dion got to know the guys living around me on the second floor. Sure, I knew he was full of shit, but he might have been the best friend I had.

He mocked up this expression of disbelief. "You clowns just gonna sit around here smelling each other on Halloween?" Our choices were slim. Spending money we saved,

Lives of Ghosts

expecting it to last until winter break, was evaporating as fast as most of us picked up the goofy new dormitory nicknames.

Sarge said, "You got some bright idea, lay it on us."

"Exactly," Dion followed. "Maybe we take a ride. Party in a haunted house." While that sunk in, he did his standard pose thing; fingertips in back jean pockets, thumbs forward through the empty belt loops. "My dad bought this place out by the harbor to move the business. Thought we'd rent out rooms till then."

That's how he played it, glancing at his feet, slowly rubbing one hand on the back of his neck. "Then we found out about the ghosts. The first tenants split after three days." Old rocking chairs moved themselves in different directions, he said. An antique radio box changed stations all by itself. "Some eerie shit," he said, slowly nodding his head.

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The old man would have kept the lot open that night. He was gone to visit some dying cousin in New York and left his son in charge of Mr. D's Motors. Dion decided used car shoppers would have other things in mind on Halloween.

That afternoon was warm for late October. I helped Dion wash and wax his new car. The whole routine. Not like I had anything better to do. Back then, that fluorescent green paint, the racing stripes, and five spoke chrome wheels were still a novelty. Their finance man had it repossessed when a guy stopped sending payments back from Nam. Dion closed the deal with a small transfer fee and the missing car notes.

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The dorm guys were an odd mix, but one common bond among us was the Draft Lottery coming that December. Slips of paper printed with everyone's birth date would be pulled from a

Lives of Ghosts

big hamster cage on national television, one by one. That sequence set our chances for dodging bullets and bamboo spears in the jungle.

There was another bond between Dion and me. Both of us were faking it. Already flunking out of school, I played militant protester, claiming a focus on bigger things. Maybe just finding other excuses to get high. Time Magazine advertised this free love all around us, and I spent a lot of time looking for those coupons. Dion played college student so well most folks believed his act. Because his father did, he got a generous salary at work to cover the cost of tuition, books and expenses.

I don't know who else, but I knew different. I heard the story over a shared quart of Schlitz one night after we closed the lot. Dion flunked out after his freshman year. After that he worked a scam, laying used textbooks around the house, using office gadgets to produce official-looking schedules and report cards. When Mr. D bought a Navy surplus laminator to seal car titles, Dion made a side income on fake ID's for underage students and navy guys.

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Working at the lot that summer, I saw his dad play natural salesman. With those hound dog eyes straddling his giant, arched nose, people took to him right away. "Trade in like yours, two months, need new tires. Next month, valve job." He mixed bits of Greek fables into jokes he picked up in this country. People told him he looked like "that Danny Thomas guy on television." He would say, "My cousin," and all would laugh.

Word never got out that Mr. D wouldn't drive in traffic. "Like too many fish in shallow water." He took the train for trips and the trolley around town. No one knew then his heart doctor had advised him to avoid stressful situations, quit the cigars, cut back on the drinking, stop working long hours, and so on.

Lives of Ghosts

The coffee pot was always on for cops and Navy recruiters who stopped by. He hosted monthly open house at the business, inviting councilmen and license officials for free food and sometimes in the back, a shot or two of Bourbon or Ouzo. Mr. D. talked all the time about how his son would complete “the education” so he wouldn’t “be scrambled” to make a living like his old man.

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Dion told his captive audience in the dorm room that afternoon, “House is empty. Dad’s out of town for a few days. Come check it out for yourselves.”

Kraut called bullshit. “You expect us to believe that ghost stuff?” He roomed with ‘Eggs’ Ackley. Together they perfected their own brand of obnoxious. Dion was ready for them.

“Well, fearless friend, you go in first. We’ll follow later and see for ourselves.” He flashed that toothy grin. “Now, if you pussies can get your shit together,” he held one palm up in front of him, like serving the idea on a platter to carry out the door, “we leave the east parking lot at eight o’clock.” We weren’t seven steps down the hall before we heard them clamber to their rooms, raking through desk drawers and pants pockets for loose change.

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At eight o’clock, three cars lined up behind Dion’s in the parking lot. Three cases of beer, two bottles of bourbon, and a sleeve of Dixie cups lifted from the janitor’s closet were going with us. Three guys from the third floor asked to come along and nobody said no.

Sailor Bob’s beat-up old pickup was last in line. He came to school on the GI bill and worked a part-time civilian job on the naval base. Two coolers were in his truck bed. The cute chick working in the cafeteria left the back door cracked so we could raid the ice machine. Sailor’s new Doors tape blared from the eight track player he had mounted under the dashboard.

Lives of Ghosts

Everyone was grateful for new tunes. Short Pecker was on record, saying the next time he heard “Good Morning Starshine,” he’d rip out the machine and stomp it to pieces.

Friday night traffic was heavy. York was right behind us, honking and flashing his damn headlights the instant each light turned green. Sarge’s dirt-colored sedan, full of wild shouts and gestures, pulled alongside us. Eggs leaned out and called in this crazy falsetto.

“You boys looking for a good time?”

“Fools gonna get pulled over,” Dion said to no one in particular. “Cops damn sure out this evening.” When the light changed at the next stoplight, he slammed the chrome T-shirt into gear and threw us back into the seats, accelerating into the open road. Eggs shot the bird as we pulled away.

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Headlights bobbing onto the property cast wild, intersecting shafts of light through the darkness. We parked in splayed directions around a mountain of gravel Mr. D had delivered to resurface the driveway. Sailor pulled forward to unload the coolers then kept right on going, angling his truck up the huge pile of rock.

The house was a four level monster; the first, surrounded on three sides by a wide covered porch. Each floor was recessed above like giant, stacked toy blocks. The fourth was a single room with bay windows looking out on each long side. A steady breeze pushed a bank of marbled clouds over the night. City lights across the water cast everything else in shadow.

Old wooden stair treads groaned under us as we waited for Dion to stab the key into the lock in the dark. The doorknob squealed, he pushed through with his shoulder, and we stumbled in behind him. The sharp click of the light switch was loud in the hush. The bulb suspended from the high ceiling revealed an ancient stove, a chipped sea of black and white floor tile, and creepy

Lives of Ghosts

rust paths in the cracked porcelain below the old faucet. The massive rooms smelled of mildew, old varnish and recent insecticide. Right then, I thought I had it figured it out. Dion was recruiting cheap labor to help refurbish the place.

“Make yourself at home, boys,” he called out after we had some lights on and pulled open the old wooden windows that would. Fresh air blew drapery linings at us in long, billowing pennants. “Watch out for evil spirits and, if you got the balls, feel free to look around.” I saw him check the mail drop box behind the front door and come up empty-handed.

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As the tale was retold, we referred to them as “Flashlight” and “Nightstick,” the two policemen called out to investigate a disturbance. I was the one who went out with Dion when they pulled up. Dion said he thought he recognized one of them from open house at the car lot.

“What seems to be the problem, officer?”

“Had a report of some hippies trashing a house out here,” the cop said, with a sweeping gesture of his nightstick toward the side stairway.

“No hippies here, sir.” Dion shouted over the music, just as the spotlight narrowed to something on the porch.

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Heavy footsteps, slamming doors, and mock screams sounded as the upper floors were explored that night. When that was over, everyone filtered out to the porch. Dion sat on the railing, his back against a pole. “Whatcha’ find out?” He asked no one in particular.

“Creepy old house,” Short Pecker said. “Not much else.”

“You guys see the view from the top?”

“Nope. Padlock on the door,” Rock said.

Lives of Ghosts

“So what’s with the ghosts supposed to be here?” Sarge asked.

“Oh, make no mistake, my friends. They’re here.” Dion had been waiting for that moment. In his story, the house was used as an emergency medical facility during the First World War. Wounded soldiers unloaded from hospital ships were warehoused right there, to die. “On certain nights, they still gamble for cigarettes and argue over radio stations.” The draft through the house blew the sheer, white drapery linings outward, waving like wispy pennants around the spot where Dion stood. He reached inside and clicked the wooden radio knob to add a soft soundtrack behind his story.

“Those that could walk came out here at night,” his eyes shifted to the rocking chairs along the wall, “to sit and take the breeze. Some say they still do.” Dion pulled two rockers beside each other, on the wide area where the porch turned the corner. “Some nights these chairs sway in silent conversation, retelling stories from the lives of ghosts,” he paused with an audible sigh, “to the ghosts of lives that might have been.” I watched Mike pull a thin, bent joint from the pocket of his denim shirt. He was feeling his pockets for a lighter as Eggs peeled off from the group to slip inside.

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I didn’t know then that Dion’s story was improvised. He told me later that vibration from passing trolley cars rocked the chairs, if they were placed just right. Ham radio signals, mixed with those from the Naval Air Station, caused the old radio dial to jump around as if tuning itself. The inspiration for our trip that night was born in the dorm room that afternoon, fulfilling his obligation to get out to the house, sort the mail for bills and checks while his Dad was out of town.

Lives of Ghosts

“Look, goddam, look,” Sarge cried out, pointing toward the corner of the porch. The chairs were moving. One, then the other, then both in unison, rocked in a silent dialogue that slowly turned them to angle toward each other.

“They say it was on a night like this.” Dion paused to let the words come to him. “Hopeless casualties jammed together on cots. Bloody gauze and crusted, makeshift bandages. In that room right there. When a veteran on the edge of consciousness decided he needed one last smoke.”

Fuzzy static blasted from the radio. We could see the red tuning needle jerking crazy across the faded dial. It stopped on a radio station preacher saying salvation was within our reach. Dion reached through the window and clicked it off. He looked back around, nodding slowly, affirming the new evidence. I had to give him credit, his images were stunning; a cigarette falling from dozing lips into the soiled bandages and bedding, then the instant, intense blaze that followed.

“That’s where they set up the brigade,” he sighted down his arm, pointing as if we could all see in the dark, “dipping buckets and passing them up the line. The captain stood right there,” he nodded urgently toward the window sill where Mike was sitting. “Blood curdling screams of agony and desperate pleas licked past him, through the inferno and into the night. In moments before the next full bucket arrived . . .”

That’s when Eggs screamed, “A FLAMING ARM CLUTCHED HIS NECK FROM INSIDE,” reached out through the window, grabbed Mike’s pony tail, and pulled him backward into the parlor. Mike had the joint to his mouth and, as he was pulled off balance, a gust of wind wrapped the drapery linings tight around his head.

Lives of Ghosts

Flames raced up the sheer linen before we could even know there was trouble. In just the few moments we struggled to untangle the burning bundle of hair, paper and dry-rotted fabric, the drapes themselves were burning. Sailor ran in and snatched them off the wall, wooden rods and all, and dragged the whole smoldering mess out to the porch. We threw our drinks on the pile. Bird saw smoke still curling up from Mike's back and we drained beer cans over his head until he was soaked and extinguished.

When the smoke thinned we were standing in a circle around charred remains. Dion just stood there shaking his head back and forth. "Well," he finally said, "isn't that some shit." There seemed to be silent, unanimous agreement that it was. "Let's clean up and get the fuck out of here."

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Our debris was picked up and the place put back like we found it. The soaked, smoking curtains were dragged to the trash pile behind the house. Front porch hosed down. Sheets back in place over the furniture. Sailor carried the coolers to his truck, threw open both doors and cranked up the music all the way. Dion asked us to check all windows, turn off the lights, and take everything we brought.

"Wait," I remember Rock called out, "where are those guys from the third floor?" Just then, flashing red and blue tracks burst across the walls. A search light cut white ovals in the crazed glass of the tall windows, one to the next. We peered cautiously around the kitchen window frames.

It was a city cop car, lights on top swirling, with one man inside aiming the spotlight. The other stood in the gravel, pointing his nightstick at something on the porch.

Lives of Ghosts

Mike had his sopping tee shirt and jeans laying across the porch rail to dry. He stood there barefoot in white BVD's with lengths of his wet hair sticking to his back. That's when Sailor's tape player kicked over, blasting 'Touch Me, Babe' at full volume. The other cop stepped around the front of the car, shining a flashlight up the porch steps.

"Well now, would you look at that," he asked his partner. "This must be the party girl." In the harsh light, his wet, pale skin and dazed expression, Mike looked like an apparition hanging there. "Step on down here, little lady." Mike couldn't hear him over the music and didn't move.

Night Stick motioned vigorously for him to come toward the police car. Mike came down the stairs and gingerly moved his bare feet across the coarse gravel. The cop turned toward where we stood and yelled through cupped hands. "I said turn that shit off." The other guys filed out to the porch. Flashlight asked Mike for his ID at the same time Night Stick ordered him to put his hands on the car. Sailor moved quickly to his truck and leaned in to eject the tape.

It had to be one of the missing third floor guys who came walking around from the waterfront, saw all the activity, and stopped in the shadow of the house. We never knew for sure which idiot it was but, in the sudden silence when the music stopped, an anxious scream flew out of the dark. "Cool it. It's the fucking pigs."

Backing out of his truck, Sailor's elbow bumped the parking brake release. Nightstick yelled, "I said hands on the car," and wacked the back of Mike's leg. Mike jerked to grab his knee but, in the uneven footing, ended up doing a belly flop into the gravel. Sailor was clear of the driver's side door and a few steps away from before the truck started rolling backward.

It wasn't more than ten feet, but the truck picked up enough speed to roll over and pin both of Mike's legs before he could get out of the way. The open tailgate smashed through the

Lives of Ghosts

left headlight on the cop car and stabbed deep through the grill and into the radiator. The coolers tumbled open and the bottles, cans and trash we picked up inside spilled from the truck bed across the hood. Mike screamed and flailed as we frantically pushed the truck off him but was unconscious by the time we dragged him on his stomach from under there.

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“Smells like a drinking party” one of the paramedics said as they loaded Mike on the gurney. The other said, “Yeah, in a bathtub.” When they arrived and broke out the emergency lanterns, we could tell how bad it was. Mike lay there bloody and broken in his tattered underwear like in those Renaissance stigmata paintings. Bleeding was profuse, and a jagged inch or two of femur protruded through the skin of his right thigh. Both his feet lay limp at right angles from his legs, in the same direction. I heard someone move away quickly from the circle of light to puke.

We never made sense of how the Shore Patrol got there, but as the ambulance drove off, a white jeep coming down the driveway moved over to let it pass. When it got to us, two uniformed guys in white helmets walked over to talk to the police. The cops had taken ID cards from most of us, and shared one with the shore patrol. It wasn't hard to spot the stamp on the booze from the commissary, or to pick out the guy who supplied it. They handcuffed Sailor, put him in the back of the jeep, and drove off into the night.

The cops were devising a strategy to minimize their paperwork. The injury and ambulance details would be enough in themselves and, with Sailor in custody; the police car damage was accounted for. They remembered Dion from the car lot and bought his explanation, something along the lines of: “We came out to check on remodeling progress and a party broke out. Sorry for all the trouble. New car lot opens out here in a couple months. Public service

Lives of Ghosts

employees are always welcome for some holiday cheer.” The police wrecker arrived to haul the squad car.

As the officers handed back ID’s, our guys loaded up, rolled back out the driveway, and headed home. The keys were in Sailor’s truck and Rock drove it back to the dorm. Just Dion and I were left. The house was dark and secure. He double checked that the kitchen door was locked and hid the key.

The tiny side mirrors on his car made rear view difficult, especially at night. Dion held the door open with his left hand and leaned out to look behind him as we backed down the driveway. He took it slow, turning around every so often to look in front and get his bearings. All of a sudden he stopped and, when I turned to look at him, he was staring back at the house.

“Look, he said, “Did you see that?”

“See what?”

“That flash of light. From the forth floor.” He allowed the car to roll back slightly and there it was again, a glowing, vertical line of light coming from that little room.

“They said that door was locked,” I remembered aloud.

“Well, somebody was up there,” Dion said. “Have to go up and see.”

“You gotta be shittin’ me,” would have been my response but, before the words were out of my mouth, I could see by the light of the dashboard that he wasn’t.

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Our flashlight was nearly dead. The way the house was wired, you had to climb each flight before pawing the wall in the dark for the light switch. We carefully made our way up to the second and third floor landings with a shoulder pressed to the outside wall. By the dim hanging bulb on the third floor, we saw the padlocked door to the narrow stairway beyond. But,

Lives of Ghosts

as we moved closer and our eyes adjusted, the lock was hanging behind the hasp. Dion moved the metal lever aside, reached for the door handle, and slowly pulled it open. The orange glow fell down the steps and with it, a hellish low buzz of chaotic, mixed noises.

At the top of the stairs, we saw that the glow came from a bone-colored parchment lampshade. The noise came from another of those floor model radio consoles with the needle tuned just off a church organ broadcast. Mr. D sat in a worn, button leather chair beside the lamp table. There was no telling how long he'd been dead, just that it happened before his son knew he was back in town. The cold cigar butt perched in the tray beside him was mostly intact ash. On the right arm of the chair was a stack of invoices. Checks were on the right. Lying open in his lap was a letter addressed to Homer Dionysios, Jr. It read, 'Greetings from the Selective Service System of the United States.'

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It turned out to be a bad time for Sailor to get arrested. Stories about servicemen buying booze for underage college students had been regular, sensational news features those days. His father, a retired Chief Petty Officer, was so angry to find out his son fucked up the cakewalk future he had set up, he wouldn't bail him out. Sailor missed just enough class during his incarceration that he dropped out before semester grades were final. The public defender accepted a plea deal where charges were dropped if Sailor re-enlisted for another tour of duty in Southeast Asia.

Dion reported to boot camp. I worked for the big car dealership that bought up Mr. D's inventory. I still do.

Mike's recovery was a long ordeal. They let him withdraw from school without affecting his GPA, but he never went back. He started over with a medical draft deferment and a lifelong

Lives of Ghosts

limp, painful just to look at. As an unforeseen benefit, he received a belated nickname. The guys who visited in the hospital took to calling him “Speed Bump,” and it stuck. I saw him behind the counter in the auto parts store, wearing a blue work shirt with a name stitched in cursive letters above the pocket; “Bump.”

I found out Dion was killed in Quang Tri province the following spring. There wasn’t much detail in the paper, just the weekly feature called, “Local Heroes.” It noted that he died eleven days before he turned twenty-one.

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I’m on this ferry three or four times a week, taking paperwork to the downtown office. I could take the Bay Bridge but, depending on traffic, the boat ride saves as much as an hour each way. Much of the year, the morning trip is so dark or foggy that it’s hard to pick out the old place, ever since that area turned into mini-mansions for rich folks. The return trip is different. Late on fall days like this, as the sun disappears into the bay and the boat arcs its path to run parallel to the shore, the low sun from behind cuts those giant homes into sharp profile against the sky.

Yesterday as we passed, the harsh yellow light knifed through that tiny fourth floor room on top, and there they were. In sharp silhouettes, Mr. D. sat in his chair, that unmistakable nose in clear profile. Dion stood a few feet away, hands to his waist, elbows defining triangles of light.

When I ran into Bird a few years ago, he told me Dion’s name is on that monument wall in Washington. I should drive up there and see it someday; maybe close the book, get a different perspective. Different from this one, caught up in the lives of ghosts, and the ghosts of lives that could have been.

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