

THE GHOSTOLOGIST

by Mark Schreiber

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CANAL HOUSE

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ISBN 978-0-9861023-8-7

cover design by Julius Tan

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My father and my Aunt Amanda picked me up at the Cleveland airport on a stormy night at the end of July. Either one of them alone might have forgotten the date of my return—my overworked, easily distracted father, or my poor great aunt, who had suffered a stroke a couple years ago and whose memory was like an Xbox after you spilled grape juice on it. But between the two of them they somehow usually managed to remember arrival times and appointments.

I had just spent a month visiting my mother and her new husband in their midlife crisis condo in Los Angeles. It was awkward, to say the least. She was a chemist, like my father, very busy with her research, and not comfortable with a son who was becoming a teenager. Her new husband was a biologist and treated me like an unfamiliar species. I treated them both like ghosts, not part of my world.

But in truth I loved the ghost world. My mother wanted to take me to all the usual tourist traps, but I urged her to take me on a night bus tour of haunted movie star homes.

“Why can’t we go to Disneyland like other families?” she complained.

Her new husband scoffed at my obsession. “You’d think with two scientists for parents he would have turned out differently.”

He said this right in front of me, as the Haunted Mansion bus drove through Beverly Hills.

“It’s just his way of rebelling,” my mother said.

Also, right in front of me. Was I a ghost?

“Maybe I’m not rebelling,” I said in my own defense. “Maybe you’re just narrow-minded. Did you ever think of that?”

“They have a haunted mansion at Disneyland,” my mom said. “I think you have a better chance of finding ghosts there.”

My father hugged and kissed me as we walked to baggage claim, which felt good. But he wasted no time on small talk, like asking me how my trip was or how my mother was or what I had done for the last four weeks.

“I have a surprise for you!” he said.

His face was beaming. Was it because I was home and he missed me, or was it because of the surprise? Whatever it was, I was glad to see him happy. He had been so depressed the last year, since Mom left.

“I bought a house!” he said.

That was more of a shock than a surprise. “A house!” I yelled. “Most kids go away for a month and their dad buys a

lawnmower, or a new set of golf clubs. How could you buy a house without asking me?”

I felt betrayed. I knew the house had painful memories for him and he wanted to move on. But it was the house I had grown up in. It was one of the few things in my turbulent life that gave it a sense of permanence. And he sold it from under me? Just like that?

“What happened to our doing everything as a family? Like you always say? You, me, Aunt Amanda? I loved our old house.”

“But our new house is older than our old house,” my dad said with his eccentric sense of humor. It’s a mansion, Grayson. Three floors! It has an observatory with an antique telescope, and a ballroom with a grand piano and a fresco on the ceiling, and a thorn bush garden in the shape of a maze, and a large swimming pool. The pool has a cracked diving board, but I’ll buy a new one. The house was built in the late eighteenth century but apparently it’s only had a few owners. I’ve been fixing it up. You won’t believe all the old furniture and paintings. It’s as though no one wanted to throw anything out. Or they were afraid to. There’s even a harp.”

“What’s a harp?” I joked.

I heard my father laughing. And then it hit me what he’d said. “What do you mean people were too afraid to throw anything away?”

“That’s how I got it at such a bargain. The one time in my life I’ve profited from people’s superstitions. It’s haunted.”

Now it was my turn to become excited. “Really?”

“Of course not. We don’t believe in ghosts, do we?”

“Yes, yes.”

My father laughed again. “And you claim I never think about you. Well, I thought about you when I bought this house. I thought, this will entertain Grayson phenomenally while he stumbles through his infantile phase of believing in the supernatural.”

He could be just as sarcastic as my mother, even when he was trying to be nice. My parents had more in common than they thought.

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The mansion was on a quiet, dark street in Cleveland Heights, with lots of tall, creepy trees. The kinds of trees that could crush a house if lightning hit them and they fell the wrong way.

My dad parked on the curb so I could get the full effect of seeing the house from the front. He opened an umbrella and held it over me as I got out of the car.

Sad as I was to have lost the home of my childhood without any preparation, without even being able to say goodbye, I have to admit the mansion was the coolest house I'd ever seen. A lot scarier than the haunted houses in Beverly Hills, where the only mysterious lights came from security guards when we crept too close to the fences. Being three stories, it was tall to begin with, but it looked even taller because of the huge roof and chimney. The roof was at a steeper angle than any roof I'd ever seen. Not even a cat could walk on that roof without sliding to the ground. And the chimney was as tall as a smoke stack, covered in soot.

Lightning flashed, lighting up a huge oak tree hovering over the side of the house, its branches scraping the wall in the wind. I thought how cool it would be if the tree got hit and toppled against the house and it all caved in, this centuries-old house, like a house of cards, in front of my eyes.

“Impressed?” my dad asked.

“Very.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet.”

And he led me and Aunt Amanda inside.

The big green door creaked open and my father turned on the lights, revealing the main hallway. I set down my suitcase.

“Wow.”

“Unfortunately, the ghosts seem rather shy,” he said. “I haven’t seen so much as a shadow of the afterlife.”

But all I saw were ghosts. Ancient eyes that followed me looking down from the portraits on the walls above the benches and going up the stairs. Old sad-looking men and women. Pretty women even sadder. Little boys and girls younger than me in stupid suits or dresses with snarling dogs or witchy cats. They were old, dark paintings, from an age when life was supposed to be traumatic. No one was smiling.

“What’s this?” I joked, pulling a string on a big gold thing standing in the corner.

“That’s the harp. Don’t they teach you anything in school?”

“I think I saw it in a cartoon once.” I pulled the other strings. It played creepy music.

I could have stayed in the entrance hall for an hour, studying the portraits, but my dad pulled me by the collar into the living room. There was a fireplace so big I could have stood up inside it, and I would have if he hadn’t grabbed my shirt

collar again. There were brown leather chairs and couches with metal studs holding them together.

“So this is our new start,” I said. “Going back into the past.”

“You like ghosts, I like antiques,” my father said. “I thought it was a win-win situation.”

There were paintings all over the walls in here too, but not of people. These were paintings of ships. But not fancy yachts and pleasure boats. These were ships in storms, sinking ships, ships at war firing cannons at each other.

I stepped close to one painting of a battle and stared at the tiny head of a sailor lost overboard. I could almost hear him screaming for help.

My dad pulled me away. “You can examine the paintings later. The tour continues!”

We walked along the long creaking wooden hallway to his office. This was the smallest room so far, and darkest, with red curtains and a heavy desk with a colored glass lamp on it. The paintings in here were of soldiers, men in red uniforms with curling mustaches, lines of men in blue uniforms firing rifles, dark men on camels attacking with long swords.

The kitchen was the only modern room so far, with a new stove and a granite island counter with shiny barstools. There weren't any paintings on the walls, only cabinets. Nothing scary. I guess that's because ghosts don't eat.

Over the sink was a huge window that looked out onto the pool. To the left was the back door. I turned the heavy knob.

“It’s raining. You can look at the pool tomorrow.”

I squinted into the darkness, and when lightning struck again I could see the pool was empty.

“I keep meaning to get it filled,” my dad explained. “Remind me in the morning, okay? Come on.”

He led me through a door on the other side of the kitchen that led to the back staircase. Unlike the entrance hall, with its wide, grand staircase, its varnished stairs and painted rails, this staircase was dark, steep and narrow, with creaking steps and a railing you could get splinters from if you slid your hand across it.

The second-floor hallway had new carpeting and striped wallpaper. The pictures here were smaller, under glass. Prints, not paintings, of flowers with thorns.

We started at the far end, at the top of the main staircase, in a giant room with a slippery wooden floor. This was obviously the ballroom. There was a black grand piano in the corner that had seen better days, and a couple music stands, and a few folding chairs stacked against the wall.

I looked up and saw that the ceiling was painted with angels and demons, like in a castle or museum, lit by a large chandelier.

This could easily be ground zero for the ghost, or ghosts. I imagined a party here, a hundred years ago. Champagne and cigars. A fashionable lady playing the piano. Lots of laughing and dancing, until a jealous wife caught her husband in another woman's arms. Or maybe it was the husband who caught his wife. Shots were fired. A ghost was born.

“How many ghosts are there supposed to be?” I asked. “A man, woman, child? What's the story?”

“How should I know?”

“Didn't you ask?”

“If I can't measure it with a spectroscope I'm not interested,” my father said in that superior tone he had.

The next room was the master bedroom, now my father's room. I recognized his king-sized bed and antique dressers. His windows looked out on the driveway and a row of willowy trees that shook in the storm.

The next room was Aunt Amanda's. I recognized her single bed with a quilt she had made herself, her old television, her tiny round tables with photos of family members I'd never known. She was like a grandmother to me. She had been a teacher before retiring, and very independent. But then she had a stroke and moved in with my father. At first it was so he could take care of her, but after the divorce she began taking care of him as well, and of me, cooking and looking after the house.

The next room was the laundry room. Then a utility room, filled with empty boxes and paint cans.

We reached the last door.

“Voila!” my father said, pushing it open. “The corner office. Pride of the house.”

There were two large windows with white mini-blinds, fresh-smelling carpet, all my furniture from the old house, my computer, my PlayStation, my collapsible meditation pyramid I had made with tent poles, my box of amulets, my incense candles, my strobe light, my flashlights, my temperature gauge, my pocket audio recorder, my infrared camera.

“Great, isn’t it?” my dad said.

I don’t know why I didn’t share his excitement. Maybe because it looked too much like my old room. Maybe it was the new carpet smell. Maybe because this room could have been any twelve-year-old boy’s room. Maybe because I was hoping for something old and scary in this old and scary house.

“Let’s see the third floor,” I said.

“Maybe tomorrow,” my father said. “You must be tired from your trip. How was your flight?”

That was my father. Every other parent asks this question in baggage claim. I was surprised he asked at all. Then again, he hadn’t asked about my trip, about what I’d done for the last four weeks, about my mother.

The grand staircase ended on this floor. I had to take the back stairs to the third floor. It was colder here, and not as well lit. The floor in here was wooden boards, unvarnished. There was no wallpaper or paintings on the hallway walls.

I stepped into the room above my room. My dad followed. Here there were also two large windows on either side of the corner. One looked out on the pool, the other on the garage. But these windows were uncovered. Branches from the oak tree I had noticed from the street crashed against the glass with each gust of wind.

The bedroom floor was varnished wood, but the boards creaked. On the other side of the room sat an old bed made from a dark wood with a massive headboard. It looked a hundred years old.

There was a flimsy metal nightstand by the bed, and a simple wooden table against the window that looked out on the pool. Against the wall by the door was an antique armoire in the same style as the bed, taller than my father, with a full-length mirror on the outside right door. I tried to open it but the knob was tiny and it stuck.

To the left, opposite the window that looked out onto the pool, was a small door.

I opened it.

It was a musty walk-in closet with an angled ceiling, empty except for an antique chair and a rag doll that looked decades

old. The doll was sitting on the chair, like someone had carefully placed it there yesterday.

“Did you do this?” I asked my dad.

“Do you think I play with dolls?”

“Did a little girl live here before?”

“Probably at one time. It’s an old house. But the man I bought it from lived alone. He purchased it a few years ago as an investment, but could never sell it. Until I came along.”

“Well someone put this doll on the chair. And it wasn’t a hundred years ago.”

“How many people do you think have been through this house, Son? Carpenters, painters, maybe Aunt Amanda put it on the chair? Eh, Amanda?”

Amanda was still breathing heavily from climbing the stairs. “It’s not my doll,” she said.

The next room on the third floor was a long, narrow storage closet filled with empty wooden crates, filing cabinets, pieces of carpet, brooms and buckets.

Across the way there was only one door, to a bathroom with a tiny shower.

The next room was the largest on the floor, a library with old books on tall shelves along both side walls. A wooden table with green lamps sat in the middle of the room.

“You must love this!” I said to my dad, who liked to read. “Your very own library.”

“Our very own library,” he said. “Although not the sort of books that interest me. Mostly bestsellers.”

I started looking at the shelves. “Some of these look very old. I wonder if they’re valuable.”

“If they were valuable someone would have sold them long ago.”

“Unless they were haunted.”

“A haunted *Valley of the Dolls*,” my dad said, picking out a book with a picture of pills on the cover. “Imagine that!”

I started to sneeze from the dust.

“Come,” my dad said. “If you think this is special wait till you see the last room.”

The last room had a dark blue door with gold stars painted on it. It must have been painted a long time ago, because the paint was faded and peeling.

“The observatory!” I shouted.

The room was smaller than I expected and there was no furniture. Just a large telescope set on a round wooden platform you could rotate with a lever.

I stepped onto the platform and looked down into the eyepiece. Of course I knew I couldn’t see anything. The ceiling was blocking the sky. But still I couldn’t help myself.

“It must have cost a fortune when it was built,” I said.

“Yes, and now you can probably see the stars just as well with an iPad,” my dad said.

“But this is way cooler.”

“You think so? I’m of two minds. I appreciate the hand made, all the labor that went into making such devices. But I’m also a champion of sophistication and progress. But it’s nice to see someone of your generation take an interest in relics such as telescopes and books.”

“How do you see the sky?” I asked.

There were no windows. The ceiling was painted black and was curved.

My father pointed to a crank on the wall. “But another time,” he said. “When it’s not raining.”

I went back to the first room, the room with the chair and doll. I stood by the window looking down at the rain pour into the empty swimming pool. When lightning struck the pool shone a bright green, like it was radioactive.

“Can I sleep here?” I asked.

“Here?” Aunt Amanda said. “But your father took such trouble to make your room. Just like before.”

“But we don’t want life to be just like before, do we?” I challenged him.

He waved me away like I was crazy. “Sleep in the library if you like. Just don’t burn the place down with your candles.”

I brought up my computer and TV and PlayStation. Aunt Amanda found the right size sheets and helped me make the bed.

She jumped at the sound of an especially loud clap of thunder. “Ah! I hate storms,” she complained. “And here you are on the top floor without blinds on the windows. Aren’t you afraid of storms, Grayson?”

“Of course I’m afraid,” I said with a smile.

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I turned out the light. Normally I would have lit my meditation candles, but because my dad forbade it I settled for a flashlight. I lay with the flashlight under the covers, listening to the rain, to the wind, to the branches scratching the window. Was it only the branches?

What was I doing? Sure, I had searched for ghosts in my old house. But the only thing scary about the old house was the garbage disposal, which sounded like a cat drowning. I knew there weren't any ghosts there. This was different.

I had to go to the bathroom. God. I ran to the toilet and peed at record speed. When a clap of thunder sounded I ran back to the room without bothering to flush.

I heard footsteps on the stairs. Creaking floorboards.

“Dad?”

I heard soft steps coming close, heavy breathing.

I jumped out of bed ready to escape. But it was only Aunt Amanda. She had brought up a tray with a pitcher of ice water with lemon slices and a glass. I bumped into her and half of it spilled on the armoire.

We both screamed at once.

“Aunt Amanda, why don't you say something?”

“I thought you might be thirsty.”

“Aunt Amanda, don’t do that again! I thought you were a ghost.”

“A ghost? I don’t think so.”

She set what was left of the lemon water on the nightstand.

I got back under the covers.

I heard footsteps on the stairs again. But not going down. Coming up.

“Aunt Amanda?” I shouted, peeking out, shining my flashlight “Announce yourself.”

“Be calm,” my dad said. “I just came to say good night.”

He sat on the edge of the bed. “If you’re so scared why are you staying up here? Come down to your room.”

“I’m not scared,” I insisted, shivering.

“I can even put a cot in my room if you like.”

“I’m not a baby!”

He patted my leg. “If you see any ghosts I’d like a specimen for my spectroscope,” he joked.

“You’ll be the first to know,” I told him.

“I’d say ‘sweet dreams,’ he said. “But....”

I listened to the sound of his footsteps going down the stairs. I pointed the flashlight away from me, toward the window, and tried to go to sleep. It had been a long day after all, and as much as I wanted to see a ghost, daylight couldn’t come soon enough.

But I couldn't sleep. I kept opening my eyes. I could see the closet door in the reflection of the window. The door was slightly opened.

It bothered me. I couldn't stop thinking about the doll on the chair.

Finally I got up to close it. But curiosity got the best of me and instead of closing the closet door I opened it.

I saw a woman dressed in black hanging from the slanted ceiling. The chair was overturned beneath her dangling feet.

I slammed the door. I couldn't breath or I would have screamed. I felt like I had run a mile at full speed. Like there was a boa constrictor around my chest.

I was shaking uncontrollably.

I had to open the door again. But it was the last thing I wanted to do.

I aimed the flashlight, but it shook in my hand, sending its beam all over the room.

“One, two, three...”

I opened the door again, but the hanged woman was gone. The doll sat on the chair, exactly like before.

I closed the door slowly, quietly, until I heard it click.

I checked my temperature gauge, but it read normal. I should have checked the temperature in the closet, but I didn't have the nerve. I wanted to leave the room with all my soul, to sleep on the cot in my father's room.

But I was determined not to let fear defeat me. I got back under the covers, even my head, as if a cotton sheet would protect me from all the evil in the universe, and counted by sevens to try to drive the image of the hanged woman out of my mind, and then by elevens, and then by thirteens....

