



IT IS AN HONEST GHOST

JOHN
GOLDBACH



**IT IS AN
HONEST
GHOST**
JOHN
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To Madeleine

'Maybe a man's name doesn't matter all that much.'

– Orson Welles, from *F for Fake*

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AN OLD STORY:
IN FIVE PARTS

I

An old story: disappointments in love, debts unpaid, a series of lousy apartments, a series of lousy jobs, betrayals, some rancour, some sickness, etc. He in many ways was typical but it was in fact the amassing of these specific typical experiences that made him an individual, he liked to think. After a long winter, with its blizzards and periodic power outages and frozen pipes and eternal darkness, spring had arrived, with its budding branches and populated streets and clear blue skies and women in skirts. Something like hope. By mid-May, after weeks of drinking in bars again and trying to meet new women, he once again fell into his solitary winter ways. The promise of the new was not dead and buried, though it once again felt distant, he decided, one mild afternoon, sitting at his kitchen table. The days passed and each day he'd go through his routine, or one of the four or five routines he'd formed and mixed up, in a sense, to keep from confronting the fact that he was a creature of habit, and perhaps temperament, who had much in common with a marmot. Still, even with his varied routines, he thought about a certain inescapable mundanity that he feared came from within but hated to confront so he rarely did, that is to say, confront it.

II

Instead, he altered and augmented his already-existing routines, taking new streets when he walked to work, stopping in stores he'd never been in before, even going into bookstores that sold books in languages he couldn't read. He read in parks. One night, around dusk, when people walk their dogs while the sun sets, he sat on a park bench, by a pond, reading in the last light. He continued reading and his mind wandered, but he reread the words and sentences and paragraphs he'd passed over, lost in thoughts that had little to do with the book in his hands. A woman with a child and dog walked past the bench. He imagined they quickened their pace when they approached the bench. The sky was more blue than orange. The geese were dark in the sky, flying in awkward formation. He watched them disappear into the dark blue. The park lights gradually came on, humming gently; he stood up and walked away when they came to full light.

III

At night he'd read on his couch for hours on end and often until daybreak, or until he fell asleep, whichever came first. Sometimes he drank. When he drank, however, he'd still read, though absently – that is to say, more absently than usual. While absently reading, he'd often dream of past loves, though not necessarily of past events. He'd dream of new and impossible events, with a strong sense of the past running through these fantasies for the sake of verisimilitude. The nights were long, not surprisingly, though he nevertheless occupied them, with varying degrees of success. First thing every morning, he'd put the kettle on the burner and make

mug after mug of steaming Gunpowder Green Tea. Again, he'd submit to routine. Love might be infinite, he'd think, though we're cracked under its impossible pressures.

IV

Mid-summer it rained for days, a tireless downpour. He avoided going outside. A cat screeched and yowled in the rain on the fire escape outside his window, though he did nothing. It isn't my cat, he thought. The days looked like nights and the nights went on and on. He was finding it difficult to concentrate. He was finding it difficult to sleep. Nothing seemed to maintain his interest, though he submitted to his routines nonetheless. He'd diagnosed his life as hollow and senseless, and the world followed suit. Cars hydroplaned in the rain and sounded like ocean waves. Thunder rumbled continuously. While sitting at his kitchen table, he thought, I've slipped through the grates of a storm sewer. The cat screeched and yowled above the waves.

V

He sat on a park bench. The sun set. Shadows of leaves shuddered quickly on the pale asphalt path. It would be an hour or so until night. He held a book in his hands, though he wasn't following what he was reading; instead, he was thinking about a woman sitting on a red blanket and reading across the pond on the grassy embankment. He wondered how he could possibly talk to her. He wondered what he'd possibly say. It seemed so impossible, walking over to her, introducing himself, starting up conversation. The water on

the surface of the pond rippled in the breeze. He considered removing his wristwatch, then asking her if she had the time. That's stupid, he thought. He read absently as the sun set and across the pond a beautiful woman read, too. The sky darkened while the park lights slowly warmed. He closed his book and looked across the pond, where not minutes ago the beautiful woman had been reading, though now she was gone and he sat still on the bench. He waited until the lights reached full intensity, then he stood to walk home.

IT IS AN HONEST GHOST

The night wind blew loudly and we sat in the car in the mill parking lot talking, watching the tree boughs bend and sway to and fro and almost break. Soon, I thought, a branch on one of these evergreens will snap in the blustering wind and fly around aimlessly. We were waiting for James. He'd run into the mill to cash a paycheque for Allan from one of the tills in the old safe in the office. It was Allan's McDonald's paycheque; he had signed the back, and we sat waiting in James's 1974 Buick Riviera. We were going drinking downtown. A band we liked was playing; we had just dropped acid.

James returned and got in behind the wheel and counted out six twenties and passed them to Allan, saying, 'Here you go, fucker.'

'Thanks,' said Allan, pocketing the bills. 'Let's drink!'

'Hear, hear,' I said.

And James spun out the back tires and whipped the car around and sped up the mill hill. The acid hadn't kicked in yet, or not really, but every once in a while we'd ask each other if it had taken effect. Slowly, it did. We all smoked and music played loudly; James had installed a stolen CD player where the old dial radio used to be. He'd installed some stolen speakers, too, that he'd bought from the back of a truck at a gas station. They sounded like shit.

James wasn't drinking but he'd nevertheless taken acid, though it hadn't really kicked in yet. He claimed he drove

fine on acid. The streetlights passed by quickly as we descended into the city and the fields turned to strip malls and fast food and gas stations and apartment buildings, all with large parking lots. We kept on driving straight toward downtown, winding with the street, with no other traffic around. There was plenty of parking behind the club. James parked far from other cars; the lot was mainly dark save some lights by the booth, where no attendant sat.

'I don't think we have to pay,' said Allan. 'Or at least no one's there.'

'Fuck it,' said James and cut the engine, and we all got out.

There was a line out front winding around the corner, but Allan told us just to follow him, and we did, and when we got to the door they let us in, stamped our hands, patted our backs while pushing us forward, and we made our way toward one of the bars. It was loud already and some band was playing, though none of us knew their name and no one we asked at the bar seemed to have any idea who they were, either. But they were loud and the vocals were distorted and so was the guitar and bass and the drums were heavy, too, and fast. Allan and I got beers and James got a Coke. We went outside to the patio with our drinks.

'The band sounds like shit,' said James.

'I'd have to agree with you,' said Allan, an unlit cigarette in his mouth.

'I'm feeling it,' I said. 'The acid, not the band.'

'Me too,' said Allan.

And James nodded, though he looked a little scared. But we said nothing and smoked. The moon was bright and there were rippling cloudbanks that moved fast past the moon, screening it briefly but sheer.

'When do they go on?' said James.

'Next,' said Allan. 'I'm feeling it. I'm definitely feeling it.'

James and I nodded, our bloodshot eyes wide open.

We went inside and the music was loud, the band was screaming, it seemed like all of them were screaming, and it was all distorted and muddy and we moved into the crowd toward the stage but quickly turned around as the crowd pushed and slammed into each other the closer we got to the stage. We moved back toward the bar.

'I kind of want to get the fuck out of here,' I said.

'I wouldn't mind leaving, either,' said James.

'Sure,' said Allan. 'I don't really care.'

'Let's head back to the mill,' I said.

As we left the bar, there was still a line bending around the corner. The car was as we had left it and there wasn't a ticket on the windshield. We piled in and spun out of the parking lot and northward toward the mill. The streetlights cast large shadows of their poles, stretching out like elastic arms, like the guy from the Fantastic Four, the leader, though I'd forgotten his name – Dr. Something, I thought.

No one was talking and we were left alone with our bending thoughts. Eventually, Allan broke the silence.

'I need something salty,' he said. 'Can we get some nuts or something from the mill?'

'Sure,' said James.

The Riviera descended the dark mill hill and in its lights were geese waddling out of the way, some hissing, wings spread, waddling quickly, and we pulled into the mill parking lot.

'What the fuck?' said James, stopping the car.

'What?' we said.

'The office light,' he said, motioning with his head, hands gripping the wheel. 'It's always left on. It's how my dad says we can tell if someone came in and tried to rob the safe.'

'How's that?' said Allan.

'Chances are they'll think they turned on the light and shut it off on their way out.'

'Are you saying you think someone tried to rob the safe while we were gone?' I said. 'You probably shut the light off after you went in and cashed Al's cheque.'

'Of course that's what happened,' said Allan. 'Come on. It's not like someone's been here and robbed the mill in the hour we've been gone.'

'You never know,' said James. 'And I know I didn't shut that light off. We always leave it on – when I was a little kid, even, I'd be lectured on never shutting off the light. It's ingrained in me to never shut off the office light. My grandfather never shut it off. My dad never shuts it off. I never shut it off. Everybody knows not to shut it off.'

'Maybe a bulb burnt out,' I said.

'There're a couple of fluorescent lights.'

'Man, you were rushing in to cash my cheque,' said Allan. 'You probably just shut it off. I mean, we're on acid.'

'Yeah, but we'd just taken it.'

'Maybe the power went out,' I offered.

Pointing toward the mill's third-floor windows, James said, 'Then why are those lights on?'

'Man, I just highly doubt someone robbed the place. Could be a blown fuse.'

'Let's go in and check,' said Allan.

We got out of the car and the moon was still above us, above the valley, over the highway, and the cloud cover was still moving quickly past the moon. The branches were blowing around and leaves were blowing from the walls of the valley and around the parking lot.

'Are you freaked out?' said Allan to James, who answered, 'A little.'

'I'm sure it's nothing,' I said.

We walked up the ramp to the loading dock in single file – James, Allan and me – and stopped at the large door as James inserted a small key in the large padlock and the lock popped and he slid it off the staple and opened the hasp and hooked the lock back on the ring, saying, ‘I’ve got a really bad feeling about this,’ and he looked greenish and worried. ‘I’m not sure I want to do this.’

‘So why don’t we call your dad,’ I said, ‘or the police.’

‘Are you out of your mind,’ said Allan. ‘The police! I don’t know about you but I’m on acid and the idea of talking to the police right now is nuts.’

‘You’re right, you’re right,’ I said. ‘I didn’t mean it.’

‘Let’s just check it out,’ said Allan.

James looked at us and opened the door, pressing his shoulder up against it, pushing with his whole body as we gathered behind him. The door opened widely on to the dark mill and James made his way directly past the machinery and quickly into the store, where the office was, and Allan and I followed. The store was dark and James moved past the shelves of various types of flour and nuts and bird-seeds, etc., and toward the office and turned on the light and said, ‘Ha!’ and we jumped. But when I looked, there was no one in the office and the safe was closed and presumably locked.

‘No one’s been here,’ I said. ‘Or at least no one has tampered with the safe.’

‘It doesn’t appear that way,’ said James, while assuring the safe was locked.

‘Well, mystery solved,’ said Allan.

‘What do you mean? We still don’t know who turned off the light.’

‘You did,’ said Allan.

'No,' said James. 'I didn't.'

'Then it was a ghost.'

'The switch was turned off. Why would a ghost do that?'

'How am I supposed to know what an apparition would do,' said Allan. 'I don't know any ghosts.'

'They terrorize,' I said.

'How terrifying,' said Allan. 'They turned off the lights.'

'I didn't say it was a ghost,' said James. 'You said it was a ghost.'

'I said it was you. And if not you, then a ghost.'

'Well, it wasn't me.'

'I'd say it could've been somebody else but there are no signs of forced entry,' I said.

'Does it matter?' said Allan. 'Everything's okay,' he added. 'Nothing's been tampered with and nothing's been stolen and everyone's okay and maybe James's arm brushed the switch on the way out. Who knows. It doesn't matter now.'

As soon as Allan finished, the lights went out and somebody jumped and it felt like the room jumped.

'What the fuck is that?' said James.

'It's okay, man,' I said, 'the power's gone out. It'll come back on.'

And it did. Immediately.

'That did freak me out,' said Allan.

'Me too,' I said. 'But it's just the weather. The wind's really picking up. Listen to it.'

And everyone went silent. And the high-pitched wind whistled fiercely, without pause.

'This is creepy,' said Allan. 'But I'm sure it's nothing; we're all just high.'

'Yeah,' we said.

'Everything's okay,' I said, 'so there's nothing to worry about. We should lock up the mill and go back to the house.'

'Okay,' said James. But then we heard the sound of breaking glass, a window shattering, I thought, and it was clear James and Allan had the same thought.

'That came from upstairs,' said James. 'I think the second floor.'

'NOT IT,' I said.

'NOT IT,' said Allan.

'I'm not going up alone. You guys are coming with,' said James.

We followed, again in single file, as James led the way with a flashlight, though the lights were on, too. We went back into the mill proper – by the first, second and third breaks, the sifters, etc. – and up the first flight of dusty wooden stairs. The mill smelled of the diesel fuel that was used to mop up the wooden floors. The stairs creaked, the mill creaked, bending, as the loud wind bent everything.

'It's a branch,' said James, pointing the flashlight's beam at a broken bough that had smashed through one of the second-floor windows; it lay atop shards of glass. You could feel the cold wind blowing in the shattered window from the top of the stairs.

'Wow,' said Allan. 'That's some wind.' He noticeably shivered.

'What should we do?' I said.

'Nothing,' said James. 'For right now. I'll clean it up later.'

'Well, at least we know it wasn't a ghost,' said Allan. 'Just a powerful wind.'

We scrambled down the stairs and back past the breaks and the sifters and the packer and the sewing machines suspended from the ceiling by a system of ropes and pulleys, where the flour bags would be packed and sewn shut. We went back in the store and into the office. James sat down at the dusty rolltop desk, with metal clips and papers all

over it, small notebooks, pens, pencils, more clips and a few postcards, too. Old photos of the mill and damsite – some black-and-white and some grainy colour – and a few old photos of the millers and employees over the past seventy-odd years of the mill's two-hundred-year existence. James opened the bottom drawer of the rolltop desk and produced a bottle of whisky, with a note written on masking tape taped to it, and he read: 'DRINK IN CASE OF EMERGENCY.'

He stared at it and added, 'This qualifies,' and unscrewed the cap – the seal was already broken – and he took a deep swig, then passed it to Allan. After taking a swig, Allan passed it to me and I sipped lightly, then passed it back to James.

'Man,' said Allan, 'don't worry about who shut off the light. It was either you or some freak thing, you know. But it was probably you. Big deal.'

'It wasn't. I know it sounds weird, but I know it wasn't me.'

'Maybe someone else's been here,' I offered, 'like your dad, for example.'

'He's away,' said James. 'He's with his buddies in New York for the weekend.'

A crash was heard, from we weren't sure where, and we all jumped.

'I think that came from outside,' said James. 'It sounded like it came from the dock.'

And he stood up and left the office and walked toward the loading dock; we followed.

'It's just a cart,' he said, leaning over the dock, looking down at the parking lot, looking at a handcart lying on its side on the gravel and asphalt. 'It should be inside, anyway,' he added. 'I don't know what it's doing out here.'

James jumped off the dock and picked up the handcart and righted it and walked it over to the ramp and rolled it up

to the dock, leaning in the wind as he walked. 'You know what?' he said. And then paused.

'What?' said Allan. 'We're on tenterhooks.'

'No,' he said. 'It's of no consequence.'

'What?' we said.

'People have died in this mill, you know, like worksite accidents.'

'So?' said Allan. 'So we're back to the poltergeist hypothesis? Are you saying it's more likely that the ghost of a dead miller shut off the lights than you? Because if you are,' he said, shaking his head, 'that's a little much.'

'First off, I'm not saying it was a ghost of a dead miller, for god's sake. Secondly, there have been ghost stories surrounding the mill, of course.'

'Why of course?' said Allan, scratching at his head.

'Well, you know,' said James, 'it's a two-hundred-year-old flour mill. It's an old building and kind of scary at night and people have died in the building, is all I'm saying, which means it isn't surprising that some ghost stories surround the place.'

'Like what?' said Allan. 'The Ghost of Christmas Past floats through here from time to time? Or maybe Casper?'

'Forget it.'

'No, no,' said Allan. 'Tell us your ghoulish tales.'

'All right,' said James. 'Get bent.'

'If you have a ghost story,' I said, 'I want to hear it.'

The wind was louder than the falls out back, but the falls could still be heard distantly, buried beneath the wind.

'No, it's just this one guy,' said James, looking at us wearily, 'named Matthew Higgins died in the mill around 1952, got caught in a belt and it snapped his neck, a piece of clothing or something, and after he died some strange stuff started happening, I heard.'

'Like what?' said Allan.

'Like just equipment started acting up all the time,' he said, 'and there were power outages all the time – and the millers would hear footsteps.'

'What's so strange about that?' I said.

'When no one else was around. When they were milling alone. When they were milling at night. There'd be reports that they'd heard footsteps. Even now, today, like sometimes Tadek says he hears footsteps at night when he's milling alone.'

'Man,' said Allan, 'the mill makes quite the racket when it's going – of course Tadek hears shit. It's an audio illusion or something, you know. What he perceives he hears he doesn't really hear. It's just a bunch of banging that sounds like footsteps.'

'Yeah,' said James, 'but sometimes his tools have been moved. Sometimes he says he knows, like knows for a fact, that he didn't leave some tool where he finds it.'

'Does he ever drink on the job?' I said.

'He doesn't really drink at all.'

'Maybe he just forgot that he'd moved whatever tools,' said Allan.

'I don't think so. He's got his routines.'

'You know ghosts aren't real?' said Allan. 'You know that, right, James? Like, once you're dead you're dead and you don't communicate with this world because you don't exist, like your ego and shit, it doesn't exist at all, so how would you go about haunting your old job site?'

'I'm not saying I believe in ghosts,' said James, 'but I do believe there are mysterious things that go on in this world and the universe that we can't explain.'

'Well, when you put it like that, yeah of course,' said Allan. 'But that doesn't mean that the ghost of some Higgins guy's floating around the mill moving Tadek's tools.'

'I'm not saying it's Matthew Higgins.'

'Or some other ghost.'

'I'm not saying it's a ghost.'

'You kind of are,' said Allan.

'I'm not. What's a ghost, anyway?' said James.

'I'm not following,' said Allan.

'Records are ghosts, for example, and books and movies,' said James.

'Books and movies and LPs are all just records – inanimate objects,' said Allan. 'We're the goddamn ghosts!'

'Haunting the planet temporarily,' said James.

'Something like that,' said Allan. 'Haunting each other at least.'

It wasn't raining, though I imagined it pouring, the mill pond flooding the banks.

'Okay,' I said. 'Let's just agree that it wasn't the ghost of Matthew Higgins that shut off the office lights and not worry about it because there's nothing to worry about, you know.'

'Agreed,' said Allan.

'Yeah,' said James. 'All right.'

'Don't be mad,' said Allan. 'We just don't believe in ghosts like you do.'

'I don't believe in ghosts. Well, but I don't not believe in them, either. It's not a matter of belief. You have brushes with them or you don't.'

'That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard,' said Allan.

'Why?'

'Why do you think?' he said. 'You're acting like only the elect get contact with the spirit world – and the rest of us go on living with the illusion that we're the only, like, sentient beings on the globe of our type, the human type, or with human-type intelligence, but you know, they're not alive ...'

'What?' said James.

'I'm one of the dumb ones,' said Allan, 'one of those assholes who doesn't believe in ghosts because I'm not special enough to commune with them. But then again I don't try enough, maybe. Where's your Ouija board, James? Time for some necromancy.'

'Man, I don't believe in free-floating spirits. I do, however, believe that sometimes the spirit of one person inhabits the body of another person, like after death, of course.'

'Of course,' said Allan.

I lit a cigarette and snapped the match toward the ground from the dock but it went out and took off in the wind.

'If after you die you come back as a ghost, I want to die,' said Allan.

'Psssst,' I said. 'Don't worry, you'll be dead soon enough.'

'But what's so crazy about that?' said James.

'Transmigration of souls,' said Allan.

'Yes, I think,' said James.

'You're having metempsychotic fantasies, James,' said Allan. 'Traits are passed on, obviously, through genetics and so on, but not actual souls. This idea of a soul is a byproduct of consciousness.'

'I don't follow,' said James. 'Didn't realize you've been eating dictionaries for dinner. But I do believe that people are reincarnated, so to speak.'

'No,' said Allan.

'How do you know?' I said.

'Because,' said Allan. 'Everything's probably happening at once, or in a blip, anyway,' he said, 'so how could souls, then, keep coming back, over and over again, when the entirety of human existence has happened in a flash already? History repeats itself but we don't!'

'Whoa, what?' said James.

'I think I sort of followed,' I said, inhaling smoke, thinking, though not very clearly, looking up at the sky, at the moon and the clouds.

'But you don't believe in ghosts?' said James.

'Neither do you, you said,' I said.

'I don't,' he said.

'You do,' said Allan.

'I want to know what Al means when he says that it's all already happened, like humanity,' said James.

'I don't know,' said Allan. 'It's sort of like we know it but can't admit it till it unfolds, as it unfolds. It's all already happened – Nero, Napoleon, now us – it's a lightning flash, never to return.'

'Well, that's quite interesting,' said James. 'Still, you don't believe in spooks.'

'So it's all happened already but it's all happening, too, and it's disappearing,' I said.

'I guess,' said Allan. 'It's a trace that's fading out.'

'So Fate's sealed?' I said.

'In a sense yes and in a sense no,' said Allan. 'It's going to go down but you have to play your part.'

'So that's my agency,' I said.

'I guess,' said Allan, lighting a cigarette. He started coughing as soon as he took the first drag, then said, 'A ghost's your future. And your present, too, I guess, in the sense that there's a *present*. And your past's certainly a ghost there below, obviously. You're your own ghost, always and forever.'

'Till you're not,' I said.

'Well, you're still a ghost – just one of a more etheric variety, a collection of egoless molecules amongst and now indecipherable from other molecules in, like, the great white ocean of oblivion.'

'Why white?' I said.

'I don't know – black or white,' said Allan. 'It's just the way I picture it. But there's a lot of muck on the road to there.' He was worked up and his voice was hoarse and he peered through the window into the mill and it looked like a puff of his breath hit the windowpane, briefly clouding it with hoarfrost, though as quickly as the icy cobwebs formed their complex crystalline patterns, they receded and vanished. 'It's freezing,' he said, shivering. 'Let's go inside.'

We went in the office and sat in chairs and sipped some more whisky, while talking more about ghosts and other things.

'Ghosts are an invention of man,' said Allan.

'Okay, okay,' said James. 'I don't believe in ghosts.'

'So who turned out the light?' said Allan.

'I sincerely don't know,' said James.

'That's a good answer,' I said. 'Time to leave him alone, Al. You bully people.'

'I bully people!' he said incredulously, sneering, adding, 'That's outrageous.'

'Yeah,' I said. 'Outrageous.'

'All I was saying, before you rudely interrupted me –'

'I didn't interrupt you.'

' – was that ghosts are a creation of man, like God is a creation of man – and/or gods, plural. Man's become a slave to his inventions before, you know – look at humankind's relationship to God, obviously, for example. And we'll become slaves to our computers, too – it's already happening, right? Anyway, James is a slave to the idea of apparitions, I think, who turn off office lights.'

'Okay, man, enough,' said James. 'I must've shut off the light. Are you happy now?'

'Yes,' said Allan.

'Good.'

'I've been happy all along,' he said.

The conversation eventually lulled and we dozed off from time to time. I couldn't really sleep well in the chair and I kept coming to and looking out the office window and then fading off again. Toward dawn, the mill parking lot filled with fog and the Riviera couldn't be made out, though the odd goose would pierce through the fog, craning its neck, hissing in the fog, all neck like a screaming white serpent save the tips of its wings, the tips of its spread wings that could be made out vaguely – a screaming winged serpent submerged in fuming smoke, scorched white.