

The Ghosts That Surrounded Them (Excerpt pgs. 1 - 15)

Summer

There Was a Family

The family was mostly made up of familiar materials: Mother, Father, and Son. It was also made up of foreign materials. The foreign materials were too many to list here or anywhere – facial tics, sexual proclivities, favorite colors and so on - but their oddity also made it familiar in a way, a family.

The most familiar materials (Mother, Father, and Son. Also, Dog) were important, but the family had trouble, over and over and over, expressing why or how they were important. In a similar way, they had trouble expressing why any stranger was important to any other stranger. Mother and Father were expected to teach this lesson to Son regardless. Son was expected to learn.

The family lived in a red house made of plastic. It was like the small plastic houses lined up in the board game, only bigger. The family's copy of the board game, which was meant to imitate trade, was bound like a mummy in shrink-wrap. Dog was supposed to live in a wooden hut out back, but was afraid to go inside after he once encountered a opossum there. So Dog lived with the family in the house. He had his own special door.

The little plastic house was situated in the center of a square plot of lawn the color of key lime pie. Beneath the lawn, the earth was teeming with worms that chewed the burnt souls of dead Indians buried there long before any suburban housing development.

The dead Indians used similar materials to build their families. The worms had families also, but they were too busy chewing to notice.

Dead Indians were not the only ghosts that lived with the family. The family created their own ghosts all the time. Their ghosts were made of words mostly and the heated tumors that grow out of love like mutations, thorns.

Ghosts were another familiar material.

There was a world that lived outside the family and the little plastic house. That world was made up of other families and fragments of families, all of them intertwined whether they knew it or not. The family interacted with the world and the world interacted with the family. Sometimes the interactions made the family feel good. Sometimes they didn't. The family's interactions did not have much bearing on the world, not as much as some other families' interactions with the world, but more than the family imagined. The family imagined no bearing at all.

The housing development was near an airport. Sometimes the family and the other residents of the development would hear a noise like the clouds were unzipping themselves and turn their eyes toward heaven. It was almost always an airplane cutting the sky above them. Ghosts did not live in the sky, although everyone looked for them there. All souls remained close to the earth where they were born, to haunt. Souls and ghosts were made up of the same things.

Television was another familiar material. Television piped dreams into the house so the family could continue dreaming when they were awake. Television also produced ghosts.

Father had a girlfriend who wanted to start a second family. One family was more than enough for Father. He felt alone inside his body when he was at home with the family. He forgot about that with the girlfriend. Or he used to. Being with the girlfriend was not as fun as it once was. Life was more complicated than he pictured it. Life hurt, caused worry. Fun was not as much of a factor as he had hoped it would be.

Mother hid in the hall closet and cried when Father and Son were not home. She tried very hard not to cry when they were. She did not know about the girlfriend, which would have hurt her, but she cried anyway because she knew she would never understand herself or be happy, whatever that means - she was not sure. She cried because she loved her child and knowing that he would have to participate in life made her chest hurt. She saw him: he would grow old, shrink, die like the rest. She cried because she missed her own mother. She cried because she was waiting for a tragedy.

Son loved Saturday mornings best. Each Saturday he woke up early, when the world outside the house was grey, and crept downstairs in tight pajamas decorated with construction equipment, to fix a toaster pastry. He situated himself on the floor in front of television, so close they were almost touching, and let the colored lights of the dreams hit him full in the face until he fell asleep again. Some mornings, his own dreams were about the dreams television had been giving him. Other mornings, his dreams were about ghosts. When he woke up, Dog was next to him. Mother and Father were also awake. They seemed to be ignoring each other, but everyone was together and the house was warm. The parents were still like a dream to Son, no end and no beginning. He flipped through television's channels, searching for more.

Some weekends, Father put a ball or a fishing rod in Son's hands. Son did not like these weekends. They made him feel inadequate as a son. Son wanted to stay indoors and feel dreams forever.

The family often wanted to be in a different part of the world than the house and the ghosts there, so they went on vacation. They hoped travel would bring them closer together in a way they remembered being some time ago but, like a mirage fading in their skulls, never actually were. The vacations were to the beach, except one time when the vacation was to Niagara Falls. Niagara Falls covered the family with mist. Dog did not go on vacations with the family. When the family was away, Dog was put in a box in a stack of other dogs.

Each vacation the family forgot that wherever you go, you bring your ghosts with you.

The beach was a place at the edge of the earth. A warm, sandy line, past which there were monsters aswim in a wet, yawning void. There were dying jellyfish on the sand for Son to poke with a trowel. There was also a boardwalk at the beach, with rides that made you feel joyful and sick. There were frozen dairy products and airbrushed t-shirts with fringes like the fringes the dead Indians used to wear, miniature golf courses and mirror mazes, spun sugar, ships painted on grains of rice, a man who guessed your age, a lady who told your future.

Mother had her fortune read to her by a woman with a phony accent and white streaks in her hair. Father was busy renting a boat to make Son go fishing. Father did not even like fishing himself but his father had taken him when he was a son. Memories like

that made Father feel bad inside and to stop feeling bad he tried to honor the memory, but usually only felt worse in the end. Ghosts made sure generations repeated themselves that way. The fortune-teller led Mother through a beaded hallway into a black-lit room with a table covered in tapestries like the ones teenagers used as blankets on the beach. Son waited outside. He looked at a wall of temporary tattoo flash until he saw the image of a devil that he wanted on his forehead. Son imagined temporary needles.

The fortune-teller lit a candle and took out a deck of cards. The candle was made from the inside of a sperm whale's forehead. The cards trembled in her hands. "I see nothing out of the ordinary," the fortune-teller told her.

"Is it that bad?" Mother asked. The fortune-teller saw nothing at all. Mother held out her palm to be read. Tiny ghosts waltzed across the surface like it was a stage. At home, dead Indians powwowed with television. Far off, islands formed in the sea. All fortunes are the same, a voice said, more or less. No they are not, said another.

The ride back home from every vacation was long. The highway was jammed with other families. The families were like insects crawling through a funnel. They stepped on each other without noticing. Son repeated himself like a bird-call, unsure whether or not they were home. He was still asking when the family pulled in the driveway. The dead Indians went once again underground to be eaten by worms. They put the furniture back in place first and turned the photographs right-side-up again before disappearing to their graves.

Son was named Markus, Mother, Jan, Father, Bob. Dog didn't have a name. Lack of pet name is a clear example of foreign material.

We All Share the Road, Whether We Like It or Not

Under an overpass bridge across town existed a family of ghosts who slept in piles of cold brown slush during winter. Their pure white hearts beat only when the passing cars honked their horns at each other. The ghost family survived off this communication. They grew fat off the drivers' anger and caused traffic jams with their huge invisible bodies. They clumped traffic together for long stretches to remind people that living is always a spectator sport.

School Spirit Was For Suckers

The elementary school was haunted but no one knew it. The kids would have been so excited if they did! The ghosts stroked the children's necks and thighs and breathed into their ears. Being stroked was not why the kids would be excited. They would be excited just to know that ghosts are real.

The school janitor scrubbed the backs of ghosts. He thought he was scrubbing lockers, but the ghosts were pressed against them. It was not that the ghosts were dirty. They just liked being touched.

The ghosts could have intervened in the lives of the children, but they didn't. They could have altered their test scores, usurped their bullies, visited their parents at night and reminded them what is at stake. They could have done all of those things and more, but they stacked themselves in huge invisible pyramids on the floor of the school gym instead.

The teachers and students were not at war with each other, but they often pretended to be. It was a part of their training that no one talked about except for the ghosts, who liked to gossip in the lunchroom. They liked to pull pranks too. They licked the children's sandwich meat with their tongues. Some children ate their sandwiches and smiled at each other. Other children just poked at their food, as if it were still alive.

The school's mascot was a knight in shining armor. The children wore tee shirts with the knight on their chests when they were forced to wrestle and race each other in gym class. They carried banners with the knight on them at graduation. The knight didn't have a face. He was only a suit of armor with an empty black space inside.

The teachers pretended to care about the knight, but most of them forgot he existed as soon as they got in their cars.

Some of the teachers wouldn't have believed in ghosts if they saw them. They would have just thought, "Oh. Another student. Take a seat."

The children would never be prepared for life and the ghosts understood this. It was obvious to them. The teachers would never be prepared either. There was no such thing as being prepared.

During Pep Rallies, the ghosts sang the school's alma mater. The song was like a prayer to them and very solemn, although they did not pronounce the words. They sang long vowel sounds instead. The words were not important.

There was one teacher who was always asking, "What is wrong with the world today?" as if the children should know the answer. They had no idea. They had not seen much of the world yet and the teacher knew this but he asked them anyway. He asked his

wife the same question at home and she didn't know either. The ghosts knew the answer though. They whispered it to each other on the swing-set at night. "There is nothing wrong with the world," they said. "This is the way it is supposed to be."

In All Weather

The fat blue mailbox was teeming with ghosts left by the personal letters that had once been there, waiting for someone's hands. There was just enough room to fit junk mail in through the mouth now, on top of the ghosts. Every time the mailman opened the door on the box's belly with a small key, the ghosts fought each other to get out. They fought so hard, preoccupied, clawing at each other, that none could escape. The mailman closed the door on them again and they were alone in darkness with each other's thoughts.

Chainsaws All Around Us All The Time

Ghosts made sounds like chainsaws in the morning to wake people up. By the time they were awake, the sound had faded away and no one remembered it. They thought they had woken up on their own.

There was a man called Steve who woke up every morning before his family and went downstairs to make coffee. He listened to the percolator drip. He turned on the stove and opened the door to let the heat fill his kitchen. He sat near the stove. He was breathing gas fumes that were bad for him, but he was doing it in such small quantities that he would never notice. People didn't notice most bad things they breathed.

After his coffee, Steve sat on the toilet. Then he took a shower and got dressed. Usually while he was getting dressed, he had to sit on the toilet again. He brushed his teeth. He had already shaved his face in the shower but he always missed a spot so he checked and reached into the shower for his razor. His face was almost dry now and the blade stung. He was ready to go to work.

At work, he was very happy to have his own office. He had not always had his own office and many of his co-workers did not have their own offices yet, so he was grateful. He would do anything not to lose his office.

Having his own office meant Steve could spend a large part of his day tucked away and no one would be able to look at him. When people were around each other, anywhere, they *looked*. They stole glances. They sometimes ogled. Being out among the cubicles made Steve feel like he was sitting naked on a wire. He knew he was far less conspicuous than that, but he remembered feeling that way and he never wanted to go back. Having his own office meant having a place he could relax, even when he was working very hard just to keep it.

At lunch, Steve ate salad made from chicken eggs and celery. The salad had mayonnaise in it too. (Mayonnaise was also made from chicken eggs and will be explained later.) The salad was sold to him by the same man everyday, sometimes along with a cup of soup. Ordering a cup of soup depended on the ingredients of the soup and how they were prepared. This was called a “special.” Everything in life depended on ingredients and preparation, Steve thought.

He would only be awake in the same house as his family for a few hours when he got home. Tomorrow would be the same way. He could not change this yet, but he was planning to.

When Steve drove home, the sky had gotten dark. There were no stars in the sky where he lived, so he didn't bother to look for them. Streetlights and houses blotted out the stars. The lights were on when he pulled in the driveway. He knew his daughter was the one who turned the lights on for him because his wife told him about it once. "It is so cute," she said. "You should have seen it."

His daughter would watch television if she had done her homework. Television would draw her close and breathe ghosts into her face but nobody would notice. The ghosts would teach her how to be a child and then how to be an adult. Some nights she would spend the whole night on the Internet, which was also full of ghosts but even more full of real people pretending to be ghosts. Steve would sit nearby as she did this, drinking brown spirits from a short glass with flowers etched in the side.

His wife spent her evenings on the phone or reading, mostly. She was exhausted. He knew she worked very hard. He knew she did not have her own office, even though she deserved it.

Steve slept in pajamas that had his initials on them (S.O.S.). The initials were sewn in red string over his heart. He did not need the initials to tell his pajamas from his wife's or his daughter's pajamas but he liked having them there anyway. It was like he was putting on a special suit for sleeping. He felt comfortable in a uniform, prepared. He

would have a job with a uniform he thought, except that it probably wouldn't pay very well and people would be looking at him all the time.

Steve had no idea that ghosts had surrounded him all day and night or that ghosts would watch his family sleep. He didn't know that ghosts exist. He said a special prayer for something magic to become involved in his life. He had said basically the same prayer every night since he was a kid. The prayer was just a list of people he loved. Some years the list grew and other years it shrank. He prayed for everyone to stay alive and be happy about it. That was the philosophy he had invented to follow. Stay alive and be happy about it. Provide for your family. Ignore the existence of ghosts.

Rollercoasters

Rollercoasters were important to some ghosts. They made pilgrimages to amusement parks and piled on top of the giant metal snakes, hung from their sides, climbed up the tracks and waited for them to scream past on their way down the line. These were ghosts left there by the memories of park attendees, by their laughter and screams. These were ghosts that people wished they could bring with them, carry in their pocket all the time. They could not. The ghosts created by the memory of thrill rides were too big to carry. Those ghosts were meant to stay where they were created.

There Was An Office

The inside of the office was made from steel, wood composite, plastic, silicon, glass, polyester, copper and wool. The people went there to do something they referred to as

“taking care of business.” Not everybody went to an office like this one. There were all kinds of offices. Some people didn’t go to an office at all. Among the people who never went to an office, there were two main groups: a) the ones who were happy about it and b) the ones who were not. Those two groups could then be divided into an infinite number of categories. Often people hopped from one group to the other.

In this particular office, there was a woman in charge of everything. People called her “Sue.” That wasn’t her real name. Sue was a name she had chosen for herself when she had first started going to work everyday in offices. She was in a different office back then and she didn’t think her real name sounded professional enough for someone who is making money by doing things in an office. She found her real name embarrassing. Everyone else would have thought it was beautiful if they knew it. Instead they called her Sue.

Sue was not a mean woman but, like the name she had chosen, she communicated in a very short manner. She absolutely did not believe in ghosts. So much so, that it radiated from her tense forehead and warned people not to ask her about things like that. It was too bad for Sue because there had been a time when she liked to talk about ghosts.

It was not very long ago that Sue was a small child with little hands that she never knew what to do with. Ghosts were very real to her. She believed in everything she could. It was harmless to believe in things then. Now, it was terrifying.

Success

Success was something especially haunted. It created excess adrenaline in people's veins. Success floated like ghosts inside human bodies. Their bodies were made of fragile materials. Success was good for them because it brought them closer to the sun (they thought.) It was also dangerous and very few of them could enjoy it properly. It remained important, no matter how impossible it was to define.

The Other Woman

Bob did not want to be the kind of husband or father who kept mistresses, but he was unhappy and somehow they just kept entering his life. He tried not to blame himself, but that was impossible in light of the decisions he had made. He was surrounded by ghosts all the time and he had allowed more than his share of ghosts to join their little family. Jan had her own ghosts, ghosts that Bob sometimes tried to place blame on, but adding new ghosts never made old ones disappear and he knew that. Bob had a lot of experience adding ghosts to a variety of situations.

The Other Woman was not just one other woman, but a string of women who were not Jan. They would never be Jan. Bob had allowed them to take the place he had reserved for Jan anyway and it made his heart feel like it was rotting in his chest. It turned his arteries into worms.

Sometimes Bob purchased things for Jan and Markus to make up for what he did with The Other Woman. He even felt guilty around Dog and brought home large bones for him to chew.

Every time Bob stopped being involved with The Other Woman, he swore he would never see her again. Then she would come along, with a new face, and he would put her in Jan's place for a while.

Misconceptions Regarding Habitat

People had ideas about ghosts, even if they didn't believe in them. Sometimes these ideas were the focus of their religion and were used to guide them as they made what they thought were important decisions in their lives. Other times, the ghosts were just something they felt but were too embarrassed to talk about. In the dreams of television, ghosts were often depicted as cartoons dressed in bedclothes. They howled and knocked things over. They blew out candles.

There were certain places people believed were more likely to be inhabited by ghosts: old houses, insane asylums, cemeteries. This was not always the case. Ghosts lived everywhere. They were what human scientists called "extremophiles." There were ghosts that lived on the sun. They stretched themselves over the ball of rippling atomic blasts and waited for the lights to go out. There were ghosts that littered the deep sea floor, ghosts all the time drifting down like bits of chum from the surface. There were ghosts deep in caves and high in the leaves of the rainforest. They thrived in doghouses and shopping malls, hair salons and children's nurseries. People went out searching for them with flashlights. Usually they had been carrying a few ghosts in their pockets (pores, body cavities) all along.

Busyness

Humans lived inside busy heads. They studied themselves until they became confused. They learned to brush their teeth for instance, then spent hundreds of years designing better toothbrushes. Their teeth still got dirty and infected. They kept dying, no matter what new invention or emotion they created. They kept living too.

The Museum

The museum was a very large building where people collected items for safekeeping and for other people to look at. Jan sometimes took Markus there, hoping he would see something that would help him generate enough interest in life to make it worth living. Inside the museum were many items that resembled ghosts, but were not. Bones, mummies, old books, portraits and spent bullet shells all looked like ghosts to the people who came to view them. The people were called “patrons.”

There were plenty of ghosts in the museum, but they were not on display for the patrons to see. Instead, the ghosts danced on the surface of these objects. They paced the gift shop and predicted books that would be sent back to the publisher next season. They stood in the bathroom and looked down at the empty toilets, waiting for something to happen. They spent decades washing their hands in a silent row at the sink.

At night when the museum was empty, the ghosts did not come alive. They barely noticed the patrons were missing. They would always be there the next day. Ghosts did not care about being alive.