

Stupid Ghosts

Ken Valenti

Emma Hazen had died of whooping cough in the 1850s, but still roamed the halls and rooms of the Sweet Rain Inn in Vermont.

So the story went.

“Emma won’t do any real harm,” the innkeeper, Carol, told Melissa and me. She pulled us two drafts of a local brew, Black Bear Lager. “She may hide your car keys. You may wake up to find your hair dryer going. Nothing serious.”

She looked off behind us, like she was sharing a secret glance with someone we couldn’t see.

Melissa and I had just tossed our suitcases onto our creaky bed and had washed up at the chipped porcelain sink before coming down to the bar. The first few sips of beer began to wash out the tension of our three-hour drive from the Connecticut coast, and a breeze through half-open windows carried country air with a lingering hint of winter. Years of liquor and beer spills spiced the old wood.

I couldn’t ask for more.

So I didn’t mind if the place came with a ghost story. The Sweet Rain was a weather, passed-over way station that could use a sense of mystery, or anything else, really, that would lend it a little more atmosphere.

But I was surprised when Melissa squeezed my thigh excitedly and said, “That’s so cool!”

Her green eyes were doe-like. There was not talking to her when she got this way. She leaned forward on the bar, and the posture lifted her shirt enough to show a sliver of skin above her jeans.

She had an easy grace honed by devotion to yoga and spinning classes. The way her legs wrapped around a rung and leg of the bar stool reminded me of a kind on monkey bars.

“Most guests do see her at some point or another,” Carol said. Short and squarish, she had a mess of curly grey hair in the shape of a large soccer ball and it shook when she nodded to punctuate her speech.

“Okay,” I said. “So how does a woman from the 1800s know how to use a hairdryer?”

Melissa muttered, “There he goes.”

She leaned back but gave Carol a narrow-eyed head shake that said, *just ignore him*. We’d been dating six months. This gesture, seen whenever I grew too cynical for her, was one of the few things he did that annoyed me.

Through dinner at a small French restaurant nearby, I could tell Melissa was thinking about Emma. I was careful not to bring it up.

In bed at 1 a.m., I was giddy on the rich night air of early spring and the freedom of being far from Melissa’s housemates in Norwalk, Connecticut and my messy apartment 40 minutes from her place, in New Rochelle, N.Y. I dive-kissed her neck, earning a tiny laughing squeal from her. But then she tensed and pushed me back gently.

“She might be watching,” she whispered.

I gave an unsure smile.

“Rob, I’m serious. I can feel her.” I could tell she meant it by the way we were pointedly *not* entwined. Normally, by now she’d be running the arch of her foot against my calf while her eyes held my gaze. Her eyes were green, but not simple green. They were the color of San Francisco Bay in a certain light.

She’d be puckering her lips slightly in a way that looked like the beginning of a kiss but that I knew was actually a sign she was concentrating, the same purse of the mouth she showed when she applied eyeliner for the night out, or carefully de-veined shrimp for paella.

I lay propped up on one elbow, my nose filled with the scent of apricot and some herb from Melissa’s sandy brown hair, and the fresh laundry smell of the crisp white sheets. Her neck emerged from her faded T-shirt in elegant, tantalizing curves. My hand rested on the curve of her warm waist.

Her eyes darted around the room, and I fought the temptation to glance around myself. We’d been reading books a couple of minutes earlier, and the lamp was on, throwing yellow light and casting shadows about the spare, whitewashed room with its scuffed, walnut-stained chest of drawers.

“What are you sensing?” I said. I felt nothing. Maybe a little chilly.

“It’s like we’re being watched. But by someone friendly.”

“Then why are you so tense?”

“Well, we’re not going to do anything while she’s watching.” She looked directly at me so that I wouldn’t mistake her meaning. “Not going to do anything” meant hands off.

“You can’t believe this,” I said. “You’re a dentist, for Christ’s sake.”

“Wanna explain that?”

“I don’t know. A dentist is almost like a doctor and that’s, you know, close to a scientist. So you’re supposed to believe in proof, not superstition.”

“What do you mean ‘almost like a doctor?’”

“Oh Jesus.” I turned away from her and dropped back on my side.

A moment later, things got worse. Melissa gasped like she’d been dipped in ice water and she rapped me on the ribs several times, hard. I rolled to face her, grunting in frustration. She was staring at the window, her face ashen.

I followed her gaze, but saw nothing.

“What’s up?”

“It’s her!” She spoke quietly. Then, in an urgent whisper; “Right *there!*” She nodded toward the window twenty-five feet away, but all I saw were the curtains moving slightly.

I purposely raised my voice to a conversational level, which was jarring deep in the night; “Melissa. There’s nothing there.”

She squeezed my arm in reproach. I slumped my shoulders and shook my head.

“Wave to her,” she said. “She’s looking this way.”

The day that I wave hello to a curtain is a long way off. I said, “What? You wave to her.”

“I can’t move.” She still held my arm in one hand and with the other she clutched the sheet in a tight fist. “Just wave.”

The apricot and herb scent from her hair wilted a mite with the musk of perspiration still unseen on her skin. I thought maybe I should raise my hand in greeting just to make her happy, but I hesitated. A few seconds later, she said, “She’s gone!”

“Great.”

“Rob, I’m so freaked out. Why didn’t you wave?”

“They’re just curtains.”

She slid down in the bed, still holding the sheet up to her chin, wide eyes trained on the curtains. I didn't tell her this: It could not have been Emma because you can't be haunted by someone else's ghost.

In our relationship, I was the one with ridiculous notions, not Melissa. I suffered doubts that I was sure bordered on some mental disorder. And Melissa was blessedly patient when I, for instance, rushed from a movie theater as the coming attractions began to make sure that I had indeed locked the car door, then rushed back to my seat, sucking air.

She was sober and nurturing, traits perfect for her job fixing people's teeth and encouraging them to care for themselves better. So now that she was suddenly taken by ridiculous anxieties, it was like she was stealing my lines.

I admit it; I'd been afraid of ghosts as a kid, longer than most. I slept with a light on almost until I left for college. My mother ridiculed my habit between drags of her cigarettes. She threatened to tell any girl I brought home.

The stubborn fear left an odd mark on my psyche. Even now, whenever I left my apartment for more than a day – even when I was packing for this weekend – I'd feel like some presence was following me as I shut out the lights and checked the stove burners. And as I checked each item, I would have to speak aloud to the empty apartment; “The bedroom windows are closed and locked...The computer is turned off...” All the while, this presence over my shoulder would be more and more amused. The closer I got to the door, the more I worried that whatever it was would grab me and do whatever it is that incorporeal beings do.

It was a chilling sense, but an irrational thought, traces of some not-quite-lost primal or loric fear, and I knew that. Fearing ghosts doesn't mean you believe in them.

Well, Melissa became a believer that night at the inn. She couldn't sleep. She tossed, snapped fully awake, lay back down and tossed again. I tried draping my arm over her, but when I touched her shoulder she gasped and jerked.

“Jesus! You scared the hell out of me!”

Finally, I slept. When I awoke, Melissa was gone. For a millisecond, I feared something sinister had happened. (I also worried that she'd left me, but her suitcase stood on the floor. Her hair dryer rested on the dresser next to the sink and mirror. It was conspicuously not running or floating by some unseen source. I smirked and thought of a snide comment, but there's no fun in being snarky alone.)

I found her downstairs, asleep on the living room sofa. Over her T-shirt and sweatpants, she wore a terrycloth bathrobe supplied by the inn. She wore one sneaker unlaced in place of a slipper. The other sneaker had fallen to the faded rug.

She held a Jennifer Weiner book.

It was so early in the season that there were only four other guests, and it was barely 8:45 a.m., so I figured if any of the others were up, they'd probably walked quietly past her and into the restaurant area for breakfast.

Belinda, Carol's assistant in running the place, came through carrying some fresh towels for the rooms. In her mid or late 40s, she looked sexy in an outdoorsy way, with faded jeans and a comfortable sweatshirt.

"Saw Emma, didn't she?" she said.

"That's her story and she's sticking to it."

"You don't believe."

I shrugged. "Sorry to disappoint."

"Hey, believe what you want."

If my mother had been alive to hear about this, she would have ratted me out with glee. With her smoke-graveled laugh, she would have told Melissa about my night-light days. She would have punctuated the tale by pointing at me with the two fingers that held her lit cigarette, making me nervous about the embers, always too long, always about to drop. One fallen ash, I feared, could burn down the house if I left her unattended too long.

I retrieved my own book and our blanket from our room. I carefully lifted Melissa's legs enough to slip under and lay them across my lap. After flipping off her other sneaker, I covered most of her and my lap with the blanket. She slept through it all, so I sat reading quietly.

A spring in the lumpy couch bit against my thigh through the threadbare chartreuse upholstery, but I ignored it.

Melissa awoke 20 minutes later.

"What are you doing?" She twisted fists into squinting eyes.

"Protecting you."

She smiled weakly, still groggy. "You weren't much help last night."

"What if I bought you breakfast?"

"An apology bought with eggs over easy?"

“And bacon. Coffee, if you want.”

“Okay, sure.” We were about to stand, but she tugged at my sleeve to keep me on the couch a moment more. She said; “You think I’m being silly, don’t you?”

“I know you’re not silly.” I hoped that sufficed and I tried to stow my disappointment. To my relief, she seemed grateful.

We had no more encounters with Emma or any other spirits for the rest of the weekend. But when we returned home, Melissa told everyone our little story.

“Totally credible,” her friend Cliff ruled at a dinner party. “I mean, how arrogant are we to think that we, ‘the living,’ are the only ones who walk this planet?”

Cliff was Melissa’s friend from yoga and I sensed from the day I met him that he resented me. I also suspected he stalked Melissa. Just a hunch, but a strong one.

We were at his dinner party, and I’d have bet he’d arranged it to impress her, to show off his friends and his prints, a Gauguin and a Chagall, the one with the guy and his sheep or his goat looking at each other a little too longingly for my taste. Cliff was parading around in a pleated knock-off Armani shirt, with a thin gold chain and pleated wool pants like something from the jazz age, the kind of pants you’d call “trousers.”

His black hair was slicked back and he held a snifter with a palmful of amber cognac.

“You have to tell me what she looked like,” he said to Melissa.

“I don’t really have the words,” Melissa said. Holding a glass of chardonnay, she screwed up her face in thought in a way that closed one eye. “She was kind of there, but not there. Like a shadow, or maybe a three-dimensional haziness. I could almost make out a bonnet.”

I said, “It was a scrap of fog and a trick of light. We were probably still tipsy from beer and wine.”

Melissa put her hand up on my shoulder as if to show that she loved me for my contrary nature and she gave Cliff a look that said, *bear with him*.

“It was not fog and light,” she assured him.

I said, “so did it glow green, like in Ghostbusters? Or was it more wispy, like those things at the end of Raiders of the Lost Ark?”

Melissa frowned and Cliff looked on with smug tolerance, using the moment to take a tiny sip of his cognac. He kept his eyes on me over the glass.

“Come on,” I continued. I tried reasoning with Cliff, though I knew it was foolish. “So they have this story about a ghost who doesn’t cause any real trouble – because that would be bad for business, right? But she’ll turn on your hair drier. How does a woman from the 1850s know how to use a hair drier?”

“Rob *says* he doesn’t believe,” Melissa said. “But when we were there, did he walk over to the window to *show* me there was nothing there? Of course not.”

Cliff waited patiently for me to respond. He bit into a sliver of smoked salmon on a piece of crostini the size of a quarter.

“I was in bed,” I said. “It was one in the friggin morning.”

Melissa nodded. “He was ‘tired.’”

Cliff gave an brief, understanding nod and said, “Perhaps he was.”

I wanted to point out that he had a caper wedged in his teeth.

More than that, I wanted to say; If ghosts exist, it is only because we believe in them first.

Instead, I shook my head. Melissa’s expression soured and she said; “Lighten up, Robert.”

Driving back to her place, she was quiet for a while, but I could tell by her tiny nasal exhales and those pursed lips that she was gearing up to say something. Finally, she spoke as she adjusted the rear-view mirror.

“Listen, Rob. Even if you don’t believe me about Emma, you could at least be polite when I tell others.”

“You mean Cliff? I’m sorry. I just don’t like that guy.”

“What did Cliff do to you?”

“You know he wants you, right?” It was a good thing she was driving because my head was buzzing a little with too much Grey Goose.

“Oh stop.”

“And what the hell was with that outfit? Are they filming The Great Gatsby?”

“Come on. He looked dapper.”

“Dapper my ass. With that twenty-dollar fake Armani? Please.”

“Robert. Stop it.”

The full name, twice in one night. Even drunk I knew better than to push it further.

“Whatever.” I leaned my head back and closed my eyes, pretending I was fighting an oncoming headache.

We had been planning a two-week trip to Prague later in the year, and I’d been thinking we should start making the plans. But with a simple three-day weekend in Vermont causing a rift, it didn’t feel like the right time to bring it up.

Every place has its ghost stories, and Westchester County, where I live, is no exception. The one that always stuck with me tells of a pirate ship on fire on Long Island Sound. The legend says you can see the ship only on nights wracked by the most violent storms. It will toss on the waves. And on its deck, you’ll see a white horse, stomping in panic, afraid to leap through the flames and into the stormy water.

I heard the tale at a library story hour as a kid. That night, I lay awake, imagining the beast stamping, eyes wide with mortal fear, a noble, powerful horse, its coat a solid ivory. On land, it would be able to run without end, bearing it’s owner into a battle or carrying an endangered rider to safety with its head high. But now it tossed its mane in terror as flames grabbed the hair and bloomed a vicious orange.

If you want spirits to exist, they are everywhere. They haunt your peripheral vision; a reflected gleam on the bathroom wallpaper moves with you as you pass. The blinds rattle when someone opens the door abruptly.

You may jump, but really you know better. Or you should.

When I was older, my mother admitted that she believed her dead sister had visited her. Not long after Aunt Margaret died, Mom was standing in the kitchen when the chimes over the sink stirred in a small wave of tinkles and tings.

“Your Aunt Margaret gave me those chimes.” They were a small collection of tiny metal tubes bobbing on strands of fishing line.

“Air currents must have moved them,” I said.

“No, Robby. No wind. Perfectly calm.” She sipped scotch from a shot glass and lifted her cigarette to her dry lips. Smoke and booze fouled her breath.

“After all those years you got on my case for being afraid of ghosts, you think you saw one?”

My mother waved woozily. As always, the cigarette ash was long.

“This was real,” she said. “The ghosts you believed in were stupid ghosts.”

She flicked the ash – finally – into the glass ashtray for emphasis.

I ignored the insult and felt momentary relief at seeing the ember in the small glass receptacle where it belonged, not dangling. It was a fear I lived with in constant pulses, sometimes finding myself kneeling on the floor where she'd just been, fingering through the carpet fibers like picking nits off an ape, certain that one day, a tiny ember was going to remain unseen until it built itself into a small flame, then a raging fire that would trap us both.

That was a fear to be heeded. That was real.

She died not long after I graduated college from cancer that hop-scotched from lung to stomach to pancreas. This was years before I met Melissa.

Aunts and cousins helped me hold a yard sale, sell some junk on eBay and take the rest to a thrift shop. Late one night, I sat at my computer in a home now mostly barren, when I heard a sound like a footstep from the lower floor. It was a snap, with a tiny echo.

My limbs froze and I measured my breath so that it would make no sound. I'd been trading instant messages with a friend, but even typing made too much noise. I dialed down the sound on my speakers so I wouldn't get the musical note when my friend sent back a message; "You still there?"

I cursed myself for being ridiculous.

The ghosts you believe in are stupid ghosts. This was just the creaking of the mostly emptied house, I told myself. But this was not a normal creak, it was clear and distinct. A footstep. I was so certain someone had entered the house, that I lifted the phone by my bed and pressed 911. I whispered as low and clearly as I could; "There's someone in my house."

"You have to speak up sir," a woman's voice said. "What is the emergency?"

"There's a *proowler* in my *house*." I listened for the footsteps as I spoke and kept my eyes on the doorway. If I saw anything or heard footsteps speeding up, I was set to yell. But now I heard nothing. The 911 woman kept me talking, had me drop my keys out the window for the cops. Then she had me sit on the floor, my hands on my head as I heard two cops moving through the downstairs.

Finally, one of them stepped quickly and lightly into my bedroom, gun drawn. Seeing me, he let out a little snort, both relieved and derisive.

I was wearing only underwear. I stood now to pull on my robe. The cop showed a smirk, just for a second, but unmistakably scornful.

Both officers went with me on a quick tour of the house to see if everything was okay. I noticed a refrigerator magnet that I had overloaded with take-out menus had dropped to the floor. Could that have been the sound I'd heard?

Embarrassed as I was, I didn't want the cops to leave. When they did, I got dressed and dumped a change of clothes into a bag, fearing that a strange presence was watching me, and I left to spend the rest of the night in a motor lodge nearby. I didn't sleep, though, unable to remember whether I'd turned off my computer and locked the door.

When I returned the next day after work, the silence acted strangely on my ears, like low pressure at a high altitude. I called my best friend, George, to tell him I'd need to crash on his couch.

I stayed with him a few days and we killed a couple of bottles of Bacardi talking into early morning hours, even on work nights, until I felt more at ease. I soon ascribed the whole imaginary intruder episode to my mental state, assuming my senses had been warped by grief.

I met Melissa four years later through an internet matchmaking site. For our first date, I took her to an indoor rock-climbing place, then to dinner, where I couldn't take my mind off the casual way she wore her scoop-neck lavender shirt.

We didn't kiss until our second date, probably because I was too nervous, not about kissing a woman, but specifically about going mouth-to-mouth with a dentist.

Before our second date, I prepared. Not just the usual brushing and mouthwash gargle, but an aggressive hunt with my toothbrush, floss and a rubber gum pick for every iota of exposed surface. I'd made sure not to eat garlic for a full two days.

And I was glad I did, because when we first kissed, on a street in South Norwalk, her mouth was somehow immaculate and fresh even after Thai food.

"I know you're a dentist and all, but man, is you're mouth clean."

She was still playing with the hairs at the back of my head. She smiled proudly.

"We had a little free time in the office today so I had Candi, the hygienist, give me a good cleaning."

What can you say to something like that?

“Wow,” I said. “For me?”

She nodded.

I said, “I think that’s the nicest thing I’ve heard in a while. Kind of weird. But nice.”

The October night was chilly, but not uncomfortable with her pressed against me. A small group of friends in their 20s walked by and doubled over in stifled laughter after trying (though not too hard) to hide that they were overhearing our conversation. Melissa heard them but kept her gaze on me, challenging me not to look away.

“You did, too, didn’t you?” she said. “You took extra care with your teeth because you were going out with a dentist.”

I nodded, feigning sheepishness. I didn’t tell her I’d also clipped my toenails and bought new underwear for the occasion. Of course, that had nothing to do with her being a dentist. That was from a general sense of optimism.

It wasn’t until our third date that we went back to her house in Norwalk. She had two housemates, but they weren’t home. She started a blaze in the fireplace while a cold wind whipped outside. Past midnight, we lay on a rug by the fire, a half-empty bottle of Baileys between us.

The flames threw flickers of light into the fringes of her sandy hair and she told me how she’d worked her way through college, then dental school in Michigan. Her parents had helped, they both held high-level corporate jobs that afforded them the house Melissa grew up in on Long Island’s north shore. But they’d taught her to be self-sufficient.

I told her my parents hadn’t had much, so I had to work my way through two years of community college before finishing a history degree at Iona College. I had thought about becoming a teacher, maybe a college professor. But I had gotten a job at book, music and DVD store and had realized that I had a knack for it. And I loved being around all those books. So I stayed on and became manager.

Through it all, I told her, I was never able to move far from my mother while she was alive and needed watching.

“You did what you had to,” Melissa said.

I’d always felt slightly absurd revealing deep personal secrets while still naked, after sex, still keenly away, I admit, of the woman’s breasts. Women loved the talk, though. And with Melissa, my past episodes and desires were pouring out of me, greased by the Baileys,

welcomed by the drowsy warmth of the fire, but ultimately drawn out, without doubt, by Melissa's look of keen interest.

"I kind of resent not being about to do all the things I could have done."

"Mourn it and move on. That's what an ex of mine used to say."

"Enough of this," I said. "Don't let me bring us both down." I moved the Baileys from between us and pulled against her, easing her back with a playful hold.

When we returned from Vermont, Melissa's tale of Emma and the Sweet Rain Inn wouldn't go away. She told it to her housemates, her parents, one friend after another. After a few times, I got tired of debunking it, so generally, I would just roll my eyes.

One of her housemates, Bill, asked us one night; "How are you kids ever going to get along in Prague? Old Europe, centuries of history. I bet there's *tons* of spirits wandering the place."

We were sharing a couple of bottles of merlot with him and his fiancé, Jenna. Suddenly, I wondered how they were coming along finding a place of their own.

When a few moments of silence followed, Jenna tried to save the situation.

"You guys are gonna have a great time."

But I wondered about that.

If you're inclined to believe in ghosts, they are everywhere, and lately, the signs had been returning to me. At home once with my windows open on a windy day, an air current pulled at the door in the last moment as I closed it. I gasped, then smirked at my own stupidity. Another time, I arrived home to find my closet door opened a crack, when usually I'm careful about closing it. I pushed it closed feeling a tickle of anxiety in my gut.

I lost a night of sleep, then another. I couldn't tell this to Melissa. I felt I shouldn't have to. It seemed absurd that the only way to end her nonsense story was to top it with even greater nonsense. It had always bugged me in relationships when arguments were won not by the person who made more sense, but by the one with the more outlandish idiosyncrasy to be "understood."

I refused to battle her harmless ghosts with my stupid ones.

Yes, as I grew more annoyed, Melissa seemed to become more insistent on telling her tale, until one time, when she found a way to bring it up with the clerk on the supermarket check-out line, I realized that my arguments were only prodding her on.

Before that, I would not have thought that she had a drop of spite in her psyche. But it was clear that's what was at work when she told the clerk that the syrup on sale reminded her of the maple syrup in Vermont, where she'd seen a ghost. She said it plainly, pleasantly, ignoring me standing next to her.

The clerk, a heavy woman of about 50 who nodded as she bagged the chicken breasts and fruit, said; "The guys in the back say there's a ghost behind the milk racks."

"Mmmm, I bet," Melissa said. She nodded and smiled

I said nothing riding in the car back to her place, but as I helped her store the food in the kitchen, I said, "Does it have to come up so often?"

"If I can't talk with you about it, at least I can talk with others." She spoke with an opaque blandness and a slight smile.

"The supermarket clerk?"

"She was nice, wasn't she?"

"She was wonderful."

Three weeks after the Vermont weekend, I got to her house on a Sunday and found her chatting with Cliff. When she let me in, she returned to where she'd been sitting on the couch with her chess set on the coffee table. Cliff sat on a chair pulled up to the other side of the game, which was well under way.

As soon as Melissa sat back down, she lifted Cliff's black queen off the board, dangling it and taunting cheerfully, "Ooh, look what I got!"

She was girlish in a way I hadn't seen in weeks. But my entrance seemed to twist an awkward screw into their good time.

"We've been talking about your favorite topic," Melissa told me.

"Great." I glared at Cliff, thinking if I stared at him hard enough, maybe he'd be shamed into admitting he was going along with Melissa's story just to get into her pants.

"Yes?" Cliff asked.

"Robert," Melissa warned.

"No, no, that's okay," said Cliff, above all the pettiness. "If Rob wants to tell me what's wrong, that's fine with me."

"Rob..."

“This is ridiculous,” I said. I shook my head and walked into the kitchen. I pulled a beer from the refrigerator, but I didn’t sip it. I sat at the table, watching the wall clock. It was shaped like a black-and-white cartoon cat, with the dial and hands in the belly. As its tail swung one way, its eyes would look the other.

I heard Melissa telling Cliff, “Don’t go. Don’t be silly. I’ll talk to him.”

“No, Melissa, you have enough to deal with. But call me if you need me. Anytime.”

After he left, Melissa stormed into the kitchen.

“I’m sick of this, Rob. I’m *so* glad you think your girlfriend is a superstitious moron, but you do *not* insult my friends. Got it?”

Apparently, I’d ruined her post-yoga calm.

“God, Melissa, that guy annoys the shit out of me.”

“Why? Because he believed me?”

“Please. He’d believe you if you told him fairies exist.”

She shook her head slowly, but her eyes never left my face. Her mouth was pulled tight.

“For weeks now, you’ve made me feel stupid.” Her resentment was toxic.

“No, you’re not stupid. That’s why this whole thing is so ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous? I know what I saw, Rob.”

“You know what I don’t get?” I said. “Why is it so hard for you to believe that a little fog and stray light from a passing car or from the moon can cause an illusion? But it’s so much more reasonable to believe that the spirit of a dead woman is floating around. Does that really seem more logical to you?”

“*Goddamn* it, Robert, who *cares* whether it was a trick of light or a ghost? *I* saw it, you didn’t, and I say it was a ghost. And I am *not* ridiculous. I am *not* an idiot. So who the hell cares what your logic tells you?”

She was shaking with frustration. In the silence that followed, she looked around like she wanted to lean on something but changed her mind. She didn’t know what to do with her hands, so she folded her arms.

She waited, with one eyebrow cocked, for me to say something, but with her in that state of fury, I couldn’t tell her how hard it had been for me to earn that logic she disdained. I couldn’t tell her how strange I felt selling the home where I’d cared for my mother, when it still held her echo in every emptied room, how for some time, even in my own apartment, a

place my mother had never seen, I sometimes felt the urge to pick at the carpet on my knees searching for fallen ashes.

I hadn't felt the presence of Emma Hazen at the Sweet Rain Inn because I'd forced myself to live in the real world, not one of irrational notions. I had thought Melissa was the same way.

I said in a tone I hoped was non-confrontational; "Can't we just not talk about it?" She shook her head wearily.

"Yeah, whatever. I'm going to take a shower. Go put on a DVD if you want."

Things were tense between us for a few days after that. My best escape, I thought, would be the poker night my friends held a couple times a month at George's apartment.

Still my best friend, George wasn't married and had no kids, so we were free to light up cigars at his place, a vice I allowed myself only for these events. What money George saved by taking women on cheap dates he apparently spent on smokes; the cigars were smooth and mellow. A haze of smoke hung about eye level by the time the third hand was dealt.

"She won't let it go and it's pissing me off," I told the guys. "Am I crazy?"

Jimmy, the assistant district attorney, said, "I don't have a problem with believing in ghosts."

"You're kidding me, right?"

"No, really." He was arm-sweeping the plastic chips he'd just won. "I believe in that crap. I mean, I've never seen one. But sometimes I wonder."

"For fuck's sake," said Billy, the bond trader. "So if you get some suspect on the stand and he says, 'I didn't kill the guy, a ghost did it,' do you drop the charges?"

"Eat me."

George said, "You know, my cousin Andy used to make a claim like Melissa's."

"Yeah?" I was worried about where he was taking this.

He spoke as he dealt us a new hand.

"Yeah, he had this mirror in his bedroom, and whenever he looked into it, he would see something moving, like ducking behind a chair. Of course there was nothing in the room behind the real chair. But he told everyone that whatever was in the mirror was going to 'get' him. Finally, we told him, 'Andy, just get rid of the fucking mirror.'"

He stopped now, picked up his own cards, then grabbed a mini pretzel and munched on it. I realized he was waiting for a prompt. Wary, I said, "So did it work?"

And here came the grin. "We don't know. No one ever saw him again."

Everyone laughed up a storm.

"Fuck you," I said. This was going nowhere. I looked to Turk. He was Billy's brother, and he was a cop. His real name was Keith Breubaker. I had never asked how he got his nickname, but I assumed it was because he was huge.

"You must see enough real crap that you don't have to imagine shit, right?" I said.

Turk took a cigar from his mouth and it looked like he was talking to the glowing embers. His voice was low and distant.

"We got a call from a guy out on Highland over a year ago," he began.

"Oh Christ," I groaned. Nothing was going my way. (Incidentally, I was down \$34 in the game.)

Rain was whipping the windows. It had been falling since late afternoon. We'd been having a run of wet weather. Now it seemed to be bringing out campfire stories.

Turk went on: "Dead of winter, bitter cold night, ice all over. Guy's stopped at a light, sees a woman in a sheer silvery night gown. She comes over to his car to ask directions to the nearest hospital. She's not even shivering. The guy reaches back to open his rear door to let her inside. When he looks back, she's gone."

"Okay," I said. "So the guy's a nut job. Or pulling your leg."

"Now here's the thing." Turk was loving this. "A month later, same thing. Different guy, same place."

I picked up my cards and fanned out my hand, finding a bunch of nothing. To Turk, I muttered, "That did not happen."

"You think I made it up?"

"No, I believe you completely, okay? Then you got a guy who passed out in a bar and when he woke up, he was in his bathtub filled with ice and his kidneys were gone, right?"

Turk glared defiantly. "Yeah, that's right."

I gave up the argument to play out (and lose) the hand, but the guys noticed I was quiet.

"This is bugging you, isn't it?" George said.

“Forget it, man. I get it. You believe in ghosts.”

“You’ve been with Melissa what? Six months?”

“Almost seven.”

“You’re going to Europe together soon, right?”

“Supposedly.”

“And are you getting laid?” he asked.

“All right, never mind.” I gathered up the cards for my turn to deal, but George wouldn’t let it drop.

“Are you getting laid?”

“No, I’m dating a fucking nun.”

“Okay. So you’re getting some. So just shut up about ghosts. Who gives a shit?”

“You know, you should try a serious relationship sometime.” I was dealing the cards now, tossing them so hard that they soared off the edge of the table, sending my friends to flail for them in the air. I ignored their protests.

“Seven card, nothing wild. And no sending your fucking ghosts to look over my shoulder.”

We leave for Prague tomorrow. I’m locking up my apartment to take the train to Manhattan. Melissa and I are staying at her sister’s place in the 20s and from there, we’ll head to JFK for our 9 a.m. flight. But before I leave, I have to make sure the lights are out, the toaster oven unplugged. The usual ritual.

As I check each item, I narrate aloud to the emptiness: “The bedroom window is closed and locked...The computer is off...The sink faucet in the bathroom is off...”

I need to hear myself say it. Otherwise, I’ll fret through an entire flight, wondering, Am I absolutely sure I closed the freezer door?

I work my way through the living room to the kitchen just off the main door.

“The stove burners are off...The toaster oven is unplugged...” Finally in the foyer, I take the handle of my waiting suitcase, bloated with badly folded clothes, and I roll it into the hallway.

All the while, I feel that something is at my back, moving with me. But it does nothing. I flip the switch – “the foyer light is off” – and pull the door closed. In the hallway, I turn the key and whisper, “The door is locked.”

Done. Free. The 8:56 p.m. to Grand Central leaves in 22 minutes. Plenty of time to stroll the four blocks rolling my suitcase.

But a strange feeling hits me halfway down the second block. The iron. Had I unplugged it? Was I sure it was off?

My cell phone face says it's 8:39. Still 17 minutes to go. I can rush back, yank the plug if it's in and still make my train with a jog. I'll be sucking wind, but I'll have peace of mind. If I miss the train, there's another at 9:44. Melissa will be disappointed. Jazzed with pre-trip energy, she's waiting for me to reach the city so we can go out for a drink before we have to get to bed.

I speed-walk back to my apartment, yanking the suitcase on its hard plastic wheels.

I lean the piece of luggage against the wall in my hallway and unlock my door with a shaking hand. I am ready to rush inside, but I stop as soon as the door is open. Something is wrong. No, everything is wrong.

The television is on, blaring a car commercial. A light comes from the bedroom. It goes out, comes back on. Four rings of blue flame roar on the stove burners.

My heart races. I'm panting, beginning to panic. The door is pushing gently but firmly against my hand. If I rush in, I am sure, it will slam behind me. The stove is the closest of all the things going haywire, but even that I can't reach without letting go of the front door. If I try to reach the bedroom, forget it.

I can't just leave, not with the burners raging.

Forget making it to the city for a drink. The chances of taking the vacation at all are slipping away.

I flip on the foyer light, but it snaps back off. I check my suitcase, but it has moved several feet down the hall, leaning against the wall as if that's where I'd set it.

This is insane. The television has changed channels. A man and a woman on a reality show scream at each other.

If I call a neighbor, I fear, the stove, television and bedroom light will simply shut off and the neighbor will think I'm nuts.

The suitcase is not against the wall now. It is rolling into the open elevator. I spy it too late to see whether someone is pulling it or if it is rolling on its own. I look back inside, and the fire from one of the burners has ignited a roll of paper towels. (Had I really left the roll so close to the stove?) The paper flares orange, flames licking at my wooden cabinets.

I try to yell, but I can't. My voice is stuck. I try to force it, but my chest and throat simply won't push out a scream.

That's when I woke up. In bed, 1:20 a.m. I'd taken a moment to lay down after work and I'd slipped into a deep sleep.

My heart was leaping. *I'm fine*, I told myself. *I'm fine*. Outside, rain washed my windows, a wild night. For several minutes, I couldn't make myself move. I listened and tried to sense whether lights were on elsewhere in the apartment. Gradually, my limbs loosened.

I picked up the phone and hit the preset for Melissa. Her voice was barely a croak; "Rob, what's wrong?"

Now I felt stupid, though still terrified. "Nothing. It's fine."

"Rob?" Almost fully awake now. "Rob, what is it?"

Here in real life, outside my dream, we still hadn't made solid plans for Prague, and I wanted to tell her now that we had to do it immediately, it couldn't wait till daybreak. Instead, I said, "Don't worry," and I hung up.

The only real ghosts are the ones you allow to haunt you.

Muttering a curse, I snatched my keys off the kitchen table. The phone rang, but I ignored it as I pulled the door shut and turned the key, saying; "The door is locked."

I felt feverish from roiling thoughts. It was time – way past time – to check out a story about a horse.

Before walking away, however, I unlocked the door again, ducked back inside to look at the stove burners and eye the socket where I usually plug in my iron, making sure it was empty. Melissa was now talking from my answering machine; "...Rob, pick up..."

Locking the door again ("The door is locked. Again."), I headed for my car.

It had been raining all day, but now it was torrential, crowded layers of water free-falling. Water assaulted my jacket, pushing it against me, and streamed down onto my pants. My legs were soaked and clammy, as if someone had poured a five-gallon jug of water on my thighs.

As I drove, I cranked the heat, aiming the vents at my legs.

I stopped at Davenport Park, a wide lawn that slopes down to a rocky water's edge. There's no way to run lightly on soggy ground. Halfway to the rocks, I lost my left shoe to the suction of mud and my foot pressed down into the loose muck in just a tube sock. Tottering on one foot, I bent and pulled my shoe free, untied the lace and let it drop down so I could carefully work my sopping foot into it.

From there, I could see only blackness on the water.

I tied the sneaker and slogged on till I reached the edge, where the unflagging rain slapped the crags and folds of black rock. Wind raged. The world was dark and the rain felt full enough to drown a man.

I scanned the violently tossing surface. I didn't know where to look.

Then there it was, a boat engulfed in orange blazes, bobbing in the torrent and the waves, maybe 300 feet out. There was a figure on the deck. A white horse. It's bearing was as noble as I'd always imagined, even as it screamed in panic.

I inched closer to the end of a rock ledge and my foot scraped a few inches to one side, almost slipping out from under me. The rock was slick and I stood right at the edge of the Sound. I didn't know how deep it was there. My knees shook.

Carefully, I inch-slid backward until I'd put about a foot and a half between the rock edge and my shoes with one soaking foot.

The ship tossed. The horse stamped from one side of the deck to the other, apparently trying to find a gap in the flames.

I yelled; "Jump! Jump!"

I don't know why I expected the horse to hear me.

"Do it!" I called out so loud I felt a scratch in my throat. I could hardly hear myself over the violent spatter of rain.

For a moment, I imagined the horse looked my way.

"Come on!" I cried my voice raw. Hot tears gathered in my eyes only to be cooled by the storm water washing over my face. "Jump! Do it! Get the hell off of there! You idiot! Jump!"

Then it was gone. The ship, the flames, the horse. Gone. Nothing but black waves, and rain and wind. I didn't know whether the image had simply disappeared or if the ship had sunk.

I cried, "No!"

But it was just me now, standing in the downpour. I looked over the dark water to see if the ship would reappear somewhere else. My nose was cold and coated with flowing water. My hands were icy, so I put them in my pockets, but the drenched cloth offered no protection.

Up the coast of Long Island Sound, in Connecticut, Melissa lay in her bed, or paced, still trying to reach me on the phone.

Back in the car, I started for home, but on impulse, I hit Interstate 95 and headed northeast. The blasting heat in the car couldn't warm me fast enough and I shivered, at one point so violently my hand almost came off the wheel.

The going was slow in the dense downpour, with my wipers sloughing sheets of water from the windshield, and I knew if I didn't get out of my sopping clothes soon, I'd catch a nasty cold.

It was almost 3 a.m. when I got to Melissa's place. I didn't have my cell phone. I could rap on her window, but with the blinds drawn, I would scare her, and she might call the cops. So I steeled myself, rang the doorbell and waited, shaking.

A few moments later, the hall light came on and Melissa, her sandy hair a mess, staggered into view, leaning her head forward with a squint toward me. She straightened a little, apparently seeing it was me, and she came to the door. Opening it, she stood aside to let me in.

"You okay?" Her voice was raw with fatigue and worry, but it was calm, her way of showing that her first concern was to support me in whatever I'd been through. I didn't deserve that, not with the way I'd been behaving lately. I stood for a moment in the doorway, clammy, cold and wretched, and I was overwhelmed by how deeply I felt for her. She was a vision in dry sweat shorts and a T-shirt, her eyes bleary. Behind me, hard rain slapped the walkway and washed the street and trees.

I stepped in, but went no farther than the mat just past the door, afraid of dripping on her hardwood floor.

Melissa blinked, waking a little more. "My God. Did you jog here?"

"I'm sorry," I said, louder than I'd intended.

With a finger to her lips, she glanced upstairs to indicate that her housemates were asleep.

"No, it's fine," she whispered. "Come on. You need a hot shower....Don't worry about the floor. You're catching pneumonia."

She gently pulled me toward the bathroom and I squished in my sneakers, particularly my left foot in the muddy sock. Melissa handed me a thick detergent-scented towel from the linen closet. At the bathroom door, I hesitated.

"I heard something. Once."

She blinked and squinted. "Honey?"

“A footstep, in my house.”

She placed three fingers to my lips. They were warm from sleep.

“Take your shower. Go. We can talk later.”

“No, listen.” I shivered violently, but whispered urgently; “It was after my mother died. I swore someone was in the house, but no one was. Sometimes when I leave my apartment, something follows me. Tonight, I saw a ship with a horse.”

I must have sounded insane. I felt completely broken. I was in no position to expect her understanding. Melissa had every right to laugh at me, the hypocrite, the jerk who hadn't believed her but who lived with his own ghosts.

“You're here now,” she said. “You're with me. Safe. Take your shower.”

When I was clean, dry and dressed in sweat shorts and a T-shirt, I slipped into bed with her. She pulled her sheet and heavy comforter over us with a rustle and held me close but loose. In a moment, she was asleep against me. Her warm weight, the scent of her skin and the press of the comforter made me drowsy and I followed her into unconsciousness.