



Lately, I am plagued by ghosts. Not the white-sheeted type like Casper the Friendly Ghost, or *Night of the Living Dead* zombies, but ghosts from my past, foggy memories that take shape, walk around in my mind, and make a home in my sleep and day dreams.

About one year ago, I wrote a short essay entitled "Soul Ghosts" for NPR's *This I Believe* series. The essay was spawned by the crash of Continental Flight 3407, en route from Newark to Buffalo, a flight that departed shortly after mine on a Thursday evening in February. In the essay, I write about the proximity of people destined for that flight in relationship to my whereabouts that night. I ask myself if they were on the same rental car shuttle? Did we walk beside one another through airport terminals? Was a passenger destined for that doomed flight in front of me in the security line, taking off his shoes, and pulling the wallet from his back pocket? In "Soul Ghosts," I wrote about the spirits and souls of those passengers being, in some sense, like walking ghosts.

Just this week, I read "The Anatomy of a Haunting," an article by Michael Jawer published in *Spirituality and Health*

. In short, the suggestion made by the article is that electromagnetic charges, containing genetic information, can be left behind by microorganisms, or human beings, and can manifest themselves in apparitions. Referring to the book

The Ghost of Flight 401

, Jawer talks about apparitions of Captain Bob Loft and Second Officer Don Repo appearing to Eastern Airlines flight crews, and the hypothesis that energy, magnetic charges generated by Loft and Repo in the stress of being trapped in the wreckage of their plane in the Florida Everglades, culminated in "a flashpoint for the creation of apparitions."

My ghosts are of another sort. They are not visions. They are my musings of what was, what could have been, and what will be. They are thoughts mixed with the fantasy of how I might have or would rather be living. The longer I ponder the possibilities, momentarily lacking gratitude for the good fortune in my current state in life, I realize that every journey, each twist and turn in the road, comes with a price tag, the cost of experience, and the consequence of choice.

In a recent drive to Raleigh to meet with a work colleague and attend a chemical trade meeting, I wrestled with the idea of visiting the mother of a former boyfriend. "Boyfriend" is far from the real classification of the relationship I had had with this woman's son. We were college classmates, friends, lovers, even adversaries, but for the sake of this writing, I will stick with boyfriend.

In order to reach Raleigh from Beaufort, there is a long stretch of northbound I-95 that a driver must conquer before exiting onto I-40 in North Carolina. In between hands free telecommunications with work and personal contacts, I watched the gas gauge move from F to E and wondered if, when I stopped, there would be a grocery store or a Wal-Mart at the exit to allow me the opportunity to buy a small bouquet for my visit. There wasn't.

Instead, I filled my Toyota with \$33 of regular gasoline at an exit in Smithfield, paid the East Indian attendant in cash, went to the bathroom, and browsed the convenience store for some token of sentiment that would say, "I was thinking about you. I want to wish you a belated Happy Birthday. I want to let you know that I was aware that you lost your husband, a man that always showed me a gentleman's quiet consideration. I want to thank you for your kindnesses when I was a young Yankee woman attending that small, southern college with your son, adrift in a cultural gulf, and you helped me navigate the foreign waters of "add-a-bead" necklaces and grits."

When I walked up the brick steps, the ghosts were everywhere. They were moving over the multi-level terrace, and standing at the gas grill. I knocked on the back door, rang the doorbell, and she answered. I asked if she knew who I was, but she did not recognize me. I did not have long hair anymore, and I am thirty years older. When she invited me in, we began to talk and looked at one another. I learned that she had diabetes, that her son owned a ranch in Colorado, that she had two grandchildren, and that she missed her husband.

I told her that I had lost my dad the same year they suffered their loss. I told her I talked to my father on the ride up, and asked his spirit if I should make this visit. I apologized for my past lousy behavior but either she didn't recall or chose not to remember the times I was rude, or drunk, or just plain hardheaded. She said I was a good student, a good influence, and that I was different. She said it was hard for me to adjust to the south. I told her I had lived in Georgia and Louisiana, California and Missouri, Pennsylvania and Illinois, but I am settling in South Carolina.

All of this happened on Ash Wednesday. My forehead was still smudged with the ash from burnt palm. Of course ghosts were swirling around me! Hours before, I had been reminded that I was dust, and I would return to that same anchorless state of matter in due time. Now, I sat in the chair where I'd last seen my boyfriend's father. He smiled at me from a portrait on the wall. Even Beau's ghost, the beloved Golden Retriever, seemed to move around the room, and slump down on the ivory print carpet beside the chair. I talked about Seagram, the dog I shared with her son at school. We talked about my marriage and her son's divorce. We talked about the nickname they gave me - Vivo - and my father's advice for her to "relax."

Were there electromagnetic energies in that room? It was surging. I did not need an apparition to feel the reality of days long gone. The essence of time traveled from her eyes to mine, moved through me, mixed in our cautious laughter, and lay still in our knowing real loss.

Less than one week later, I sat in Jim's barbershop chair at J&J's in Port Royal, and listened as he told me about the television being on when he returned in the morning, knowing he'd left the shop with the set turned off. A swing in the back yard swayed when there was no wind. That he was waiting for the electric clippers at the station next to his to start up.

Jim's dad passed away a little less than two months ago. The shop was his dad's, Jimmy's, before it was his. The swing was where Jimmy spent much of his time before his passing. His aura is strong.

Maybe the idea is to embrace our ghosts, make friends with them, cherish the swirls of foggy memory that fill us every so often because they are so fleeting. A certain respect for energy left behind may be the right state of being for the receipt of answers to questions that baffle us. If I am wrestling with ghosts, am I alone, or am I in the company of forces greater than myself, struggling to pull me by magnetic force, to a place where I will meet clarity? For now, I will meet my paranormal intuitions with expectation and wonder.

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