

Ghost Trail

short story by Allison Fine
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Vamos!

Mother

We all die the way we live. It may appear offensive and rank but that's only because the human condition is really bleak and gray, even though we try to create a circus to convince ourselves otherwise.

Yesterday I got a lecture from my mother about the block of street-side façade that once graced our section of the *Barrio* that has now become gentrified into an office building housing a dentist, a bike shop (billed as “ordinary”) a Chiropractic center and the office of Rosa Maya Martine “Reiki Master.”

Yes. I know my mother is dead but I still get lectures from her everyday. In fact, I get lectures from her only since she died. When alive, Matilda never told me anything much, except she cooked a lot and that saved us both I suppose, although the cooking led to eating that led to overeating and now I am fat, I waddle, I have diabetes (a family curse) high blood pressure, cholesterol—all the things we fear because it all leads to heart disease but that's a moot point already since I had my first heart attach at forty-three and have had two more and a pacemaker put in and now I am walking around the house a couple of times a day to keep my daughters happy. I have two of them. They both look like me the poor girls—it is sad they did not take after their mother who was skinny and beautiful and the sort of woman that stopped traffic—literally. People in cars would crane their necks around to see her walking the street. She caused many accidents. She caused

one huge accident in my life and I haven't gotten over it to this day. And honestly, I don't know where she is or who she is with but I know he is suffering much the same as I did, if not more. She was impossible but that's the way with certain beautiful women.

My mother is dead. I have already said that but I want to repeat it because it bears repeating. Which is why I get dream lectures from her. I am sure she is one of those unhappy spirits that inhabits the world between life and death, not willing to let go completely, yet certainly not thrilled to come back here either. One of those angry souls that walk *The Ghost Trail* as my friend Ben Black Kettle told me about.

More like pacing than walking, I reckon. So she has decided to mess with us still in our bodies. I am angry about all this, but not enough to say anything to anyone for fear they will think I am crazy. Which I am. Which I am not. I am not crazy. My two daughters would think so if I told them, so I do not tell them. Now I am not one of those people that can claim Native American blood or heritage although perhaps Juan's blood probably holds some Mayan remnants but there is no way to tell. Nothing we ever heard about, so I am not going to claim any rights to understanding this concept of the Ghost Trail except that for all practical purposes it seems to me a kind of spiritual death squad and even deeper than that, I just know it. Something I understand without conscious awareness—it is in my bones and, I have been told, more than once by my friend Ben Black Kettle and other native friends around Tucson, that I quite naturally live on Indian time. So perhaps this is something just beyond explanation and therefore I am wasting any time trying to explain it.

I live in Tucson and I am a poet but not a famous one, however, I try very hard to get the attention of some of the more famous poets in town. They know me only because

I put my fat, sweating body up on stage for open mike night at the local entertainment scenes—places that have open mikes and ad hoc readings and slams and that sort of thing. I am fatter and older than all the other poets that show up except for the famous ones, of course, who never show up and hear about me through friends. There are some mutual friends. Even though Tucson has reached the 1,000,000 Population mark it still feels like a small town and I think it always will. My name is Vamosi, as in *get out of here, or here we go or let's go*, but in my case Matilda probably wished I would just get out of her stomach. Matilda was half-J on her father's side, her mother was Skokomish from the res outside of Seattle, but seeing as her maternal grandmother was Jewish Matilda's mom, Sarah, went to live with her grandparents in Eugene, Oregon. Her grandfather was a mucky-muck at University of Oregon there. I never met him. My own father was Hispanic from Meridia in the Yucatan Peninsula. I'm gonna go there one of these days. Maybe.

I never saw him, my father, I only heard about it. Endless stories Matilda would tell and they all changed over the years. Details would be dropped and added, embellished like all get out, but the central figure, my father Juan Martinez, stayed the same.

What good is a teacher to you if the teacher is dead? I say the same thing about the disappearing father. An invisible one, one about whom the whole family tells stories, really all lies, a pack of lies and liars telling them, I say, an invisible father that has a name and a date, a series of dates, actually, a whole life history about which you, as a young boy, could give a rat's ass, but then certain things will become totems, talismans,

whichever word you prefer, like the red bandanna that Matilda kept inside of a blue-black square box inside her bra drawer.

I hated her bras, they were the ugliest things in the whole world. This discovery one day at age five or six or whatever could have turned me gay if I'd had a proclivity in that direction. God, they were big ugly barn-sized white—oh forget it—don't let me go on about my mother's bras—but inside the drawer, toward the back of it, actually, was the box and inside the box were his dog tags from the army and the bandanna. I am not sentimental. I hate sentiment of any kind. In fact, my girlfriend (who hasn't got an inch of the beauty of my wife but she's loyal and good to me and takes care of the food thing, her name is Francis but we call her Frenzy), Frenzy tells me I never saw an emotion I didn't hate, but I beg to differ about that because she knows that we can make the little house we live in shake when I get going. But that's sex and perhaps to her sex and emotion are two separate things. That's the way certain women are, I suppose. So the bandanna became my friend. I would talk to it as a child. Talk nonsense or even listen to it, waiting to see if it would talk back to me. Although, thank your lucky stars it never did. Only once. I was certain the bandanna said something strange as I was into carrying it inside my back pocket of my jeans when I went outside to play baseball or go biking or whatever else we boys did—there were five of us boys then, but two are dead and I may be the third, although Matilda said she's already suffered the death of two sons and now it's her turn to go so "...we all that is left can die on our own..." It was inside the back pocket of my jeans and when I got out of the neighborhood and had worked up some kind of a small sweat I pulled the bandanna out to wipe my face and I distinctly heard "Don't fucking do that!" I looked around. Nobody there. My friends had all gone home. I was

alone on a side street off Speedway about three miles from home. I am sure the bandanna spoke. He didn't want to wipe off my sweat. After that I put the damn thing back into the box and never carried it around again. I was eleven then and pretty soon there were other things on my mind besides my father and his fucking bandanna and the stupid stories my mother and my two older brothers told me, because he was around for them and they remembered him. Without memory a thing can become about as real as fantasy and we all know castles in the sky are not real.

Speaking of memory I woke up from a dream the other morning that made me understand the words "gentle the horse." Ben Black Kettle had a little horse ranch in Heber City, Utah right off the main road but he gave it up because his Uncle died and left him some land near Canyon Lake, Texas. I was supposed to be learning how to gentle those horses from him but I got on some fat mare named Mary and confessed that sitting on a horse terrified me. That was years ago after me and the first wife split up, (well, as I said she left without a trace) and the kids went to stay with Matilda while I healed my broken heart. I traveled up from Tucson and went to hang out with Ben on this tiny little ranch where you took your boots off before walking into the house—the house was nothing but five rooms all bare bones except a few pieces of ugly furniture that served the purpose and nothing else and a bed that looked as if no one slept in it for more than two hours of recuperation. There was a horse being shod named Buster and Ben laughed and warned me that Buster was an ornery horse and could likely kick me if I came near. That didn't do much to assuage my fears. He put me on Mary and we were supposed to ride out into the open field and see what I could do but I could do nothing—I was scared and

that was it. How was I supposed to learn to gentle horses when I couldn't even sit on one?

Anyway, back to the dream. I was out in some open field that looked to me to be Idaho or maybe somewhere in east Texas where the grass can be very green and the trees loom large and ghost-like. Cottonwoods, (*ever hear the story of the "Hanging Tree of Orange Texas?"*) anyway, hanging tree is a title of the kind, not the suggestion of something sinister as some people might like to think. I am out in the field watching wild horses run the way they do in a happy time of open field where no one is reining them in. Suddenly toward me comes this fast running wild horse and for a second I am fearful but then I reach my hand out to his nose and he slows down, stops and nuzzles my hand and I realize what gentling is all about. The horse was able to associate with me in a gentle way and there was no fear on either side. So what significance does the dream have to my life? I am still trying to ponder this and just as I am my middle daughter calls to see how I am and to tell me her 1997 Chevy has a problem and most probably wants me to come and have a look at it. I tell her that I am busy thinking about a book I want to write and she laughs.

"You don't write dad," she tells me.

"Yes, I do. I had a journal prolific with lyricism when I was fourteen.

"Kurt Cobain had a journal too and he killed himself."

"Who's Kurt Cobain?"

"Forget it, dad. Can you come over later on this afternoon? Or tonight?"

"If you and Dave make me dinner."

“Dinner it is.

She hangs up. I look at the clock and see that it is only 8 a.m. and not late enough for me to greet the day with coffee, oatmeal and raisins sitting on my front porch watching the weeds Frenzy calls plants blow in the October wind of a glorious Tucson fall day. These notable days still require enough sleep to by-pass the fear that is always lurking around the edges of life.

Today’s lecture from my mother dealt with my hugging my first wife more. That’s a moot point. The lectures always come in the wee hours of the morning, that place you go when you are about to wake up but don’t want to or can’t, and are not completely asleep either. In these moments thinking is not controlled by anything conscious and the images are often quite vivid, imaginative, privy to incidents of construction that sometimes are called ‘from another realm.’ But still they have a purifying effect and sometimes the emotional content of such moments lingers long through the day and into the evening until I turn on the news and let the bad energy of our planet drown out the unfathomable passion that meetings in the ghost realm evokes.

I call it the ghost realm because to me that is what it is—meeting the ghost of my mother and the ghosts of my past, my thoughts, my friends (now dead or gone) people I haven’t seen or heard from in over twenty years—this seems to be the place where I can contact an array of stuff that I can’t even remember when I’m awake. The problem is that once I contact it, it stays in my front consciousness and I would rather it disappeared when I woke up. It just never does. I also contact people in my life currently and have conversations with them I wouldn’t be caught dead having. What is the data in regards to the relationship between imagination and ghost realms? I have no idea. I think they are

different places and when I try to explain this to my friends and family their classic response is the condescending smile, the indulgent nod and the dismissive wave of the hand. Imagination is something I know I am creating but what happens in the ghost realms is an energy that is creating me—I am the end result of the creative process, not the starting point and most important, I have no control over it.

But all this begs the point, as I am a man alone now. Really alone-- inside of a marriage. Now that is the loneliest thing a man can discover—to be living with a woman, know her like you know an old kettle drum, the outside worn smooth with many hands or one hand brushing alongside it, around it, against it, holding it, holding it—Francis, Frenzy, my kettle drum. She doesn't like that analogy but will smile at it just the same. And I smile back. We smile a lot at each other because that's about all we can do now. She is living with a poet who does odd jobs for people—cleaning their offices, fixing their cars or washing machines or electrical wiring, helping them with websites for their dream businesses (so many people in Tucson have dream businesses). So Frenzy works a lot and she resents it but she won't say. She has a job working as a customer service supervisor for Citibank. In these times you can imagine what that means.irate, angry, hurt, terrified people calling about foreclosures and bad deals and maxed out credit cards and all sorts of shit. No wonder when she gets home all she can do is smile. Underneath the smile I dare not go, but she doesn't hasten to take me there anyway. The biography of our relationship is like a smile floating on the surface of air, like a silk scarf dropped into a lazy river or something. Not a ripple or a wave but this beautiful colorful thing suspended on the edge of timelessness, lighter than the water, not sinking below the surface but glancing and dancing above it, almost like it could take off into the air and fly

if it weren't bogged down with water molecules inside the tight woven fibers of the scarf. Magenta is how I imagine this scarf of our love, deep, deep red with a hint of gold.

One Holiday is Just Like Another

Thanksgiving day I read Malamud all day. He takes me into the sad, haunting places I have been avoiding but dwell in anyway—those nightmares have become my reality and Malamud is right there with me. The girls ignore me. Frenzy decides to hike *Agua Caliente Hill* at 4:30 in the morning (after which she comes back renewed with terrifying vigor, takes a steaming hot shower), a strenuous hike to a desert summit that makes you feel complexity and total immersion or absolute annihilation, depending on your state of mind. LeAnne, oldest daughter, is in Idaho Falls with her boyfriend, the ne'er do well Bradley—an interior decorator of inner chaos, and the youngest, Victoria, has decided to go to Patagonia Lake with a friend she just met. Victoria--only sixteen and very independent. Like her father, I suppose. "It wasn't hard for her new husband to imagine himself the child," Malamud says of his Dubin character and I confess I feel about the same. I've always been the walking child—I suppose it forced my kids to grow up faster and it did nothing for our relationship throughout the years. Someone had to be the adult and I was always reluctant to assume that mantle. Frenzy, on the other hand, embraced motherhood and adulthood in one sweeping breathtaking leap into the unknown. With her usual vigorous and searching characteristic—the heart, light and airy while the body converts and becomes massed and filled, like a gourde, ripe succulent; heavy—she loves responsibility and how I hate it! We've made a good couple.

The daughters are always criticizing me with this condescending air as if somehow I had missed the boat and they would reluctantly throw me a life raft but the rapids are too fast and anyway, these dreams are so interesting; such a distraction from the dullness of life! To dream as a child! I am on the mammoth brown couch reading and looking out the window at the one Saguaro in the yard, wondering if the plant has the same feelings as I have, although he (she?) seems to have a lot more power of endurance. Feeling abandoned.

“Why aren’t the kids here?” I ask Frenzy but actually I am shouting to empty air because she is in the kitchen making a turkey and all that crap just for the two of us, which I think is redundant, but she reassures me there will be plenty of leftovers (this does not encourage me a bit) and the girls will partake when they return from their “journeys” as she put it. I stand at the threshold between kitchen and living room, a foot in both worlds, undecided as to whether I will step into the pungent warm odors of a bereaved Thanksgiving kitchen or back into the Living Room hell of Malamud and my own thoughts.

“Their journeys?” I ask.

“Out into the world away from Family on Thanksgiving.”

“Doesn’t that bother you?”

“No,” she says and goes on with her cooking. Stuffing—her own special recipe. “You could make something dear—like the sweet potato pie or maybe a large salad or something.”

“OK,” I tell her but I turn and amble back to the Living Room anyway. Actions speak louder than words.

Inside the cave of my mind I have built a retreat that speaks of rebellion against authority, against work, against buckling down to the corporate mentality, against being a man and making a living the way I'm supposed to—to be honest, on any given day I'd rather go fishing. And fishing for me means fishing, the real thing, or fishing for ideas inside the vast recesses of my imagination, (fishing for challenges I'll never meet) or fishing inside the television for something worthy of me, something so compelling that I will not be sitting there just to stave off boredom. But the fact is I am retired from Lansing Car Assembly, Oldsmobile. The last car rolled off the assembly line in April, 2004, but of course I was long gone by then. We moved to Tucson as soon as I got my retirement after twenty-five years on the line. That was in 1980 when Lansing's population declined by a thousand people and I could see the place shrinking in front of me. My mother and dad had gone to Tucson in the mid-seventies when things were cheap and after Dad died me and Frenzy helped her buy the condo she lived in until she died. So we went out for mom, and the girls were eager to get the hell out of Lansing too, although the youngest missed her friends, and I miss my drinking cronies to this day. Nobody understands boredom like your fellow line buddies. But still. You move on.

So me and Frenzy had Thanksgiving alone and although the food was good it was depressing and boring and I missed Michigan. Looking out our window I could see nothing I wanted to see, because I wanted conifers and evergreens and a light dusting of snow to get my blood up and all I saw was the Eucalyptus and the Saguaro and a bunch of scrubby desert things. But then that is what I get for moving to Arizona and I have

only myself to blame. Frenzy and me, we're alone now and pretty soon, when the girls are really gone, that's the way it's gonna be—her and me; the thought of what will we say to one another across that great distance we have developed over time—the ocean of monotony that happens when two people have nothing left to articulate. That's Thanksgiving this year but maybe it'll be better next year.

The Golden Bough

Month after Thanksgiving: An ocean of monotony. I am beginning to think I am insane. It's only Frenzy and girls keeping me together with scotch tape and safety pins. Must I hit bottom? Damn it! I can stop it, can't I? I am thinking this old scarecrow needs to make a vision quest into some kind of unfriendly foreign environment that will force me to lose my nerve and gain it again. No joke. No compliment. I question my intelligence; I wonder if I am shallow and I wonder if maybe suddenly—the poetry has left me. Poster boy for a lame loser. Unlike my sister who:

(The meticulous structure of my sister's life):

...would make anyone admire and respect her and dislike her vehemently simultaneously. No one can really like a self righteous overly ego driven woman in her sixties who claims to have done nothing but avoid doing all the things we all do—living—that she labels “mistakes.” “I avoid mistakes,” is her battle cry and alongside it, the stories of all the horrendous things she could have done if only she didn't know better. Beforehand. A kind of psychic avoidance alarm goes off in her head, I suppose, whenever there is any suspicion of a fearful holy moment of adventure and risk that might not turn out safe, warm and assured. These are the people that state matter of factly the terrible blunders and suffering of their friends and family, without compassion

or identification—heaven forbid she and her partner would ever have the kind of risk-driven edgy stories the rest of us tell about our skating across the frozen pond of our lives. We get hooked, she never does. We get pushed and shoved by nasty experiences and totally annihilating people, she sidesteps all this because, of course, “I could see all that coming..” We have our neuroses splattered on our face in a gelatinous ecstatic consciousness, the sort of consciousness that some label “melt down,” depression, anxiety and bi-polar disorder. She has a whole other project going on in her driveway. Dressing up the garage and making a party out of it, that’s her approach to life. Forget the oil and fluid leaking from the car; her car? Never leaks! She leases and trades it in every other year. No stress cracks in her life! No risk, no miss.

The rule of the sanctuary is to be a priest or a murderer as Sir James George Frazer once told us—so which am I? I think the murderers do well in our society; my sister and her ilk. You know, the ones who sublimate the murderous tendency to become the ‘head hunters’ of business, the ‘sharks’ the rest of us have to swim with? I am the priest, I think, a priest without a monastery, the monastic man with a wife and kids.

So, there is no need to die or murder myself because, the truth is, I am already dead.

So, the Ghost Trail I am riding, what is it really? The Ghost Dance, the Trail of Tears—do I remember my ancestors in some long forgotten trail of memory that has passed down from generation to generation, or am I that foolish old man they see, kidding myself? What do I really know anyway? I do a sweat lodge once a year and think I’m reliving the pain of my elders but I ain’t reliving shit. I am simply folding up into my own pain and I know it. And how much of all this is just the reading I’ve done, Black Elk

and Sherman Alexie and M. Scott Momaday aside, aren't I just an interloper, a fake, a wannabe? I don't know shit and shit knows I don't know shit and shit shits on shit just like it always has.

But yet, here I feel I might be lying underneath the lies. I mean, after all, when I go into those strange and tender dreams of white plains and snows and horses, in my waking dreams and sometimes even in the sleeping nights, what have I done but travel the Ghost Trail?

"It's not just a campfire story you know," I tell Frenzy one day while she completes the ultimate act of futility—trying to create a Christmas atmosphere in our house in the middle of the desert. "There really is some truth to the transmission of elders from one generation.."

"Oh, I know baby, I know," she says, coming to cradle my head in her arms for a moment. "You are all the things you say you are. And more."

And that, my friends, is all I need to hear—the Christmas present to end all presents, that I am what I say I am.

In that vein, I lean forward into the Ghost Trail and you may follow if you like. I won't stop you. I won't care neither. We're both broken promises no matter how you look at it.