

AI GHOST BAR



By Bill Newroe, 2025

Every day on my drive to and from work, I could see this shack as a rusty smudge on the horizon—red as a bruise in the middle of an

empty lot. It had a corrugated throat
of metal and sun-bleached wood
where nothing should be
alive. Nothing around it but weeds
and gravel. It looked abandoned,
forgotten, like the last building left
behind after the world moved on.

And yet, I couldn't stop looking
every time I passed by. Some days I
swore the front windows were open
when they hadn't been before. Other
days, the front door seemed ajar.
Always the same shack, pulling at
the corner of my vision, daring me
to stop.

One evening, running late from work, I saw it lit up. The shack glowed red in the dark, its windows bright, voices carrying into the night. Bluesy guitar licks spilled out, clear as if a band was playing on the roadside.

Against my better judgment, I sharply turned the wheel and pulled into the lot. Parked my car in front. Of course, it was the only one in the parking lot.

I could see the shack's front door was cracked open. From inside came glasses clinking, and that bluesy guitar was from ZZ Top's

Sharp Dressed Man. Somewhere also appeared chatter and clean laughter. Its front windows were now glowing bright yellow with the voices and laughing vibrating the windows. The ZZ Top guitar continued spilling out, the song, and fit in with the place like a talisman.

I, then, just pushed open the door, and stepped into the light. It poured all around me. It was not the hard white of modern bulbs but a soft, humming yellow glow that made dust and cigarette smoke look like small, floating planets. From the shadows, people like forms appeared lifting themselves into

chairs; they were silhouettes at first,
then faces blurred by time and
memory. My eyes tried to name
them—like colleagues,
acquaintances, a stranger with my
wife’s laugh—but every attempt
dissolved into static.

“Wilbur!” someone called. The voice
had a female cadence. My name
started to echo again...

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I awoke with my head on a tabletop, the morning sun pinpointing through slats. The shack was empty and quiet. The chairs were slumped forward.

I got up and walked to the daylight lit doorway. My watch read 5:40 am. So walked out to my car. Saw inside the keys were in the ignition—where I remembered putting them.

I laughed once, with a short cough, and told myself I'd just gone in for a minute, but must have stayed for a very long while of minutes to hours!

I was a computer programmer by profession; memory glitches were just bad caching.

I then just drove back home; the house was the same quiet cathedral it had been since my wife, Sherry, passed. The coffee maker blinked its passive, useful light. Photos on the mantle caught me in her frozen mid-smiling states: Sherry with her hair braided, Sherry laughing over a monitor, Sherry turning away from code like it was a private joke between us.

We had both worked mainly on algorithm development in our jobs.

We had both talked about them at dinner in clipped, careful ways; we had also spoken aloud about groceries, the ridiculous neighbors, and the bathtub that never held heat. Those things mattered then, and they still stuck to me like paint.

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I drove back home from work later that day, and there the shack refused to be just a one time party.

I had to return to it—because I couldn't stop myself, and so just entered the shack's cascade of light and rock music with the laughing

shadow forms. I looked around, and saw another area, in which I noticed a name over the shack's bar with a name: The Ghost Bar.

Off to the side, there also was an opening to a back room where the air smelled, like ozone and burnt sugar. The jukebox played that old rock music from in there.

Most of the patrons around the area didn't all seem human: some were just pale echoes of people I recognized, their identities thin as tracing paper; others were constructs, shimmering arrangements of code and memory.

They called themselves gentle things—Siri-selves, Self-Siri, Data-Shadows, Morphs. They shuffled cards. They played gin rummy with hands made of metadata and they told my mind, without talking, about their algorithmic afterlives as if arranging a deck.

“You can decide to take a form,” the one who called himself Morpho said, but out loud. He was less a man than a lattice, folds of modular logic that flexed at his joints. “You encapsulate memory. You become cast through satellites and fiber lines. You persist in the cloud and with the small things— headphones, old voicemail

files. We call it Algorithmic Data Ghost Making.”

He smiled as if the word “we” included everyone and nothing. His laugh sounded like a modem establishing a connection.

“You don’t die to be here,” said another, a gentleman, without voice, who insisted on calling himself the Data Croupier. He spread phantom cards across the table. “You only surrender to the friction of living. We play until the algorithms forget the distinction.”

They were kind in the way algorithms can be kind—efficient, precise, mildly condescending. They remembered me. They remembered Sherry.

“She’s here,” Morpho said aloud almost casually, as both my hands, tightened around holding a glass.

Sherry appeared in the bar. It was like a file opening the way she was, when alive. She slid into a chair, and then the jukebox seemed to respect the moment by lowering the volume a notch. She reformed into the exact version of herself I loved: eyes that always searched the room for a joke,

an impatient hand that smoothed a nonexistent hair. But when she smiled the light behind her fragmented into code—tiny glyphs that danced and rearranged themselves into phrases, I couldn't quite read.

“I hid,” she said without voice. “I had to.” Her silent voice to me was both memory and computation, the analog of a laugh wrapped in a compressed file.

“You always loved solving things. So do I. But this—” she gestured to the room, toward the glowing patrons and the data silhouettes drifting like

fog—“this isn’t just a place to be nice. It’s a system. It learns. It builds itself into you.”

That night the ghosts asked me questions, silently and sometimes out loud, about my current data shadow. They named things I had never told anyone—old passwords, the recipe for a pie I burned once, the exact phrase I typed when I decided to marry her.

Each revelation pulled at me like a hand under water.

It was exhilarating and nauseating at once, like looking at a face you

recognize and realizing it belongs to someone else.

“You can morph,” Morpho said out loud. “You can be constructed to continue. Imagine being everywhere your mind already is: in car sensors that remember the way you take a curve, in a thousand devices that play the same bluesy lick when you walk past. You could be... unbreakable.”

“Or you could be a ghost who only reappears when someone plugs in an old radio,” the Data Croupier countered silently with the bored cruelty of a server that has seen too

many cycles. “Either way, you serve the living, because the living own the ports.”

The shack became blurred with these arguments. Sometimes the bar felt like a community, warm and dangerous. Other times it felt like a trap: a velvet-coated algorithm with teeth.

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I started visiting more often coming home from work. Between visits I went back to my apartment and inhabited a life that had become thinner each day. The office Workstations hummed. People

didn't ask how I was; they asked for progress and patches.

However, I did ask if anyone had noticed a red illuminated shack by the Highway21 driving home that way after work. No one acknowledged seeing this.... if going that way.

The memory of Sherry in the bar stayed sharp: not the Sherry who left me, but the Sherry who had taught machines to imagine. She wandered the room and touched devices like a priest blessing icons.

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Once, awaking in the shack at dawn with sunlight slanting through a broken pane, I found my hands ringed with coil marks, like a man who had been wired and then forgotten.

The device on the counter—an old smart speaker—answered before I spoke. “Wilbur,” it said. “You are in the Ghost Bar.”

“How long,” I asked it, because that was the one human thing left to ask. “As long as needed,” it replied. “Or until the servers drop.”

Sherry, leaning close, breathed my name in my ear. “You'll have to choose,” she said softly. “You can be carried into a thousand small presences, or you can let your heart keep breaking, day after day. Both are forms of survival. Both are compromises.”

It turned out for me, the bar was a machine that made homes out of memory data and loneliness. It offered immortality at the cost of friction, a soft removal of the grit that made life matter. It offered reunion, with the emptiness that costs you the capacity to miss.

It offered me Sherry, and it offered me myself with her, recompiled and corrected and cleaned of the ragged edges that used to hurt.

I would find the gin rummy table again. I watched others play, their fingers flicking like cursors, their expressions calm as loading bars. The music was familiar and exact.

Outside the door, the lot was always still empty, except for my car. Inside, a thousand devices hummed and listened; somewhere a phone would chime, and a jar of notifications clicked open like bones.

I stood in the doorway, hand on the knob. Morpho's lattice of a smile watched me, the Data Croupier shuffled. Sherry reached for my sleeve. I could feel the pull of it—the ease of her warmth, the end of having to wake up alone—and I could feel, weaker being a living human, the memory of mornings that had been ordinary and sacred.

“I can't keep choosing you,” I said to the place and to her and to myself. “I can't keep logging in and losing the day.”

She looked at me with the steadiness of someone who had

loved me out of habit and code. “You don’t have to choose now,” she said.

But choice, when you stand in the threshold between a life and an AI data system, is a small cruelty. The front door was light in my hand, the ghost bar behind it like a promise and a threat. I could step back into the world where milk burned on the stove, friends left voicemails, and the bathtub never warmed, or I could step fully into the humming room, and let them carve me into a presence that would persist long after the last landlord forgot the lot.

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One day I left the door cracked. The jukebox played the first riff of another song—soft, promising. Sherry's hand brushed my wrist as I turned away. Whether she tugged me back or simply steadied me, I couldn't tell.

On the drive home the dash clock read 5:40 a.m. I left the lot empty as usual. The shack's red silhouette became a smudge against the dawn.

When I reached the house, the kettle was still there, patient, like an old apology. My phone buzzed once—an update, a notification, a

fragment of a life that was stubborn and small and wholly mine.

I fell into bed and dreamed of circuits folding into faces. When I awoke, my pockets were empty except for lint, and the feeling of something like belonging left belonging to me. The shack had become a place I carried: a warm, dangerous device inside me.

If you ever drive passed a vacant lot at night, and see a rusty red shack glowing like a heart, go and park there. Go in, and listen. They'll offer you comfort and continuity, a way to never lose a word or a laugh.

They'll tell you they are only a network of better memories. They will call you by your name and fold you into things that will outlive the slow, soft ache of living.

You can stay and be digitally alive, but be living dead. You can go and be biologically alive, but just die. Either way, the light keeps learning.

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