

FACE TO FACE (THE GHOST)

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Oct/Nov 1989

If you think you detect some anger, you're right. Anger is like electricity: it should be used wisely. I don't know that I will learn on time. I'd snap the neck of a kitten if it hopped on my lap right now.

A colder day it could not have been. I think I've heard that line before. Maybe it was when I was younger and had spent the whole day tobogganing, never noticing the cold turning my cheeks red, then white. When I'd get home I'd catch it from my mother and maybe that's where I've heard it before. "You couldn't have picked a colder day to stay out too last," she'd scold me. But the cold didn't bother me. Nothing seemed to matter to me then.

And it was cold, standing beside him outside the door. We had said little to each other as we had walked across the parking lot; but then I hardly knew him.

"You still have the chance to change your mind," he offered. "There are so many other things you could wish for. Fortune and fame are what I hear the most."

"No, thank you," I said.

"No, I didn't think you were about to change now. It's not often I see such determination for a wish that would make most others tremble. I trust that your determination is well directed."

I looked at him scornfully. "Where do I go now?"

He nodded at the door. "In there."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

I tugged on the handle and the metal door creaked. The metal was thick and the lock looked unbreakable if engaged. This would not be an easy complex to penetrate if you were unwanted.

As I closed the thick metal door behind me, my eyes darted about like a child reaching for candy, quickly taking in the details of the room. There weren't many. The grey walls were two storeys high, and the concrete floor was wide enough and long enough to play a game of football. The corners were so dark I could barely see them, the only light being hung from the dead centre of the ceiling. It was a strobe light, the kind that used to flash and dance over the shaking bodies that made discoteques so popular at one time, but now it was motionless. The thin light beams stood rigid and straight from ceiling to floor. The room was almost empty, more hollow than a promise made in desperation, except for an old fairground carousel below the light, the figure on the carousel, and me.

With a deep breath I took the first of the many steps needed to walk to the carousel. My steps were strong, confident, rhythmic: they sounded like a basketball being dribbled in an empty gymnasium.

I stopped. I was close enough to touch the nearest horse of the carousel. Two rows of horses ringed the carousel, each one identical to the next, each one covered by paint so old that the colour was now indistinguishable. The wood that they were made of was rotten and beginning to fall apart.

I cleared my throat but there was no reaction. His back was turned to me and his head was bobbing every few seconds, like an earnest listener at a fire and brimstone sermon. 'Amen' it bobbed. 'Amen.'

His form from the middle of his torso to his feet was without definition and obscure, as though he stood in three feet of water.

"I'm here," I said.

He cocked his head an inch to one side and I could see a glimpse of his left cheek. But he did not turn around.

"Why have you come?" he asked coldly.

With a chuckle I put one foot on the edge of the carousel and leaned on a horse. I wanted to at least appear relaxed. "It was my wish. But you know that. Actually you know what I'm going to say next and when ---"

"Stop it!!" he shouted, cutting me off. "This moment is not for jokes or questions of paradox. I can't understand why you have made this wish."

"But you made this wish, too ... once."

"Don't trifle with this meeting, I tell you!" His head shook like a rattle as he scolded me again.

"I won't. I mean, I wasn't trying to." I was sincerely apologetic.

"*YOU* made this wish!" he shouted, his head still shaking.

"I know."

It was odd that he had not turned to face me. I had used my wish to meet him, and all that I could see was his back and his hair. I had expected it to be grey, not so much the colour of my own. If could be the poor lighting that made it look so young.

I told him what I was thinking: "I had expected that you would face me as we talked."

"Your life is in trouble these days, isn't it?"

"You know ... yes, it is. But what does that have to do with you turning around to face me?"

"Everything." His head bobbed slowly again as he continued to speak. His voice sounded like a father's voice telling his child that the hamster is sleeping, and no, it won't ever wake up. "I'm concerned that you expect me to help you when it could do just the opposite. Are you prepared for disappointments?"

I was really upset at the long discussion of my simple request. My hands were wringing together, squeezing sweat from the creases of my palms. I answered impatiently. "I am. It's easier if we talk face to face."

"You think so?"

"Yes, yes I do."

He only waved his hand. "If that's what you wish ..."

"Turn around!"

Slowly, he did turn around. It was the cavity that was once his right eye that I saw first. Without realizing it, I took several steps backward. My arms clenched over my stomach. Then I saw the dried blood on the right cheek and neck, the hole in the right temple, the hollow in the middle of the hairline.

"Oh, no," I sputtered, choking on my breath. His face was my face, my face today.

I fell on my knees. I had no control of my senses, my head spinning and dizzy from the blood draining from my brain. I know I could hear my own plaintive moan, and I still clenched my stomach with both arms, like a frightened child would cling to his blanket.

In spite of myself, I looked at the door, which now seemed only a few yards away. I could get out. But I looked at him again.

He was surrounded by a yellow glow, and his appearance was changing. His face was still mine, mine today, but the wound was gone. He watched me as steadily as when I had first collapsed.

My fear was overtaken with rage. "You bastard," I said as I stood. I pointed my finger at him as I stepped forward. "What was the point of scaring me like that?"

"I showed you how I am."

"I see how you are! You're fine."

"No, I'm not," he answered, shaking his head. "I'm dead."

I moved around him, stepping between the horses, circling some of them. His torso swiveled so that his face stayed squarely toward me. I was furious, I couldn't understand his attitude toward me.

"You're supposed to be me!" I screamed. "He told me you would be me! This is not the way I would be!"

"Wow, you think you know yourself ..." he answered in mock seriousness.

"Fuck you!" I punched the nearest horse, chipping the old wood from its ear and cheek, and gashing my knuckles. They bled. "Forget this whole meeting! You have to know how desperate I am and you couldn't care less. You're no better than the living! So fuck you and fuck this wish and fuck the god that brought me in here!"

"Do you use those words to shock me?" he asked as I was about to step from the carousel and open the door.

"I'm saying what I feel."

"What do you really feel?"

"I feel like knocking you down ... one good punch."

"Like the horse?"

"Harder than the horse," I growled.

"Do it."

"I wish I could. You're not real."

"You don't know that you can't."

I looked him in the eye, at an emotionless stare, and I felt taunted. My bleeding fist tightened, and my arm coiled for a second, then I lashed at his face with everything I had.

It was like punching ice, except that the only cracking were the bones in my fist. A coldness swept through me, dulling me completely, and I fell back against the wall of the room.

I tucked my hand under my opposite arm. The cold in my body slowed my every action, even my thoughts. I blinked slowly. I stayed slumped against the wall.

He stood between two horses, part of the only row of horses left. Surprisingly, he smiled as he looked down at me. "Nice punch," he said.

"You must be a joy to kiss," I answered.

"How is your hand?"

It seemed to be slow motion as I turned my head to see the hand tentatively being brought from under the protection of my other arm. Three fingers were crooked and no doubt broken. I held up my hand for him to see.

His same hand was already held up and facing me. The same three fingers were bent.

"Why do you do that?" I asked weakly. I knew that I was ready to cry, perhaps ready to give up, but I did manage to stand. My voice was falling lower and lower, overwhelmed by the agony of feeling so uncertain.

"This is how it is," he said.

"Why is it how it is? Why do you look like I do today? I thought you would be a wise old man with wonderful stories to tell me about my life. I need to know I have something to live for, something worth waiting for. Then I could keep going. But you've only shown me that my life is as good as over. What happens? What am I about to do?"

"That's up to you."

"Am I going to die?" I asked. All of the horses were gone now. The walls had closed in on us not more than three feet from side to side. We were almost face to face. The ceiling seemed to be touching the top of his hair, and made me stoop, and the little air smelled stale and was freezing cold.

"I don't know, you decide."

"But you already showed me suicide. You showed me my broken hand. Do you look that way because of what I will do, or is what I'll do a result of what you're showing me? I made this wish so that you could reassure me that everything will turn out okay. Why would you show me death?"

"It wasn't to be cruel. I was just showing you how it could be."

My back straightened and my mind alerted by his unexpected change of words. "How it *could* be? Wait a second, you said how it could be ..."

He did not answer me.

I spoke again, my voice trembling. "Then I do have a chance. This is not how it has to be. All of a sudden you're giving me hope. Why?"

"Haven't we been through enough? I know of love that you couldn't have. I know the baby you lost. I feel that pain, and how alone you are. I know." As he spoke, I saw his appearance change for a brief moment. He looked like the little boy I was with snow-frosted hair, cheeks red and sometimes white, eyes wide with delight. I could see this boy speak of my pain, though I knew that at his age he could scarcely understand it. I watched his face change back to mine as he spoke the last sentence. "But you have to see how it could be."

"Wouldn't death be better?"

"You decide."

"But that's what I came here to find out," I pleaded, my nose almost touching his, my breath forming frost on his face. "Which is better? Is it going to get better?"

"You decide," was all he answered me.

I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth. The tears squeezed through my clenched eyelids, fighting for the chance to be heard. They slid off my jaw and thudded to the floor. I'm not sure I heard a thing.

I sensed the door begin to open behind me, so I opened my eyes. In the short seconds they had been closed, he had changed again.

His face was more weathered, the lines on his forehead were deeper and the flesh sagged under his eyes. His hair was grey, almost white. We were so close, the room was barely able to hold us both. I

looked into his black pleading eyes, his face swaying slightly as though it heard the beat of broken hearts. He was *old*!

Behind me, well in the distance, I heard a voice: "It's time to leave."

I felt the air from outside the room pulling me away from him, from the old man.

At the last moment I locked my hands around his throat. The cold shot through me and froze every joint. Only my lips could move.

"Be real! Be real! Be real!"