

I Return

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I'd always vowed that if I died young—any age shy of senility—I would return to earth as a ghost to look after my wife and children. My love was this strong, I was certain. Stronger than death. Strong enough to cross from the hereafter to the here.

I was forty-two years old when, having done my weekly part for the earth by dropping off at the Sherman Recycling Center a stack of newspapers, four cereal boxes, three tuna fish cans, a pair of plastic milk jugs, and the empty bottle of Circus Girl chardonnay Jennifer and I had downed Saturday night in a prelude to a higher order of merriment, I stepped into my Toyota Prius and was struck on the driver's side door by what my children (Elsa, fifteen, and Benjamin, thirteen) used to call the Crunch Truck. Who knew this mobile compactor reached speeds of up to 70 miles an hour—or up to 68, anyway, which was how fast the driver, a nineteen-year old high on methamphetamines, was going when he plowed into me.

So I was dead. Which, although I'd spent a not inconsiderable amount of time thinking about such an eventuality, was a shock.

I considered myself a perfect candidate for neither heaven nor hell. In my later years, I had been more or less exemplary—a faithful husband, a good father, a solid citizen. As a younger man, however, I had, I feared, at least once crossed the line separating callowness from callousness. I didn't like to remember this time, although even unexamined, it left within me a residue of guilt, something my later good works, such as they were, didn't remove.

The hereafter as I first encountered it was neither heaven nor hell but a chat room in which a collection of the incorporeal dead blathered on, in a medley of languages, about their lost lives. Even when I couldn't understand what was being said, I could interpret tones; I knew who was bragging and who was spewing regret. I knew who wished to return to earth to redeem themselves and who wished to go back merely because they were curious to know what would happen next in the human story.

I heard talk about a portal to earth, and although I was tempted to dismiss it as wish and rumor, I committed to memory what I deemed the most trustworthy information on routes to it. At last satisfied with my roadmap, I set off, navigating through tunnels and mazes and, in one instance, what looked like a bowling alley with glowing orange pins.

Months seemed to pass, but eventually I saw, in the black expanse below me, a hole the size of a manhole cover, opening on what looked like blue sky. It was guarded by a spirit who claimed to be a Sphinx, although he spoke in a Brooklyn accent and asked me no riddles. We chatted about the sense of smell, which, in addition to the sense of touch and taste, we had lost in transit to the hereafter. He said he missed the smell of his mother's fish stew. As he waxed nostalgic, I floated over the open portal and focused all my thoughts on returning to what I'd left.

A moment later, I was in the men's room of a high-school football stadium. More specifically, I was suspended a foot above a urinal cake, which put me in the line of fire, so to speak. Before being doused, I levitated and floated out of the bathroom exit and into the stands. The stadium, situated, I eventually learned, in the depressed town of Hamlet, Montana, must have held five thousand people, and it was packed.

I discovered I had the ability to communicate with the living when, quickly bored with the game, I made my way to the concession stand and ordered two bags of popcorn. (Why two? For my children, I suspect. Or perhaps for me and my wife.) The boy behind the counter, whose acne and greasy bangs bespoke a miserable adolescence, offered my two bags to the air. We were in the north end of the stadium, about twenty yards beyond the goal post, and there was no one in the vicinity. A few moments passed as the boy glanced left and right. He even stared over the counter, as if whoever had placed the order might have collapsed. "Hello?" he whispered.

In retrospect, I should have withdrawn without another word. But I was as surprised to be speaking as he was surprised to be spoken to by a ghost. I said, "I used to put warm oatmeal on my face to help my acne. I'd lie on the kitchen floor like a mummy. One day my sister sprinkled brown sugar on me and threatened to pull out a spoon."

The boy whirled around, his hair flying like a cape. "What the fuck?" he said several times.

I had a vision of his future: In three years, he'd be a soldier, fighting on a distant frontier. It was possible I'd soon see—or, rather, soon hear—his soul in the hereafter.

Minutes later, I heard the churning of a freight train, and minutes after this, I was on board, headed back east, to my family in Sherman, Ohio.

From the outside, my house looked the same as I remembered. On the inside, it was tidier, brighter. The newspapers I used to pile beside my armchair in the corner of the living room were gone. My old toothbrushes, which I had collected in a gray plastic cup on the left side of the sink in the first-floor bathroom, had been disposed of. None of my sweaters were hanging on the backs of the chairs around the dining room table. Indeed, I would have thought I'd entered the wrong house if I hadn't

spied my wife in our bedroom, sitting in front of her vanity, combing her long, black hair.

I didn't know what time it was since the sky's grayness suggested anywhere from early morning to dusk, but by her outfit—a low-cut, cotton dress with a black-and-white checker pattern—I guessed it must be evening. She sprayed perfume on her neck. The gesture wasn't entirely foreign to me—I'd seen her apply perfume once or twice in the early days of our marriage—but I didn't immediately understand its implication. And when I did realize what it likely meant, I couldn't help but cry, "Are you going on a date?"

Immediately, my wife stopped combing her hair. Slowly, she craned her neck around. "Benjamin?" she asked

It was a comfort to hear her speak my son's name. I was about to tell her so when she spoke another name, a name to which I couldn't attach a face or a history: "Peter?"

"Who's Peter?"

My wife shot bolt upright, clutching the comb like a billy club.

"Who are you?" she asked. "Who's here?"

She had thick lips I always thought sexy (although in my hereafter state I'd lost my libido), and the bottom one was trembling. She'd made herself up; her eyelashes looked like thin, black petals.

"It's me," I said.

She drew in a deep breath, and as she released it, her shoulders slumped, her breasts fell. She was, in short, relaxed. And a second later, she wasn't.

"Is this a joke?" she screamed.

"It's me," I said. "I've come back."

"Where?" she asked, surveying the room.

"You can't see me. I'm incorporeal. But I've made it back from the dead, to be with you again." With a measure of pride, I added, "Like I always said I would." It had been a long time since I'd told Lilly my love for her was so great that even death couldn't keep me from her. But it was on the record, and now I was fulfilling my promise.

She wasn't convinced I was who I claimed, and it took me a quarter of an hour, perhaps longer, to explain myself so she believed me.

"This is so strange, so strange," she muttered.

"Aren't you glad to see me?" I asked.

This was the wrong choice of words—she couldn't see me, after all—but I hoped it would draw a smile.

She looked down and fidgeted with her fingers. I noticed she'd removed her wedding ring. She looked up to where she supposed my invisible presence hovered. "Michael, I stood by your grave as they lowered your casket in. I cried. I sobbed. I was the perfect widow. And all the tears were genuine. But after a while, one tends to move on."

The doorbell rang, and Lilly recoiled. "Oh," she said, breathing

heavily. "Listen, Michael, I have to answer that. I've got a...um..."

She sprang toward the bedroom door, but before leaving, she turned around. "I don't know if it's such a good idea for you to hang around here. We can't go to Peter's place because...well, there's the wife thing, and..."

"You're dating a married man?" I said with a mixture of incredulity and outrage.

"He's a transitional figure in my life—obviously." She patted her hair. "But he's kind and he's fun."

"Why don't you transition back to your husband instead?" There were a hundred things we needed to discuss, I believed, although I couldn't recall any in particular.

"Michael, I'm sorry. This is unexpected. It's awkward! Could you call next time...you know, to give me a heads up?"

"A heads up?" I repeated.

"In the meantime, you could stop in to say hi to the kids. They're at my parents' house. I'm sure they'd love to...uh...hear from you."

The doorbell rang again. "Coming!" she announced, and she disappeared down the steps without saying goodbye. I heard the door open; I heard a flurry of words. Then I heard the door shut followed by silence.

Our cat, Theodore, an overweight Persian, came in, sniffed the air, and jumped onto the warm vanity seat my wife had vacated. I called him a hundred times—I even attempted to imitate the electric can opener—but although he acknowledged me by perking up his ears, he soon settled into indifference. I suspect he knew I couldn't offer him anything he'd want.

I thought of what I might have said to Lilly had she stayed. Beyond a description of the hereafter and an account of my journey from Montana to Ohio, I couldn't say I had much to report. And Lilly clearly didn't deem it important to talk to me. When did Lilly and I stop having much to say to each other? I wondered. I might have shivered with the coldness of my revelation, but there was no longer a part of me that could shiver.

I found my daughter chatting on her cell phone in her grandparents' basement. Elsa and I had once been close. She and I had shared an interest in magical creatures (I was once an aspiring fantasy writer, though my day job was high-school physics teacher). The two of us would trade off being the narrator of our epic-in-progress, which bore a number of titles over the months we told the tale: *The Purple Unicorn*, *The Pink Unicorn*, *The Pink Unicorn and Her Purple Baby*. But this enchanted time of father-daughter closeness, I realized, must have ended half a decade ago, and the teenager sitting cross-legged on the floor and twirling her brown hair with her right index finger was if not a stranger, then a mutation of the girl I'd known and understood.

Even the most skilled stenographer, I suspected, would have had difficulty recording every word Elsa spoke into the phone. I heard mention of boys and music and movies. I heard talk of girls and cliques and seasonal clothing. I heard nothing about unicorns, neither pink nor purple. Nor did she once mention me. But when, an hour or more later, she clicked off her phone, she wore such a look of despondence, I thought I knew the cause: she was missing me. Thinking I could console her, I spoke her name.

Her reaction was similar to her mother's, which made me think of Lilly, which reminded me of where Lilly was and with whom (and without whom—me). I would have felt profound sadness if, as was becoming apparent, my spirit state didn't preclude sadness.

After I had convinced Elsa I was her father, or at least her father's ghost, she and I fell immediately into an uncomfortable silence. For the life of me—oh, how those old phrases linger—I couldn't think of what to say. After a while, I began to grow angry or as angry, I suppose, as a hereafter being could. Didn't my daughter, a whisper away from being an adult, an adult who would become a geriatric, a geriatric who would die—didn't she care to know what might await her beyond this life? Didn't she want to talk with, converse with, rap with—whatever the latest, coolest expression was to describe communication—me? How lonely I might have felt if I could have felt anything.

Breaking the silence, my daughter looked up and said, "I'm glad you're okay, Dad." The briefest of pauses: "Do you mind if I make another call?"

"I won't linger," I said, but I doubt she heard me above the music her fingers made as they pounded numbers on her cell phone.

I interrupted Benjamin in the guest bedroom, in the middle of a fantasy. At least, I assume he was in the middle of a fantasy (I always called on fantasies when engaged in solo flights under the covers).

What left his mouth was a series of expletives I'd never heard in the order he used them. When, at last, he established who I was (which failed to remove the suspicion, even hostility, from his face), he said, "God, Dad...I mean, how rude. You never barged in on me when you were alive."

"When I was alive, I could knock," I said. "And, please, don't think the entire world—even the Pope, I'd bet, if I had anything to bet with—doesn't do what you were doing."

He had no response, and I was afraid we would lapse into the kind of silence Elsa and I had endured. It relieved me, therefore, when he said, "I have homework—about a week's worth."

"I'll help you," I said, which had always been my response. Doing Benjamin's homework had been my way of reliving, in his presence, my academic glory.

“Great,” he said, and jutting his chin toward a corner of the room, he added, “My backpack’s over there. The homework assignment’s in the red folder. There’s math, there’s earth science, there’s a reading passage I’m supposed to interpret.”

“Sure, son,” I said, and instinctively made my way toward the backpack. But I no longer had hands to open it. I had no fingers with which to squeeze a pencil, to print answers.

What will my son do without me? I wondered.

And I had an answer: Learn to do for himself.

I would be the stricter father—and the better teacher—in absentia.

“There should be a pencil somewhere in the backpack,” he said. “If you can’t find one, go ask Grandma.”

He rolled over, falling quickly to sleep. His snores were light, child-like. If I was his future, they’d grow heavier over the years. When he was a freshman in college, his roommates would invest in earplugs—or have him exiled to off-campus housing.

Oh, the lessons he’d have to learn without me. But my absence, I was realizing, would guarantee he’d learn them.

If I could have, I would have kissed his tousled hair. I loved him—of course I loved him. I loved him enough to say goodbye.

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After such an unenthusiastic reception by my family, one might have suspected I’d be ready to hop a train west, to see if I could find the hole in the sky, the passage back to my eternal chattering place. I was confident I would find it more amenable, or at least less intolerable, than when I’d left it, since I had proved false the grand idea of my indispensability. But I had one more visit I wanted—I needed—to make.

I’d dated Katherine Peters during our senior year in high school. She was the first woman I’d loved who had ever reciprocated my love, and during the months we were together, everything I saw—from her lips to the tired bricks of our eighty-two-year-old high school building—seemed to blaze with color. We spent as much time together during the week as we could. On weekends, especially during warm weather, we sat on her front porch, sneaking an occasional cigarette, talking, kissing. We’d often stay up until two or three in the morning. After such nights, I’d walk the ten blocks back to my house singing to the stars.

Before long, our relationship began to run its course; our kisses, once so fiery and new, were becoming routine. We had been accepted to different colleges. She wanted to become a veterinarian; I wanted to become a best-selling author, J.R.R. Tolkien’s heir. In short, we eventually would have parted ways. This is how I saw our lives, although I never exactly communicated this to Katherine.

Because Katherine and I had been dating for ten months, we didn’t

treat our high school's prom as an opportunity to hook up (in a phrase from my children's generation) or as one last chance to unleash the mischievous children in us by, say, spiking the punch or turning over the principal's Chevrolet in the parking lot. The prom was a dance, and we liked to dance.

When we returned to Katherine's house at two in the morning, I stood with her on her porch. The air was cool, even cold, although it was mid-June. I was tired and ready to go home. I had something important to do the next day, which was an unfamiliar situation for me. Previously, everything important in my life had to do with Katherine. I was about to kiss her goodnight when she looked over my left shoulder and said, "You can't leave. We'd miss you too much."

Although grateful for the sentiment, I was about to plead my excuse, but I hesitated, tripped up by her use of the first person plural.

She stepped past me and shouted into the darkness, "You said you wouldn't leave and now you're leaving!"

She had awoken a dog, who barked furiously somewhere up the street. A moment later, I heard, or thought I heard, a window opening next door.

"Katherine," I said, pulling her to me. She pushed me away and began running down the street, screaming, "Don't leave me!" She'd run track until the eleventh grade, and as far as I could tell she'd lost none of her speed. I, no runner, huffed and puffed after her.

Fortunately, she did a loop around the block, finishing on her front porch, where she sobbed until her mother, with a cigarette in her mouth and a T-shirt down to her waist, collected her. Katherine staggered into her house without so much as a goodnight to me.

When I came to her house two days later, her sister, who had lived all her life as the bad girl to Katherine's good girl, told me Katherine had been admitted to the psychiatric ward of the Ohio Eastern University Hospital. She told me more: Katherine had had an abortion two months before we started dating. "I think she's talking to her dead baby," her sister confided. Katherine's diagnosis, however, was schizophrenia. (Now, of course, I wonder if the phantoms Katherine saw were real.)

I had a job as a counselor at an overnight camp outside of Akron, and I left for it without once visiting Katherine in the hospital. I wrote her—at least, I think I did—but she never replied. I was, anyway, soon off to college in Maine. Sometimes I convinced myself my behavior toward her wasn't cruel or heartless. I was only moving on.

A year after I graduated from college, I heard Katherine was working in her parents' pet supplies store, the Cat's Meow, in West Sherman and taking courses at Ohio Eastern. I thought about going to see her—to apologize for my behavior, my cowardice—but by this time I was dating Lilly. I had job interviews lined up all over Ohio, and I soon received an offer to teach at a high school on the far, and most rural, end of Sherman

County. Lilly and I got married, bought an old farmhouse on the same dirt road as the school was on, and soon welcomed Elsa into our lives.

Eight years later, my family and I moved back to town after I was offered a job at Sherman High School. Over the years, I probably saw Katherine a dozen times, always at a distance, the last time in the fruit section of Food World. She was holding a bunch of green grapes. She looked at me as she would a stranger. At the time, I assumed she didn't recognize me. This might have been wishful thinking.

Now I wanted to visit her in order to follow up on my long-ago intention to apologize. But the greater reason, I confess, was this: Because she wasn't married or attached (at least as far as I knew), I thought she would welcome the presence of an old lover, even if he was barely present.

I was aware, of course, of how my reappearance—or, anyway, my return to the scene—might exacerbate her mental illness. But after my rejection by my family, I was, I suppose, desperate to connect to someone who had once loved me. Even the dead, it seemed, could be selfish.

The Cat's Meow opened Sundays at ten, and it wasn't quite nine when I drifted in. Whereas the store's main competition, Pet Perfect, looked like its mega-store cousin, Wal-Mart, the Cat's Meow resembled an overstuffed pantry. Cat food, dog food, bird food, leashes, catnip, collars—anything a pet owner could want—crowded the shelves of the narrow aisles.

The cash register was on a counter in the middle of the store's single, large room. Beside it were CDs with animal themes, or at least references to animals in their titles, including the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds*. Katherine and I had often listened to the Beach Boys on her front porch, the cassette tape of *Pet Sounds* eventually becoming tangled and unusable, although by then one of us could merely hum the opening notes of a song and the rest of it would be in the other's head for days.

Behind the counter, sitting on the yellow-carpeted floor, was Katherine. She looked older than when I'd last seen her, of course, but I couldn't say she looked worse. Her brownish-orange hair fell in autumnal corkscrews onto her shoulders. There was silver in it, shimmering like fish in a sunlit creek. Sleeping in her lap was a puppy, copper colored and not much larger than her hand. I remembered Sundays at the Cat's Meow: It was the day a local animal shelter brought in stray cats and dogs in the hopes that the Cat's Meow's customers would want another pet.

The other animals were doubtless at the back of the store, in cages the shelter provided to show them off. Katherine had elected to spend the minutes before she opened the store in the company of this dog, who was sick or comatose or perhaps only sleeping. Something flared up in me, something unexpected but familiar: a desire to mock her charity, to ridicule the kindness she always extended to the world, especially to its most pathetic inhabitants. I remembered times she would cross

Main Street to speak to her “friends”—I thought of them with quotation marks—sitting on benches in front of City Hall, stealing sips from bottles in bags. I’d stand apart from the scene until she finished saying hello, or I’d meet her later at the Book and Brew or at her house. I remembered, too, how two months or so after we’d begun dating, I found out she was writing to two prisoners, and I became as furious as if I’d discovered she’d been cheating on me. I wasn’t consoled when she said, “They’re in for life. No parole.”

What was it, I wondered now, that I despised so much in her goodness? Just as I asked myself the question, I knew the answer: She was kinder than I was, more compassionate, and I resented the feelings of selfishness, even meanness, this engendered in me. So I had despised her for having what I lacked.

What a waste these emotions had been, I thought now, how destructive to the short, and mostly nice, time Katherine and I had had together. Contemplating their futility, I laughed.

Katherine’s head had been bowed over the sleeping puppy, but she lifted it quickly, a disturbed look on her face. Freckles—I remembered how much I loved them—fanned in an upside down ‘V’ from the top of her nose. Her lips moved, a jittery trembling, although no words left them.

I knew the power I had. It was nothing less than the power to destroy her. I could laugh in her ear now and whenever we were alone. I could whisper demonic suggestions, tease her insecurities. I was sure I could torment her into killing herself and so wipe from the earth the person I had hurt most in my life, a person who no doubt carried with her an impression of me as a selfish coward. I might once have been tempted.

But the hereafter seems to mute temptations. Or perhaps I’d grown as a person—or as a soul, a spirit—after my death.

I did not follow my laughter with more of the same. Instead, I flew toward the cages at the back of the room and gave, in the same register as my laugh, a happy bark. On my second bark, I was joined by the two adult dogs who lay in wire cages at either end of the wall and a golden retriever puppy in a glass cage in the center who might have been announcing himself for the first time. Meanwhile, the cats and kittens in the other cages scrambled around, alternately curious and cowering.

Katherine walked, smiling, to the back of the room, and facing the cages said, “Who started this?” She looked down at the puppy in her arms before staring at the tiny golden retriever, who released another howl. “Which one of you dogs has a bark like a laugh?”

I laughed again, but only after I had left the Cat’s Meow. Outside, my laughter wasn’t nearly as sonorous as it had been indoors, but it rang with some of the old joy, and with something else—something like the relief of the pardoned—as I was swept up, as with gentle hands, into the enormous blue sky.