

Ghosted

I had left it sitting on the dining room table for several days, hoping that it would tell me what to do. It should not have been the shock that it was, but then these things always are, because you don't want them to happen. Birth and death are two of the most common occurrences on Earth, but when they involve you and your loved ones, it's a big deal. This one caught me completely off guard and produced a flood of emotions, including a bit of guilt. I hadn't really kept in touch with him as much as I should have and hadn't followed through on some of the things I had promised him when I saw him last, what was it, three or four years ago. I know he wouldn't have held that against me and most likely completely forgot what I said the minute I drove away. He wasn't one to sweat the small stuff.

"Deceased. Return to Sender" was scrawled on the backside of the slick black and white photo of Manhattan, as seen from the roof of the Metropolitan Museum, majestically overlooking Central Park South. Sending Ken that postcard was one small promise I did keep, but he never got to see it, apparently, unless some morbid mistake had been made. But since Ken did not have a working telephone and I did not have his niece's number or that of his nurse or anyone who might be able to affirm or deny the one-word chest punch written on the card, there was no one to call. The handwriting was too shaky to be that of a postal employee - who would most likely have used a stamp anyway. And USPS would simply have marked "Undeliverable" on it. Which would have been even more disturbing, I suppose. I could not imagine who wrote it, but I'm guessing either his niece or whomever was picking up the mail on the farm now. It certainly wasn't Ken's hand, so I had to rule out some sick joke on his part. Besides, Ken's humor did not extend to cruelty.

"Deceased. Return to Sender". It had been two weeks between my sending the postcard and when it came back. That in itself did not mean much in reality, given the continuing downslide of our now almost anachronistic federal postal system. However, that did not stop me from trying to read something into the lengthy gap. Why wasn't it returned immediately? Why was a more explanatory letter not sent to me, considering the obviousness of our close comradery as evident in my cribbed message? And why was the postal date stamp not from the 77324 Pine Grove Texas post office, but from an Aldine station? The next question was: How do I find out the how/why/when of my pal's demise? Well, aside from his exceedingly venerable age. Last I heard, just last year, he was doing fine. Had there been an accident? Drank himself to death? Murdered? And what happened to his farm, his savings, his wishes to be buried on his property? I had to locate his niece, but in fact, I never did learn her name, so how could I ever locate her? Was an obituary published in any newspaper? Somehow I doubted it. Check with the County Clerk? Social Security? All I could think of was to contact Slidelle. Surely she or her attorney brother would know how to track down such information. If necessary, I would have to go there myself to find out just what the hell happened. Not to be crass, but Ken intimated that he wanted *me* to have a lot of the antiques in that dusty old 19th-century mansion.

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A couple of days later I received an email from Slidelle:

“Compadre - I musta spent four hours Googling all the recent obits, crime reports, etc., but nothing about your dearly departed came up. I’m sure *you* also checked online. I couldn’t even find any mention of Pine Grove. That’s where you’re from? I never knew and forgive me, love, if you did tell me and I just didn’t process it. Because you went to Houston Tech I just assumed you WERE from Houston. I wish you much luck in finding out what the hell happened to your friend and his property. If you do, damn well I will sic my bro on it, re: the property and contents. Sorry I couldn’t come up with anything or have any useful suggestions. Of course, I would love for you to come down and stay with me if you wanna check it out for yourself. I can relocate the current non-payin’ tenants of my spare room for you. Hell, I’ll move into the garage if I have to and you can have my room. MUCH MUCH LOVE to you, mah darlin one. - S”

After much ankgsty brain-storming I decided I would take Slidelle up on her offer. I wrote her that I was gonna book a flight for next week and come down soon’s I found a reliable cat-sitter, one that won’t bail after a couple of days, allow shit to overflow the litter box, let them die of thirst, or just throw the bag of kibble on the floor on the first day and never return.



The only open business I saw for several miles was a gas station I had used many times. Not that there was anything unusual about that, given that the once-flourishing area between Houston and Humble had long ago been devastated by both industrial pollution and failed developments. The same scrawny, straw-headed guy was workin the pump who’d seemingly been there for decades. And he’d probably been using that one greasy rag sticking out of his bibs for all that time. I pulled in and he mosied over to the car. I rolled down the window.

“Hah-dy” I said, trying my best to recover the exaggerated twang I only used when traveling in rural Texas. Since they hate “city” talk out there. “I haven’t been here in many years. I used to buy gas here when I lived in Pine Grove back in the day. I remember you from then. How you doing?”

“I’m all right, I guess. Don’t ‘member you raht off, but ya know I seen lotsa folks over the years. Can’t recall em all. What’dya need today?”

“Well, actually I don’t need any gas. I actually stopped to ask you if you knew a friend of mine who lived on the farm up on the hill in Dogtree. His name was Ken. Ken Clarke. Tall Black man. Really old guy. Drove an old GMC truck. I got a card sayin he had died. I’m on my way there now to check out the property. Hopefully there is some sign or something

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with contact information on it or a phone number I can call.”

“Don’t know of no Ken by *any* last name that I can recall. And definitely never war no Black folks be livin’ round here. Where’s this farm you talkin bout? They ain’t no farms and ain’t been for a *coon’s age*. Specially not on that godforsaken piece o’ land. Nothin but silt, sand, and scrub. What the chem plants didn’t poison, that stupid “planned community” flop covered over in concrete an’ blacktop. I don’t even wanna look out the winder when I drive past it cuz it’s pretty damn spooky. Where’d ya say you were from?”

“Pine Grove.”

“Don’t know it. That one o’ them subdivisions of Humble? They keep redistrictin’ and renamin’ ‘em. I just can’t keep up with it. Tryin ta make it sound more attractive to buyers I guess.”

“You have to know Pine Grove. It’s right north of Dogtree. When I lived there the population was around 500. Last time I was there it maybe had shrunk a *bit*, but not that much.”

“Nope. I know these parts better’n anybody. I’ve lived here for fifty years. Since I was a teenager. Ain’t nothin by that name and never was - not out here. Maybe that weren’t the official name. No town signs fer sure.”

“They moved the sign off the main road when it got annexed by Humble. It was only about two miles south of Humble.”

“You don’t mean Pine *Village*?”

“No. That’s south of here. I grew up in Pine Grove and I lived there til I was 18.”

“Well, I ain’t sayin I don’t believe ya, but I’m a lot older’n y’all and I just don’t know nothin bout it. You sure you on the right road? This is I-69. Maybe you want I-59.”

“Uhhh. Well, I appreciate what you were able to tell me. I’m gonna head up there and see what’s goin on. Y’all have a good day, my friend. What is your name? I’m sorry I never asked you before.”

“Jim.”

“My name is James. What a coincidence, huh?”

“It’s a pretty common name. From the bible.”

“Yes, James, brother of Jesus.”

“He had a brother? Musta been a half-brother.”

“I guess you could say that. Well, thanks again. I’m gonna go take some photos. If you’re still open, I’m a stop back and show you what I found.”

“Okay, but I’m prob’ly shuttin down early today. No bidness t’day. Just gonna heat up some chili, watch the game on the tv an’ have me a few beers.”

“Well, enjoy, Jim. Later.”

“Yep.” He mosied on back to the ramshackle office.

I pulled back onto the road and headed towards the Clarke farm. I did not see the winding dirt and gravel uphill drive that I normally could find blindfolded. I ended up driving right into Dogtree proper. OK, proper is a bit strong for this little dot in the road, but Ken’s property lay to the south. I made a U-turn and slowly drove back. I couldn’t be more than a

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quarter mile down, at most. But there was no road, no old mansion, not even the big hill it sat on.

I made another U-turn and parked on the shoulder where I was certain the farm had to be. The old house must have been torn down, but I did not see any lumber, foundation, or other detritus one would normally expect from a demolition. The area was flat as a pancake, except for a few of the big old dogwood trees that I recognized, which confirmed that I was in the right place. Newish-looking slabs of concrete had been laid where the big barn used to be and a lot of rusting construction equipment lie about. Everything else was dirt, which also looked recently dozed, because there were undisturbed large tire tracks snaking all around. Even the low valley down to the left of the house, where the cow pasture was, had obviously been landfilled. I tripped over a crushed rusted metal sign that read "Rowe Construction". If there was truth in advertising it should have read "De-struction".

The effect of all this destruction of what was such a beautiful, even idyllic, estate, which held so many precious memories for me, was so disorienting and incomprehensible that I was stunned to the point of not being able to feel any emotion. Like when someone receives news of a family's member's death and they just stand there, stone cold, because it just can't be true and because you don't want it to be true and never anticipated it ever happening. And because you didn't get to say goodbye or tell them how much you loved them.

When I snapped out of my stupor I wondered just where Ken had gone and when. Was he pushed out or bought out? Was he hospitalized or put out to pasture in some god-awful nursing home? Or did he just die quietly in his sleep or while listening to the news on that old cracked and half-melted two-tone melamine radio in the kitchen? These are the answers I came here to get and I needed to stay focused on that mission, despite the immense distraction of the destruction that lay all around me.

I walked further back where the former hill sloped down towards the little creek fed by Green's Bayou. There was a slight incline but no creek visible. It always was just a trickle, and occasionally, during droughts, it did dry up completely, but there had been some recent flash floods, so that would not explain it. I walked down the slope towards where the creek would be and saw that it had also been filled in. I flashed back to the time I got stuck in quicksand, running from a coy-ote I was convinced was rabid. Ken came running to rescue me with a bamboo fishin pole after hearing me screaming "*like a girl*".

Only small patches of weeds were scattered about the 80-acre estate, again indicating that this sad remodeling of the most verdant spot around for many a mile was very recent. I guessed that the county had re-dammed the Bayou's runoffs so that the creek no longer ran through here - or possibly anywhere.

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I did a 360 and faced towards the road. Finally, the weight of all this came down on me and tears started flowing. I felt a chill and noticed my hands were shaking and goosebumps had appeared on my arms, even though it was a hot motherfucker today. I headed back to the car, plodding slowly like one does when trying to walk across the bottom of a pool.

I figured I would likely be able to get more information from folks in Pine Grove, as plenty of them had bought produce, milk, and eggs from Ken's roadside stand over the years and a select few hunted on his property. He was also a frequent visitor in town, and given his age, height, and Very Blackness, he was impossible to miss, especially with the rattling late '40s wood-bed pickup that he drove. It was the only vehicle I had ever seen that had weeds growing out of it.

As earlier, my inner GPS was off, as my home town seemed to be a lot further up the road than I had judged. The turnoff was not where I had expected it, nor did I see the large hand-painted Adam's Feed Supply billboard that marked it. Another iconic landmark vanished. I glanced at the mileage counter, which I had had accidentally reset back on Beltway 8 when I left R&B's Soul Food and was trying to figure out how to use the damn digital dash menu. Twelve miles. I knew that neither the beltway nor Pine Grove had been moved since I had been here last so the turnoff had to be here. I guess the counter could be inaccurate, but that was unlikely because how could anything computerized be less than perfect?

Once again, I made a U-turn to retrace my path. Because of my farsightedness, I frequently could see things more clearly from the other side of a street. Although it was nearly naked, I did spot a wide, dirt path on the left that had to be the turnoff. Yep, it followed the same southeastern curve but the blacktop was gone, most likely for resurfacing. That was encouraging, because the county had long neglected road maintenance out here.

I drove along the dusty trail, which *also* seemed to stretch further than expected, before reaching town. But nothing appeared except more destruction

After about a mile I knew something was terribly, terribly wrong. As far as the eye could see - which was pretty far, given the flatness of the land - there was ... nothing. No trees, no homes, no buildings of any kind, no cars or trucks, nor any traces that a town had ever existed here. Not even a nuclear bomb could so completely wipe a landscape this clean. Just concrete slabs, dirt, and scrub brush. Even tumbleweeds - probably kudzu - eerily rolled through the wasteland, like on some old Hollywood Western backlot. And just as silent as any ghost town.

I should have tried to maintain contacts with my former schoolmates, teachers (though *they* are most likely all dead), and neighbors in Pine Grove, but I didn't. I was so happy to leave behind the sometimes suffocating limitations of small town life that when I moved to Houston at eighteen I never looked back. Except for Ken. I talked to a few kids that I had

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been friends with from the old nabe at the HouTech 10-year reunion but they also had all moved on. The only other former *compadres* were either in prison, institutionalized, in the military, or interred.

I parked, and suddenly feeling sick, opened the door just in time to throw up. Raising my head slightly, I felt dizzy. I paused, hoping to hell that when I looked again, all would be as I remembered it.

However, it wasn't. This was no dream. It was, however, a living nightmare. Or rather, a dead one.