Simon Says

by Marshall Moore

Simon never looked ethereal. I'd expect someone who grew up seeing ghosts to dress in black every day. I'd expect him to be gaunt and to chain-smoke foreign cigarettes, Gauloises maybe. The kind wrapped in black paper. Strong. Two puffs and you've got throat cancer. I'd expect him to have… well, never mind what I would expect. Simon was none of those things.

He did see ghosts, however.

Starting almost at birth, he told me. They'd swirl around in the air above his crib, sometimes trailing ectoplasm, sometimes not. Supernatural mobiles. Baby Simon would stare at them, eyes wide, and gurgle. They'd gurgle back. Other people in the family had the ability, but to a lesser degree. Simon's mother told me she saved a bundle on baby toys, since the poltergeists amused him far more effectively than anything manufactured by Fisher Price.

The ghosts taught him to speak, to read, and to write. When Simon told me that, I had to raise an eyebrow. But by that point I was both convinced he really could see specters and head over heels in love with him, so who was I to argue? Before most other kids could write their names, Simon had developed a beautiful cursive. He could speak a few other languages: Italian (the language of his paternal forebears, some of whom kept him company cribside), German, French, some Russian. Simon's mother had sense enough not to call in priests or attempt exorcisms on her own. A practical woman, she concluded that there was nothing wrong with free education, regardless of its source.

Rather than fostering dependence, Simon's ability produced the opposite result: he charged through life determined to succeed on his own merit, as single-minded as a spermatozoön. Had he wanted them to, his ghosts could have done all sorts of errands for him, getting even with children who were mean to him (any gay child is fair game for his peers), providing answers to test questions

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that stumped him, and so on. Somehow, Simon sensed he'd never amount to anything if he allowed this to happen. In grade school, he gave himself headaches from studying as long as his parents permitted before sending him to bed. He took up the piano and practiced for hours, finally recognizing his lack of a gift for music in high school. He locked himself in his room in his spare time and wrote poems he'd burn in college. Everything he did, he did with a sort of abandon.

Here's where I come in.

Until recently I had never seen a ghost. Or, rather, I had never seen one and known what I was looking at. As a child the idea of ghosts fascinated me; I checked out all the books the library had and skulked around graveyards hoping to catch a glimpse of something supernatural. I expected transparency, shrouds and ectoplasm, tendrils of fog, moans and groans. I got nothing. Growing up in the South contributed to my outlandish expectations. Southerners take for granted things people from other parts of the country would never even consider. My own mother and grandmother, born and raised in coastal North Carolina, superstitious to their cores, scared the piss out of me time after time with their ghost stories: the Devil's tramping ground, a patch of sand where no grass would grow because Satan liked that spot to pace and think; the phantom engineer, decapitated by his own train, forever walking up and down the tracks on foggy nights, swinging his lantern, searching for his head; the hitchhiker in the darkest part of the Croatan National Forest, a girl who would ask for a ride home, arrive, wait in the car for the driver to knock on her parents' door, then disappear while the occupants of the house explained how she had been killed in a wreck years before. I believed every word and never saw a thing.

Simon thinks we met once, in junior high school, when he visited cousins in North Carolina, but I don't remember. I think I'd remember a boy with dark red hair and brown eyes. By that age I felt pangs of interest in other boys and would have had a crush on him at first sight. He swears we met. I disagree. In any case, when

we allegedly met, Simon's ghosts were in attendance. I never knew. He says he was sitting in a park talking with two of them, a great-aunt who died in Ireland (the other half of his lineage was Irish) years before his birth, and some other man from Russia who liked to follow him around. I walked by, stopped to say hello, noticed nothing unusual about the boy on the park bench, and kept going. The Russian, who could see parts of the future, told him who I was and what my role in his life would be. Simon tried to run after me, but I had already disappeared around the corner.

We met again 13 years later.

Living in Baltimore, slogging through my 2-L year at Maryland Law, not entirely sure what I'd do when I graduated, or even next week, I managed to hold onto some kind of social life in my rare moments of spare time. My friend Mark Tucker from undergraduate days at Rutgers had moved to DC and gone to work for some agency that contracted with the federal government. His work involved computers. He earned obscene amounts of money. He told me what he did. I could never remember. When Mark and I were seniors, he met Jeremy Glass, a 1-L at Penn Law. Love at first sight. They spent all their extra time (Jeremy didn't have much) on the phone, swapping e-mail, or commuting first between Philly and New Brunswick, then between DC and Philly. Jeremy finished Penn and took a job with DOJ. They bought an old rowhouse on Capitol Hill and restored it. Marital bliss.

At their housewarming party:

I knocked first, doubted whether anyone would hear me over the pounding techno music inside, then tried the doorbell. Both the knocker and the doorbell surround were shaped like gargoyles. I looked up the block, hoping nobody would break into my new Corolla.

Mark opened the door a crack, peeked out, recognized me, grabbed me by the arm, dragged me inside, slammed the door shut behind us.

“Drinks are in the kitchen,” he said after we kissed hello. “Get a beer or a glass of wine, say Hi to everybody you know, and meet me on the deck around back as soon as you can, OK?”

Off to my right, in the kitchen I guessed, I could hear someone trying and failing to open a bottle of beer: “Where is the fucking bottle opener? Goddamn it, where did that thing go? I just saw it here not three minutes ago, and these motherfucking imports do not have twist-off caps.”

Mark propelled me in that direction and slipped into the crowd.

The music got louder. Somebody shrieked.

I found a Michelob Dry and gloated discreetly as I twisted off the cap and threw it into the trash next to the guy who was still swearing at his bottle of Amstel Light. Didn't even miss the garbage can. I felt so manly I scared myself.

Mark materialized again.

“Get your ass out here now!” he hissed in my ear.

I followed him outside.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, you just live in Baltimore, that's all. I never get to see you, so I'm being selfish. It's my prerogative because we're in my house.” He kissed me again.

“Careful, bud, you've got a husband.”

“John, come on. Jeremy's not insecure; he doesn't have self-esteem issues; he wouldn't keel over dead if he saw me kiss my best friend that I used to sleep with at Rutgers.”

“No?”

Mark swigged his beer and shook his head. “His head's screwed on too well for that. He likes you, John. He's not the jealous type.”

“Things are going well, then?”

They were. Mark felt the jitters because he and Jeremy were the people everyone said had been born for each other. This led to a certain pressure to be “on” all the time, to be perfect… never argue, never fight, make wild love five times each night. Mark

loved Jeremy and loved being half of a pair of bookends, but he felt a little puzzled at the same time. They had the house. They had a black Lab named Sam. They had year-old European cars (a Volkswagen GTI and a Saab). They made a lot of money and invested it well. What more could anyone want? Or rather, *Now what?* Mark didn't know which question to ask, much less what the answer might be.

"You worry about everything. If you were to relax and enjoy the ride, you wouldn't be Mark anymore, you'd be someone else. I'm not sure I'd know him if I passed him on the street," I said, nudging Mark in the ribs.

I shivered in my jacket and drank more beer. Sooner or later the alcohol would kick in and I wouldn't notice the chill. Mark caught my gaze wandering and changed the subject for a minute; he knew me well enough to know when I'd maxed out on something. Come spring, he and Jeremy intended to landscape their backyard plot. Their south 40 consisted of a paved slab where they parked their cars, a narrow strip of earth next to the fence on each side, and the deck off the kitchen where we stood leaning against the balcony. My nose kept threatening to run. I wanted to move the conversation to a quieter spot but Mark seemed to prefer talking outside.

Then Simon walked into view.

"Thank God you were finished with that," Mark said when the beer bottle slipped from my hand, bounced off the wooden deck, and shattered on the pavement under the front bumper of Mark's GTI.

"He's beautiful," I said. Maybe that's not exactly how I put it, but I know I said something just as inane. "Who is he?"

"Simon Rossi. He's not your average gym-toned Ken doll but you can't take your eyes off him, can you?"

"Italian? With red hair?" In the age of Caesar cuts and goatees, Simon wore his hair longish and tied back in a ponytail.

"Half Italian, half Irish. I'd call that auburn, not red. Jeremy knows him better than I do. He says it's not from a bottle."

I wanted more beer: another bottle to hold, something for my hands to do. Mark laughed when I grabbed his Kirin, still half-

full, and drained it dry. He promised (or threatened) to get Simon and introduce us.

“He's single, you know.”

More inanity: “With his looks?”

“If you're into guys with hard bodies and small brains, he's not for you. This is a brainy town, but most of the fags here still chase after gym clones.”

Beyond belief.

“He's had an interesting life, John. You should talk to him. You might hit it off.”

For some reason the idea terrified me. My heart raced. I fidgeted and, when I took a step away from the balcony I'd been leaning against, realized it had pressed a wet line across the seat of my pants.

“I should have mentioned it rained here this afternoon. I take it Baltimore was dry?”

“Never noticed,” I said, eyes on Simon, who, God help me, was making his way through the crowd in the kitchen. Looking back, I can't call what I felt that night love at first sight, but I knew I was intrigued. Knowing what I know about Simon now, I don't mind labeling this a premonition of the most basic kind. Destiny in Levis and a heavy wool sweater. Coming my way.

“I'll introduce you.”

He did.

Like Bambi in the headlights I stared at Simon when he stepped toward me and offered his hand to shake. Mark gave me a mischievous wink and disappeared into the house for fresh bottles of beer. When Simon and I attempted conversation it limped along on crutches like “Nice place” and “Yeah, they've done a lot of work to it.” “Where did you go to school?” “What do you do?” That kind of thing. I'm surprised he didn't think I was as boring an asshole as I thought I was at the time.

Mark returned with Jeremy and more beer.

Jeremy was already drunk.

“You're both tongue-tied,” he announced.

Simon and I looked at each other and blushed. His face turned as red as his hair.

Jeremy continued: “So stick out your tongues and compare knots. If you're both into bondage we've got a guest bedroom.”

He and Mark exchanged a glance this time, nodded at each other. They communicated on a level I couldn't access, although I could guess where their thoughts were going. Mark and I went back a long way and had our own private channels; when he and Jeremy talked on their secret frequency I could often get the gist but not the meat of the message. I knew what the skeleton of this animal looked like.

“You're not,” I said.

Mark and I lived in the same dorm as freshmen. Although the honors dorm had been designed as a quiet, bookish sanctuary free from standard underclassmen's antics, we partied as hard as anyone else. One popular trick involved pennies: three or four of them, wedged between door and frame, no exit for the occupants of the room.

“C'mon, don't protest,” Jeremy said. “You two look as good together as we do. Step inside and go upstairs or I'll get out my cattle prod.”

“Cattle prod?”

“For the tourists,” Mark hastened to explain. “And people in malls at Christmas. Now, go!”

Half the people at the party got involved. Simon and I were herded into the room and pennied in; the party-goers cheered when the deed was done.

When Mark and Jeremy returned two hours later Simon and I didn't want to be bothered. Somehow a real conversation happened. Simon told me he had seen ghosts. He could speak German. He warmed up to me when he found out I knew Latin. My Southern origins fascinated him; having grown up in Manhattan and, later, Connecticut, he had read books about the South, trying hard to imagine the sultry weather and magnolia trees. For me, the

South was more about mosquitoes and rednecks. Every day, I felt a twinge of relief not to be living there, but I didn't want to argue the point with this beautiful man. Especially when he had stretched out on the floor with his head in my lap.

I stayed at his place in Adams Morgan that night. He wouldn't hear of me driving back to Baltimore at 3.00 in the morning. The next night he drove to my place. That's how we got started.

We moved in together a year later. I had just graduated from law school and had the bar exam to prepare for and dread, plus the inevitable rounds of interviews. Simon and I found a little tract house to rent out in Aspen Hill, a suburb 10 miles north of DC, up Connecticut Avenue and accessible to nothing; we moved in during the narrow gap between the end of my finals and the beginning of those interviews. I would have taken the plunge sooner, but commuting between the District and Baltimore every day, keeping a law student's hours, is only for people who don't need sleep.

We got through the standard newlyweds' arguments about whose sofa to keep (mine) and whose to discard (his), where to shop for a coffee table (he didn't want to default to Ikea like every other homo from DC to Boston; I couldn't see why not), whether to buy groceries at Giant or Super Fresh (neither of us cared enough about the issue enough to continue bickering). We bought furniture. We filled in the empty spaces. We used one bedroom, had two left: an office apiece. We shopped together for an aquarium (hexagonal) and managed to agree on which fish should occupy it (the low-maintenance kind: a pair of kissing gouramis, some barbs, and a catfish we named George Bush). We lovingly Windexed birdshit off each other's car windows. When I passed the bar Simon surprised me with a chocolate cake. When I got my first job he surprised me with a week in Provincetown. At home, we woke up every morning, blearily made coffee, stumbled downstairs to Soloflex and NordicTrack ourselves into something like wakefulness, performed the morning rituals, kissed long good-byes at the door before leaving

for our jobs, mine at the law firm downtown, his at the World Bank. I liked my life… our life together. Then dead people got our phone number from God knows where (I wouldn't have thought they had 411 in the afterlife) and started calling at all hours.

The first time, I didn't know anything odd was happening. The phone rang just as we had finished playing around on the sofa. I had gone to retrieve a towel from the linen closet. Simon lay still, to avoid creating a stubborn stain on the upholstery. The phone rang. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Simon reach carefully for the cordless handset.

"Hello? Oh, Hans." His voice hardened. "*Guten abend*." That was the only part I understood. I recognize German when I hear it and can pick out words here and there but I couldn't follow a fluent speaker, especially when he is pissed off. Simon unleashed what sounded like a string of invective, then dropped the phone on the floor.

"Hurry up before the come runs off my chest," he said, voice still tight.

I tossed him the towel.

"Who was that? I didn't think anyone you know in Germany had this number yet."

"My, umm… that was Hans."

The phone rang again.

The aquarium aerator stopped bubbling. Power outage, I guessed… all the lights in the house switched off at the same time. The refrigerator's faint mechanical hum ceased; the blue-green numerals on our entertainment gadgetry disappeared. I looked out the window to see who else had been affected.

"The lights are on down the street," I said.

"I'm not surprised. I think Hans is having a tantrum."

"Are you going to answer it?" was all I could think of to say.

"I might as well."

Simon picked up the phone. More German. He absently toweled away our post-conjugal stickiness and scorched this Hans

person's ears. Then something happened I couldn't quite follow: in the middle of what I assume was a sentence, Simon paused. “Oleg?” He switched to Russian, smiling now. The lights came on. I understood even less Russian than German but I knew Simon's vocal inflections well enough to pick up on a few things. Simon sounded like he was talking to a friend he hadn't seen in years.

After a few minutes he rang off.

We stared at each other, still nude.

“Oleg wanted to congratulate us for moving in together. I haven't heard from him in ages. Well, once in a while, but not lately.”

“Who is Oleg, again?”

”He's Russian. He was with me the first time I saw you.”

“At Mark and Jeremy's housewarming party?”

“Before that, in North Carolina, when we were both in the eighth grade.”

“I love you but you're a nut sometimes. An adorable nut, but still kind of a nut. Have I told you that before?”

He nodded.

“Oleg was born in a village near Tashkent. He's Uzbek but speaks — spoke — verb tenses get so complicated when you're talking about the dead — Russian. During World War II he was conscripted…”

“Wait a minute, Simon.”

“Believe me,” he said, looking me straight dead in the eye. “The ethnic Russian officers conducted their own ethnic cleansing long before the former Yugoslavs got around to it. They'd march regiments of boys from the Central Asian republics across minefields, to clear them, to keep their precious Russian and Ukrainian soldiers from being blown up. Oleg stepped on a mine in what is now part of Belarus.”

“That's a hell of a long-distance call,” I said. It was the first thing I could think of.

Simon nodded.

“Hans is from the same time period. I don't like him as much, but he has his uses.”

“His uses?”

Simon sat up now, noticing (I guess) for the first time we were having this completely whacked conversation while sitting stark naked in our living room after sex. He pulled on his boxer briefs and stared into the aquarium, where our gouramis wrestled in a passionate liplock.

“Oleg can see the future, up to a point. Mostly he gives me stock quotes. With his help my investments have completely surpassed the market average in the last ten years. He warned me to get out before the crash in 1987, and he told me there'll be another one at the very end of the Nineties. I didn't inherit as much from my grandmother as I allow people to think.”

I searched the pile of clothes by the sofa for my own underwear. It's one thing to say you believe in ghosts when you're a kid. Kids also believe in Tinkerbell in order to keep her from winking out like a candle flame. Kids believe in Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, and happy endings. It's expected. It's quite another thing to be a rational adult (a lawyer, for God's sakes) and be asked to accept that a dead Russian, excuse me, a dead Uzbek, gives you great stock tips from the hereafter. Especially when the news is shared while you're covered in come after sex on the sofa. This is more or less what I said to Simon.

He blinked at me. I had never seen him look more haunted.

“I haven't seen any ghosts up close since we moved in together. Most of them are respectful enough to allow me some space. Unlike Hans. Hans was on the crew of a U-boat. He was a Nazi. Claims he sank the Lusitania. I think he has a lech for me.”

“Then I'll call him back and tell him if he lays an ectoplasmic finger on my boyfriend I'll come after his ass, dead or not.”

“What?” Simon actually looked alarmed.

“Star 69,” I said.

The phone rang a couple of times on the other end. I expected but did not get the taped recording: *We're sorry. This*

service is not available for the number of your last incoming call. The ringing stopped, but instead of an answer I got silence. Dead air. I pressed the phone closer to my ear and strained to hear anything in that void. I seemed to pick up voices in the background, very faint, speaking in languages I didn't recognize.

“Hello?” I asked. I didn't like this. Too real. “Is anyone there?”

Simon reached up and took the phone away from me. He turned it off, then crossed the room and turned off the ringer. His normally olive skin had gone a shade of pale whiter than I had ever seen. His eyes were huge, and sweat shone on his brow.

“It's real, John. I'm not making this up. Remember the first night we met? I told you I had seen ghosts. I just didn't mention that I had seen them more than once, or that it was a regular thing.”

How could I doubt a man whose face looked like that? Simon looked scared. I knelt on the carpet next to the sofa where he had stretched out, and cupped his face in my hands. I kissed him.

“I don't know what I heard, and I don't remember seeing you in the park, but I don't think you're crazy.” I hugged him. “What do we do now?”

“We get dressed and fix something to eat, we brew a pot of coffee, and I tell you the rest of the story.”

We talked late into the night. He did most of the talking, to tell the truth. As I listened I felt increasingly uneasy, not out of doubts about his sanity but out of (this shocked me) belief. Our kitchen with its cheerfully dowdy yellow wallpaper, its refrigerator covered with magnets shaped like farm animals (cows amused Simon to no end), the smell of the vegetables I stir-fried, was no place for a story like this. My chair creaked a little when I leaned back in it. If someone wanted to talk about growing up haunted, the place for that was a big spooky old house with suits of armor in each room, battle axes decorating the walls, white dustcloths draped over all the furniture, and one black rotary phone in a cubicle under the stairs. Not here.

I know more now than I did then.

This weekend Jeremy, Mark, Simon, and I decided to drive up to Philadelphia for a change of scene. After that phone call from Hans and Oleg, a certain equilibrium returned to Simon's and my life. Simon's ghosts flocked back but kept a fairly low profile, or so he told me. I could sometimes tell when he saw something I couldn't: he'd just stare fixedly at a point in space. I never heard him talking to thin air, to his credit. A fractured sort of peace reigned, but I had a sense of something being about to happen. And I'm as psychic as your average two-by-four. Simon's ghosts (Oleg, I assumed) weighed in with the occasional forecast about which stocks to buy or unload, which roads to avoid, and the like. Benignly unobtrusive. Simon and I grew a bit wealthier. He traded his Saturn for a blue BMW. We got a cat and named her Bicker because that's what we did for two days, trying to settle on a name. Simon rarely mentioned ghosts, and if any poltergeist activity was taking place it was too discreet for me to see. I suppose this is what it's like to live with HIV: you get on with your daily life but in the back of your mind you remain vigilant.

South Street is Philadelphia's urban hip strip. Funky shops proliferate. Pierced twentysomethings browse in thrift shops or buy CDs next to buff gay boys and middle-aged tourists. Lines form at the cheesesteak restaurants. None of us had been there since Jeremy graduated from Penn Law. Simon had never been at all.

“You'll never find a parking spot in this crowd,” Jeremy said.

He thought Simon was either naïve or crazy to drive into the one-way congestion on South Street and expect to find a place to leave his car and had said so twice already.

“Oh, I think I will. I'm lucky that way.”

Simon winked at me.

I mouthed, “Oleg?'

He nodded.

True to form, Simon found the perfect spot in front of Tower Records. A blue Mitsubishi 4x4 left the space just ahead of us

and to the right. Simon claimed the spot and graciously did not gloat over it to Jeremy.

We spent the next few hours browsing, relieved to be away from Washington for the day. The plan was to spend the afternoon on South Street, have a late dinner, then go out dancing, close the place down, then find a hotel afterward to crash for a few hours. Of course it didn't happen that way.

In the depths of an antique store, where Jeremy and Mark had dragged us to look at fixtures for their house, my cell phone rang. This wouldn't have raised any red flags, but I always kept it turned off until I had to make outgoing calls. Always. Oblivious, Mark picked up a stained-glass window and held it up for Jeremy's approval. Simon looked at me instead.

“This is probably for you,” I said, holding the phone at arm's length.

His eyes widened and he looked over my shoulder, not at Jeremy, Mark, or their window, but at something only he could see. His face darkened.

“Oh shit.” He took the phone.

“What is it?” With a grunt, Mark put the window down.

Simon's voice broke: “My mother and sister were killed about an hour ago.” I moved to put my arms around him. “It was a car wreck… I saw them just now. Before your phone rang.”

“They were here?”

He nodded. His chest hitched; he was trying not to cry.

“We need to go home right away,” I said, trying to take charge of the situation before it slipped irretrievably into the Twilight Zone. Jeremy and Mark did not ask Simon to clarify what he meant by seeing his mother and his sister.

Walking back to the car, Simon leaned over to me and whispered, “It's worse than you know. Hans did it.”

“What?”

Simon nodded. His eyes welled with tears; one broke free and ran down his cheek.

“You think I'm insane,” he said.

I shook my head No. “My cell phone was off when it rang, Simon.”

He nodded.

“This isn't easy. This isn't how we're taught the world works.”

“Surprise, surprise.” He barked a short laugh. “Ever wonder which other basic truths aren't really true?”

“Every day. Here's the car. Give me your keys; I don't want you to drive back.”

He agreed he shouldn't drive. Jeremy and Mark huddled together, saying nothing, obviously sensing something wrong beyond what they already knew. I promised myself I'd find some explanation by the time we got home. Driving would help clear my mind.

Simon's car permitted me to make much better time than I would have in my practical little Toyota. I had us home in two and a half hours, most of which passed in silence. I noticed Simon seeing things whose nature I could only guess. My stomach and bowels lurched and knotted in fear of what revelations he'd have for me after Mark and Jeremy left our house. They offered to stay for moral support if Simon wanted that, but he declined, and kissed them goodbye. We promised to keep them posted.

Finally we were alone.

“It's a lot worse than I thought. Some of this won't make sense because you can't see Hans and the others, but trust me on this one, okay?”

I started brewing a cup of coffee to keep my hands busy.

“I told you I thought he had some kind of lech for me?”

I nodded.

“I guess I was right. My mother came back to warn me: he'll come after me now. She and my sister were like an experiment. He scared the driver of an oncoming truck; he lost control and hit them head-on. Now they're in the same place Hans is. I don't know how or why, but they are. I thought they'd be somewhere else, but…”

I sat on the kitchen floor and traced the patterns in the linoleum. I didn't want to be having this conversation. My stomach writhed like a vat of eels; I wanted to vomit, to run outside where the cold air would shock me back into the real world where ghosts didn't exist at all. My head started to pound, a baby migraine taking its first faltering steps; I figured I had half an hour before it reached full gallop.

“Hans has always said he wanted me to be with him forever, but I basically dismissed that. I never though he'd be able to do anything about it.”

“What can you do now?”

Simon looked bleak. “I don't have a clue. As much as possible, I've always pushed the ghosts away. You know that. I mean, I've always known I'd never have a normal life like everybody else, but I've tried to minimize the impact the ghosts would have on me. Maybe I should have been paying attention.”

“You have to do something,” I said.

“I know.”

We sat at the table drinking coffee laced with Bailey's, waiting for the phone to ring. Over the next few hours Simon's father and brother called from Hartford and Chicago. Relatives were already on planes from Ireland and Italy. Arrangements were being made. Simon decided he'd leave first thing in the morning. He jotted down phone numbers for me. I'd join him two days later.

“I think I need to spend a few hours in the office with Oleg and a few of the others,” Simon said after the last call from his family.

I nodded.

I kissed him.

I followed him through the house and watched him close the door to his office. He shut off the light. I heard a match being struck: candles. This was the last time I saw him alive.

I fell asleep channel-surfing. When I awoke a talk show was blaring from the TV, some asinine story about trailer park

dwellers who kept large pets. A big-haired woman named Gert from west Texas lived with two goats in her mobile home. I tried to imagine the smell during an El Paso summer and almost puked at the thought. The coffee and Irish cream roiled like lava in my stomach. I switched to the Weather Channel, my favorite soporific, and wondered whether I should knock on the door to Simon's office.

He didn't answer when I tried.

I opened the door, saw him on the floor, not breathing, and started to scream. I'm not really sure what happened next. 911. At some point I must have called Mark and Jeremy, because they were there. And the EMTs, the ambulance, defibrillators…

Last night I saw my first ghost. I expected my first sighting to seem alien and bizarre, but that's not how it happened. The experience felt so normal. The ghost was Simon, of course. I was so glad to see him I forgot he was dead.

“You're here,” I said, reaching for him.

He lay next to me in bed. He felt solid and warm as real life.

“I'm here.”

I started crying again. “I can't live without you. I don't want to.”

He held me. “John, don't.”

For a long time we lay like that, his arms around me, him dead, me alive, until I had cried myself out.

“Why now? Why are you back?”

“I took care of Hans. Hell doesn't exist — not the way the Baptists would have people believe — but Hans is in the closest thing there is. He'll never be a problem again, not for me or anyone. I wanted you to know.”

“Why did you leave me?”

“It was the only way we could think of to stop him. Oleg, the aunts, a few others. We made plans for hours while he laughed at us. He didn't think it would work, but I surprised him.”

“Can't you come back? That's the only part that matters now.”

“I wish I could. But it doesn't work that way. You know that.”

“I don't know anything anymore. You saw to that.”

Simon said nothing in response to that. Finally: “I miss you too.”

Eventually, late that night, I fell asleep. Simon and I talked for hours. I had an idea and convinced him of its merit. He cried this time, and I did, but we couldn't find any other way out of our predicament. I didn't want to spend the rest of my life sleeping with a dead guy, basically, and I didn't like the idea of waiting for him to reincarnate and becoming a pedophile or, worse, him coming back straight. That left only one option.

I called in sick at work today.

I put my affairs in order.

Remember high school, when you read Poe? “We loved with a love that was more than a love.” Only I'm not going to dig Simon up to be reunited with him.

He'll be back for me at midnight. He said he can do it for me the way Oleg did it for him: I'll just close my eyes. There won't be any pain.

My ashes will be scattered in the same place as his.

Together forever.

Marital bliss.