

Real Talk – A Ghost Story

by Steven Gowin

Tunnel hobos, all hootched up high, think a sign's all about super powers, mind reading, clairvoyance, dig?

But it ain't nothing to do with winning a lottery or finding a sawbuck on the street. No no no. It ain't witchcraft nor alien power. Man, it ain't telling the future, nor time travel nor bending forks, nor mending forks, nor mending folks.

Them hippies say it ain't no sign world, and I'm a fool, gimpy fool with my froze up hip. I suppose that's about right, but I ain't with them mean haints and tunnel bastards no more.

Teak

Found a wood chair out on Egbert, down by the SP tracks. Teak made wooden chair.

Chair journeyed from far away, jungles of Asia, man. But been out there in the cold and rain now long long time. Never rotted. Only problem is just that busted stay, bogus stay, stay a while, stay away stay.

This chair is signified, man. So I am watching it. Careful. Waitin' for more. Listenin' to all the cylinders in my truck, Hillary, again. Number four's bad, could be a weak plug, bad wire, fouled intake, gummed up valve.

Meat Juice

Them tunnel cats got them big carts, good ones from Shop 'N Save. Fill em with all kind of stuff a hobo need. Shop 'N Save cart got them big honkin' wheels.

Bulk joint, Shop 'N Save is. Big old families buyin' 20 kilo sacs of rice. Gallons of milk, ketchup, marshmallows by the case. The squares shop the sales and sail home to garages with shelves to shelve all that crap.

You can't put that meat up that way though. Man, you gotta freeze that shit, congeal it. Plus, meat all shot through with hormones and antibiotics. You know what I'm sayin'? You eat that shit, you grow, grow to gigantic proportions, enormous, elephantine, man, 'cause it's fuckin' with ya, fucking with you.

That meat juice did for me. My head, my hip all boogered up, both of em. Damned steroids, fuckin' beef and chicken. All that crap, and you eat it, and your brain runs fast man; the mind goes real fast sometimes, too fast.

But other times, you stall up man, freeze up in your parts, your head, your hip, your heart, and you can't get away. You gotta have somethin' for all that shit... handle it... somehow.

My Steed

You do need you a good cart. Could be Shop 'N Save, could be Safeway.

You keep the wheels lubed, up oil em up, keep the dust out, and they'll serve you well. Me, I run a little Walgreens cart I got me tied to Hillary's tail gate. I get in and outta them tight spots the other hippies can't reach, cruise them little boutiques, and such.

Got Ruthie a real nice bracelet throwed away out there where the big boys can't come. And I'm fast with little Walgreens too, even with my froze up hip and all.

Got Walgreens, also I got Hillary... Hillary's my steed man, steady mount. She's a 1982 Ford F-150 pickup which I name for the

president's wife, cause she is reliable and'll take a lot of crap and keep right on.

Hillary got a three in the tree; her windows'll roll up and down; all her locks work good, and she is a tough bird to dent or ruin. She got a short block 302 v8 mill and runs hot for a old gal which I do not abuse or use poorly.

Take care ye your steed, and your steed'll take care of ye, I always say.

Cargo?

Here's what Hilary's carryin' right now...

A walnut veneer chiffarobe, two ladders, one wood and one aluminum (well one ladder; them metal monsters snatched the aluminum one while Hillary was parked over on Newhall and Williams across from the damned police), 12 paint cans, couple of em half full of paint, broken weed whacker, broken power mower of 1.5 horsepower, sleepin' bag.

She also got a child's desk and blackboard, a dozen bags of used clothes, couple mattresses, busted Sony Trinitron TV, washin' machine basket, four pieces of luggage, half a dozen board games. Small sofa, extra parts for Hilary, a couple coolers, box of Mexican Coca-Cola bottles empty. Eight or ten boxes I ain't opened yet which contents is unknown. Chevy Impala hubcaps, case of Hunt's ketchup.

HeeBee Jeebies ?

I used to sleep all the way down at the PG&E plant. Had a place over there nice and warm inside, and nobody else around. That's all I will say. Keepin' that place a secret just in case.

Them other hobos hang in the SP Tunnel over on the Hill. After the Cal Trains quits for the night, them hippies light a nice fire of tore up pallets. They got plenty of hootch, smoke, blow, smack, crank, glue, you name it... whatever a hobo need for his head.

Problem in that hole, couple three times a year, some of them juicers buys the farm. Goes down thus: hobo parties hardy and sleeps the dead man's sleep. Next morning, 5 a.m., the Baby Bullet come crashin' towards the Peninsula and vaporizes that hippie and all his cart shit all over the south bound bore.

Couple of Samoans, Pepe Gomez, and Jimmy Regan, all of em evaporated in that Potrero Tunnel few years back, all their bits hither and yon... atomized to a ectoplasm man. But right away, right away, they start walkin' by night, boppin' around, balancing on one rail, blue glowin' blobs of cold fog in the dark, walkin' and talkin'.

Pepe and Jimmy come right up to me... dead man smilin'... askin' for ghost juice and dope, and "Why'd that loca loco locamotive vaporize us? Where's our balls and wisdom teeth, man?"

Hippies in that tunnel do not care a shit about em, but hell, them dead men give me the heebie jeebies.

Ruthie ?

Ruthie laid Hillary right on this hobo. Ruthie and Hillary belonged to Skinny, Ruthies's old man, el epaso, my brother in law before he passed, you dig?

The only good thing about Skinny, he took real good care of Hillary, had her oil changed regular, tune ups, brakes, good tires. If she needed a fuel pump pumper gasoline pumper, Skinny'd take her straight to the Ford dealer man. Hell, Skinny treated that Ford bettern he treated Ruthie.

Me and Ruth came up over in the Mission. Mom and Daddy had that house on Folsom... raised iris and sage and thyme and zucchini out back. Had a bearing avocado tree. Avocado ain't supposed to give fruit this far north, but ours did man, every year.

Skin lived a couple blocks over. His daddy was a mean alcoholic son of a bitch and the mother spent every minute she could in mass at the Immaculate Conception.

Niños Bravos?

Mission used to be all Italian and Irish... Then Mexican, then Central American... We was 'bout the last gringo kids down there, I guess. Little Mick urchins runnin' amok, raisin' hell.

Ruthie'd been pickin' up Spanish from the barrio kids, and worked out the pastry scam. We'd find a panadería down on 24th... La Reyna, La Victoria, Dominguez, didn't matter, we hit em all.

Ruthie'd wait at the bakery door, actin' shy... green eyes shinin' sweet and a little wild, a little loquita, hummin' Cielito Linto. Skinny'd belly up to the counter and start the pitch, "Señora, por favor un pan dulce para nosotros."

While Señora tried to cypher what this pequeño bastardo, Skinny, was about, I'd step up and point to Ruthie, "Mira, Señora, nuestra hermana... pobrita, patética," and I'd whisper, "una retrasada mental." By then, Ruthie'd have started the waterworks, "Soy una muchacha lamentable."

Señoras'd get real quiet, a poco confundido, shake their heads or mutter some cussin' in Spanish. Sometimes they'd just laugh. "¡Que niños audaz!" and, if the scam'd worked, "Ven aquí gringuitos," they'd lay conchas or cuernos or empanadas on us.

Soon as she'd grabed her pan dulce, Ruthie'd yell "Gracias," and blast down 24th laughin' so hard she'd just about pee. Skinny, on her heels, would try to catch her free hand... but Ruthie'd tear away, "Keep off me. Get lost."

Finally takin' up the rear, came the only true inválido in the equipo, yours truly, limpin' fast, huffin' for breath. "Wait up. Momento. God damn it!"

Army and Valencia ?

Old Skin was quite a boy back in the day. Fine lookin' monkey, tall and dark, but with bright blue eyes. Could be charmin' in a snakey way. And could dance like a son of a bitch.

Ruth grew into a slim, poised woman. Had that light red hair with the Irish wave and freckled complexion. Girl moved like a damned swan. Teachers claimed she was headed for university and more. Then it started runnin' off the rails. Momma got the leukemia and went fast.

Then that bastard Skinny caught up with Ruthie, somehow. I know she'd not gone willingly. She was only 16. Knocked up with Skinny's brat, damnit. Course the priests and families got the wedding fever. Talked her into marrying the son of a bitch. It ended bad; she lost the baby, over at St. Luke's.

It was very little joy on Folsom Street after that. Daddy didn't last long either... A Water Department supervisor, he was buried in a trench accident out in the Richmond just a few months after Ruth's tragedy.

Fire department pulled him out before he kicked. They hauled him all the way to St. Luke's, Army and Valencia; I suppose SF General was overrun with boozers and junkies. All busted up, lungs caved in, he bought it on the tenth floor. Broke Ruthie's heart, mine too.

Skinny and Ruth took the Folsom place, but Skinny wouldn't harvest the garden. I'd already moved out; Ruth went quiet... life just kinda drained out. I'd see the spark in her, but it was weak man, way way down.

That's why Ruth couldn't pass St. Luke's without crying. Daddy bitches about it too, and curses the "damned SFFD..." not for not saving him, but for taking him to "fuckin' St. Luke's." He ain't sad about it though; mostly he just talks about avocados.

Macho Punches ?

Somewhere along the line, Skinny started to hate my guts; maybe it was the gimpy leg, or my dopin'; maybe he was uncomfortable because that house was part mine.

He'd already turned his family against Ruth. Said she was crackin' down on 24th, stealin.' Then he started in on me, callin' me Ruthie's worthless brother worst nightmare brother, cripple doper alkie bro. And if I was with him, he'd punch me one of them hard macho punches you ain't supposed to wince over.

All come to a head one day. He says, "Howard, keep your ass away from Folsom, or I will beat bejesus out of you." I said nothin'.

That riled him, but see for a long long time, I had other stuff needed tending more than Skinny and his lyin' and bullshit and abuse... stuff like stayin' juiced up, buzzed up, hippied up enough, dig, to deal with that shit going on in my head.

Besides, karma'd turn, turn, on the bastard one day. Seen Karma do such... many and many a time. But when Karma does do like that, it's no pleasure, man. None.

A Sawbuck ?

Well Skinny was good as his word. Started when them tunnel hobos been dopin' and hootchin' me two, three days, and it was my turn to score somethin'. But hell I been juicin' and dopin' all them days myself, and never made my rounds.

I ain't collected no recyclables, swapped out nothing at the Alemany Flea, ain't panhandled a soul, nor scrubbed a windshield, nor boosted a UPS box to fence.

I am still loaded to the gills when I go over to Ruthie's and a little strung out, I suppose. I figure little sister will see my shape and lay a sawbuck or two on my ass. I am a "lamentable."

So I get to Folsom and kinda stumble and fall up them steps, part cause I'm still lit up, part cause I ain't eaten for a while, and part cause the fog'd rolled in thick and cold, and that hip was ailing.

Mofo hip'll give you a sign time to time. Make you think about goin' into a bush to pee or reachin' in a bin for a refund pop bottle. Hip give me a good pang that day, buckled my leg under. I almost fell. You see a sign, man, you got to signify, but I did not.

Well next I know, Skinny's blastin' outta that house and I am on the ground, and Skinny is beltin' bejesus out of me. He kicks my stomach, kicks my head, kicks the stomach, tries for the head, bashes a kidney, busts a nose. Bastard smacks my ass all over Folsom Street. Mama'n Daddy standin' on the roof seen the whole thing.

Cops finally break it up; ambulance arrives. Skinny claims I'm trying to bust in, but he won't press charges, and I end up... in guess where... St. fuckin' Luke's.

Seventeen stitches in my cheek; ruptured spleen, nose broke, five ribs cracked, contusions which is bruises all blacks and blues man.

Shit I can't walk for three days, I'm so stove up. Did, however, kipe me some fine narcotics.

Well when they spring me, Ruthie picks me up and sneaks me down to the cellar on Folsom. Daddy's there; hospital dope's almost gone, but there's a new can of cherry Minwax in a paper bag, so I'll be alright. Ruthie says keep my mouth shut and lock that cellar from the inside just in case Skinny hears me.

But Skin's gone fishin' to the Farallons, so I come outta the cellar and get me the run of the place. No jucin' no dopin' them couple of days, but I get me three squares. Three and two's five. Five alive.

Healing ?

I healed up slow, more'n a year altogether, and wear me a good scar to this day. Three days after the whumpin' I'm back to my ways with them hippies and tunnel spooks.

But Karma ain't forgot what did happen, and turn turn it did, like I said. Couple of years after beatin' bejesus out of me, the bastard Skinny winds up in St. Luke's, cancer freakin' out in him, a regular cancer hootenanny. He's shot full of the shit and it's kicking his ass.

Idea of goin' to St. Luke's do not appeal to Ruthie. So I tell her I'll go over with her; see I understand the place, seen it all as a sign. I ain't holdin' nothin' about my beatin' against the Skinny although I'd never forgive him what he done to her. "Signs got you covered little sister," I say.

Ruthie says, I am full of crap... sign world and such ain't nothin' but a dope dream. Whyn't I get back on regular meds? She hugs me though, and says don't worry, and yes would I please please go with her? I'll need to see this.

So next day I do not, don't, end up with them juicers and hobos, and I do make it to Ruth's like I say. Ruthie makes me get a shower and washes me my jeans and sox and drawers. Now I got clean clothes for the visit. Then, it's over to St. Luke's; over there for care, "There there, Skinny," you son of a bitch.

Uncle KoKo ?

Hospital always smells like peanut butter. Skinny's on floor nine. Ruthie and me go on up. We find the room. Old boy beside Skinny's zoned out on meds, arms akimbo, mouth open, little drool.

Son of bitch looks familiar. Got a long deep mark on his right forearm and diamond studded tooth, only tooth in his head. I place him. Hell, it's KoKo Gomez, Pepe Gomez' uncle.

Used to dope up with Uncle KoKo time to time. Bastard was meaner than Skinny... scared shit out of me. He's been juicin' it hard, and tweakin' too from the looks of that fang.

Ruthie slips out to the ladies'. So I'm all alone with Skin and old KoKo and KoKo's dope on his nightstand. KoKo'd kick your ass for "borrowin'" from his stash back in the day. But he ain't cogent or conscious, and I feel he'd want me to have a little sumpin' sumpin', half a dozen, maybe... well, OK, the bottle. Percodan.

Quick as I filch the pills, old KoKo lets out a kinda wet snort... long and loud. And he lifts a finger too, long six incher, waxy and wet, yellowy skin just kinda hangin' off it, polished nail curled back on itself. Sends me the willies up my spine.

This is a god-damned sign.

Cancer Worm ?

I'm seein' Skinny now; he's bone thin, and blood drained, Skin and bone, you'd say, ha.

Blinds is closed and curtains drawn, but I'm lookin' right inside his body, and I seen the only thing keepin' him alive is pure meanness which is a dark slimy tumor, a shadowy black worm in the bastard oozing around his gut and chest. I can smell it too, all sweet and rotten.

But I did dig the sign, and something more's comin', ain't sure what, good or bad or both. But Skin's a friggin' dead man, KoKo too.

No Wife to a Man ?

When Ruthie gets back, and me and Ruth get chairs pulled up, me closer to Skinny than Ruthie, he rouses a little and starts in, "You, Howie, you fuckin' gimp. You smell of pee and peanut butter!"

And then, "Ruth, you are no wife to a man, no mother to a child. You never wanted that baby did you?" Skinny could never leave her alone about it; see Ruth couldn't have another child after that first one.

"Oh god, help me," now he's cryin' and tryin' to reach across to Ruthie. Son of a bitch wants her to hold his fuckin' claw. But he can't reach, and Ruthie slides away, and I wonder if Ruth sees that cancer slug racin' around fast in Skinny, crazy black snot.

KoKo's breathin' hard in the next bed, and one of them machines to which Skin is wired is click clickin'. Down the hall, some old bastard is babblin' about an Indian motor bike, and a Mexican waltz is driftin' up from god knows where tinny, but sweet... *guitarrón*, violin, guitar.

And then it changes. The room goes lighter; peanut smell blows away, and Ruthie breathes deep, and you can breathe cause the air's better. "La niña lamentable," she whispers. Then she looks at

Skinny, and looks at me, green eyes shinin' again a little wild, a little loquita. Seen it before; by god, she's ready to fly.

Now she's up and lookin' straight at the bastardo. "You won't be back to Daddy's house, Skinny, and Howie's takin' your truck." She heads for the door, hesitates a second and turns back only long enough to say, "I'll see you tomorrow, Howard."

My Karma ?

Oh hell, it was a mess. Skinny tries to get out of bed and starts throwin' whatever he could lay hands on, rippin' wires and tubes outta himself and knockin' shit over.

"That bastard ain't gettin' my Ford," he yells and gets to coughin' and nurse has to fix him a hypo to calm him down. When he passes out, I step into the hallway.

I head downstairs. Few minutes later, I'm out front of the Jerusalem Market chug a luggin' a quart of Rainier Ale wrapped tight in a brown bag. Then I remember them perkies, and pop a couple.

When the glow comes on me and my stomach's warmed up, it's back up to Skinny, I go. Got to do it, see. No question. Mess up my karma bad if I ain't there with him for the end.

It's just gettin' dark, and old KoKo's gone. Skinny's hypo is wearin' off; he's real agitated again. But before them nurses can fix him again, he rattles and gasps, and lets go, eyes all glassy, right in front of me. All's quiet but for them machines and the sufferers down the hall.

I wait and wait for all that blackness to drift up out of him, but it don't. Skinny just goes darker and darker. Pobrito bastardo.

Samoans ?

Next day, Ruthie gives me Hillary's keys and title, but I decide to leave Hillary on Folsom or over on Bayshore whenever I go with them hobos.

See, I don't want to vaporize nobody with Hillary nor get her vaporized by some crazy son of a bitch driver while I am juiced or hopped up to the gills. A vehicle is a responsibility, and the Mission don't need no more gimps.

Back in that tunnel, them hippies is still jucin' and dopin' and Pepe Gomez and Jimmy Regan's just walkin' bold as ever, floatin' over them rails kinda a hazy ectoplasm.

But now Uncle KoKo's with em too, and hell, KoKo's almost whole... screamin' and ragin'. He got a couple other mean haints helpin' him too, big bastards, the Samoans I think, stinkin' of dead fish and colder'n ice.

Son of a bitch starts after me wavin' that waxy yellow finger. Bastard say's he's gonna kill me. KoKo wants his fuckin' percodans back.

That's when I quit them tunnel hippies and spooks for good.

On Folsom ?

Lucky thing... Ruthie'd told me to come over whenever I want; she knew I wouldn't, would not cause trouble. Wasn't ever like that.

So I start stayin' on Folsom, helpin' Ruth around the house. I'm handy, and something I can't fix, I just ask Daddy how to do it. We start a garden that next summer, fog tomatoes and green beans, leeks, even a potato patch. Had some decent sweet corn one warm summer and the avocados.

Spent many a good year with Ruthie, before she turned bad... bum ticker don't you know. Went down smooth for her though. Very little

pain thanks to the doc and me (I kept hands off her dope). Never in St. Luke's, and she dies in her bed, peaceful.

We plant her in Colma by Mom and Daddy. I got a place out there too, I guess.

Now this house on Folsom is mine. Own me a garage where I put the stuff me and Hillary collect, and sometimes I trade it at the Alleman Flea or take it out by the dump and throw it over. No sense paying the garbage haul fee. Hell, I get it close.

County assessor wants his property tax, but General Assistance and the flea market do not cover that. I ain't worried though cause the county's broke; take em years to get me out.

So over here, it's me, Mom and Daddy, and Ruthie. Mind's a little better, hip's a little worse. Ain't dopin' much and am on them Free Clinic prescriptions for hop heads and alkies. I am still diggin' the signs... bettern ever, if you ask me. Put that teak chair in my garden for the sign on Hillary, and the sign come.

Got Hillary a pint of Gummout; hippied her up on truck dope. Juiced her straight up. Number four cylinder's fine now, Hillary's firin' on all eight. She is strong again, real strong for a long long time.

Now I know I ain't lastin' forever; that is real talk, but Hillary might. Signs say so.?