

Zach Smith
11007 Valley Forge Cir.
King of Prussia, PA
19406
thirdpartyzach@hotmail.com
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Ghost is my Copilot

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Driving aimlessly around the back roads that stretched and swerved, crisscrossing for miles, up the hills and down, the fantastic scenery calmly unfolding, the trees, the fields, the mansions and the cottages. Some of these roads emitted the ambiance of America, and at times a driver might forget just where he was, and that was fine, after all that was the reason for the drive. It was on these very back roads that John was driving. It was a Friday night, he had nothing to do, and he needed to get out of the house.

It seemed to be very common this summer for John to have nothing to do on Fridays. John decided to see if one particular friend of his was free tonight. Online John found a message from his friend, it read: "Work 5-10." John set out to try and find him at work, for something to do. He thought he knew where his friend was working. John took the back way. After ten minutes he arrived in, what he thought of as: "the city," though in truth it was a fairly small town. He drove up and down main street, trying to find the store his friend was apparently working at. John didn't like the busy roads so he gave up trying to find him and drove back into the less populated area again.

John drove through a small town with a much undesirable complexion of urban sprawl. Another friend of his lived back there. He wanted some company, a friend that enjoyed a nice calm ride through the countryside, so he pulled out his cell phone.

"Hey man."

"Hey, what's up?"

"Not much."

"What are you doing tonight?"

"I work tomorrow at like 5:00 in the morning."

“Ok, I was just calling to see if you wanted to hang out tonight, its cool though.”

“Hey man, give me a ring some time, we’ll definitely chill this summer.”

John worked too, in fact he had his first job before most of his friends, there were many times as a kid he was invited to do something with someone, but he couldn’t because he had to work, and it was a few more years before most of his friends understood what that meant.

The CD in the car radio changed, but he didn’t change it, and he did not have a CD changer either. It must have been a ghost. Sure, John believed in ghosts. After all, he had lived in a haunted house, and you would have to be crazy not to believe in ghosts if you lived with them. Though some would argue that ghost sightings are paranoid delusions, or schizophrenic episodes, in other words you would have to be crazy to believe in them in the first place. The ghost that changed the CD, if it was a ghost, reminded him of his personal collection of scary stories, that were true, and that for better or for worse he was the main character in.

Several times he had heard chairs being moved in his house, when there was no one around, this event had become so common and insignificant, that he could not remember the last time he heard the chairs move, though it was probably only a few weeks ago. He had seen papers being shuffled, again with no one touching them. The TV being turned on by itself. People standing at his bedside, and then dissolving into thin air. Another one of John’s friends swore he saw a man with a top hat, standing in the living room staring at the TV, when no one was home. All of these incidents took place after John had grown accustomed to the ghosts, none of them compared to his first time.

At the age of six, he was playing in his room just before bed one night. He happened to look out the window, and to his surprise there was someone or something looking back. It was a head, wiry hair sprouted about its skull. The flesh had slowly dripped off until all that John saw

were a few patches of skin held in small bags under the cheekbones. The nose was missing, only an indentation was left on its face. Before John had time to react, the head spoke. The sound did not come from the skull, but from everything at once, and it said “I-76.” With that John let out a scream, and ran into his parents room. Many people would argue that it was a schizophrenic episode, but John’s parents heard the sound as well. So terrified of his own room was he, that for the next three years he slept on the floor of his parent’s room, and even in their room there were still many sleepless nights when John would lay awake shaking with fear.

As if they too were ghosts, the thoughts of John’s personal horror stories faded away, floating above his head, then blowing away with the wind. The music playing on his CD player was from a band he hated. It was one of those bands that had a mellow sound, and one had to be in an altered state of mind when initially exposed to it, in order to continue to enjoy it once having returned to a traditional state of mind. Or in more simple colloquial terms: a hippy jam band. The band reminded him of his ex-friend, Woody. He saw Woody earlier that night, on the side of the road, but he would not stop for him, he had made that mistake once before.

To take his mind off Woody, and the phantom that might be in the car, he called another friend. This particular friend of his always had some reason to not hang out, even though they always seemed to have fun when they did.

“Hello?”

John was surprised, usually no one answered the phone.

“Hey, it’s John.”

“John, what’s up?”

“Not much, what are you doing right now?”

“Nothing.”

“Want to hang out for a couple hours.”

“I would but I have to work early tomorrow.”

“Ok it’s cool, we’ll get together some other time.”

They continued to briefly reminisce about the old times, he was one of John’s oldest friends that he still stayed in regular contact with. While John drove into a valley his connection was lost, when he came to the top of a hill he gained it once more.

“I’m sorry buddy, but I can’t hold a good connection. I’ll talk to you later.”

John’s thoughts came back to the song on the car radio. That band was still playing on the CD player, playing some awful hour-long rendition of one of their all ready too long songs. The song continued to remind him of Woody, so he pulled the CD out of the CD player and tossed it out the window.

The ghost sitting next to John was angry, if there was a ghost there at all. Maybe the ghost was just another schizophrenic episode, John didn’t remember ever having an episode before, of course if he did would he even realize what it was? John didn’t have any of the answers he was looking for.

He tried to let his mind drift away from the ghost, but the music was still stuck in his head. He tried to ignore it, but no luck. His mind kept wondering back to Woody and the downfall of their friendship. Eventually John stopped trying to fight the memory, and let it play out in his head.

It was earlier that summer, on a night much like this, John found himself driving through the woods again, looking for a passenger, a copilot, a friend John could chat with while together they enjoyed the road. Woody was walking on the side of the road. Woody had been one of John’s oldest friends, but on and off. Since High School Woody enjoyed drugs, John on the other

hand hated them. Woody slowly worked his way to doing it all the time. Woody had become close friends with other classmates that John never liked. They were the popular crowd, the ones who made the world of abusive drug addictions look like a glamorous lifestyle, and the same people who generated undue difficulties for John and his other friends.

Woody had to go to rehabs and special schools for his drug problem, he would clean up his act, but then quickly return to the drug lifestyle. Against his better judgment, John picked him up as he saw him walking on the side of the road.

John quickly found out that Woody was running from the police, they caught him with drugs, hard drugs. He told John to drive around to throw off the cops. John tried to throw Woody out of the car, but he had a gun. John drove around for hours at gunpoint.

There was smoke in the car now, it was the ghost, or just a hallucination. Though he didn't think it was a hallucination. He had a choice to make: should he drive to the local general store and talk to his friends that were working there, or should he turn the other direction and continue to drive around aimlessly in the back woods.

He made his choice and turned down a road into the woods. John drove past one of the houses very slowly. It was a multi-million dollar mansion, made of Mediterranean imported sand stone with turrets and multi level roofs. He had heard about this house as a young kid, then when he first received his drivers license he went out to find it, when he did it was beyond what he imagined.

By now John was getting hungry, so he made his way to a fast food restaurant. Like normal he took the back way, a way he knew well. John tried to take his mind off the ghost, and the hunger, so he called another friend.

“Hey man, what's up?”

“Nothing much, what are you doing right now?”

“I'm getting ready to go to band practice at 9, why?”

“Oh nothing, I am just driving around aimlessly with nothing to do.”

“Ah, that's the best.”

“Yes I know, I was just wondering if you wanted to join me, but I guess you can't, it's no big deal.”

“Ok, I would love to, but I got the band thing. Some other time though, definitely.”

This was the last friend that John had contact with this night, and it was appropriate because this was his best friend. He was at the top of a hill, and generally heading west, with no music, just the steady purr of the engine as it rolled down the road into the unknown.

He drove past a huge radio tower, one of several on the top ridge of the hill. He passed a house that always had Christmas decorations on it. The house sat at a T-bone intersection, John turned and drove down into another valley, and he made his way into another town.

John ordered a burger, shake, and fries for him self at the drive through window, and then ordered the same for the ghost, he knew now that he must be insane. He ate with one hand as he drove onto the highway, I-76.

He remembered back to what the ghost said so many years ago. He had researched it when he was older, trying to find out what I-76 was. John found out that there was a man who was caught in an explosion on the stretch of I-76 that ran very close to Johns house. The man was brought up to a near by house, and was made comfortable and died in a room in that house. Fifty years later John tried to use it as his own room, failing in the first attempt.

The ghost's food next to him began to disappear. John wanted to drive home now, but he couldn't. The ghost told him to get off the highway. Normally John wouldn't listen, but there was still the possibility that the gun pointed at him was real.

John wished now that he hadn't picked up Woody, he wished that he had decided Woody was dead to him long ago. He didn't pick Woody up on a night like this, he picked him up tonight. Though John couldn't believe how stupid he was for doing so.

Woody had never killed before, but it wouldn't have surprised John if he did tonight, if he killed his old friend in order to escape from the police. John knew now that there was a ghost, riding shotgun. Woody was dead to John, and sitting next to him was the shadow of a man he once but no longer knew, a phantom holding a revolver.

The gun was now pointing at his head. The ghost was telling him to pull off the highway, and back into the woods, because the cops would be there. John wouldn't listen; John still pretended to ignore his old friend.

Woody was pleading with John to pull off the highway; John still pretended to ignore Woody. Woody was yelling, screaming to pull off at the next exit, but the next exit passed by.

Woody cocked the gun and held the trigger firmly.

"I'm sorry but I have to do this," said the ghost.

"Do whatever..."

The sentence probably would have finished "...you have to do," but we can never be sure exactly. Before he could finish the sentence a bullet went through his head.

Authors Note:

This is one of the earliest stories that I truly enjoyed and put at the top of my list as an example of my best work. Some of the story is based on a real experience I had as a kid, the ghost story part of the story is not exsagerated or altered in any significant way, and for many years purposely driving aimlessly on country roads with my friends was a very frequent accordance.

I thought this story had the potential to get published in a respected magazine somewhere, evidently I was wrong. For years I have thought of my own stories as the best ever written, but slowly I have come to accept that others do not share this opinion. This story has been rejected 5 times over the last 7 years. The rejections in order are: Philadelphia Stories, Blackbird, Dark Discoveries, The Absent Willow Review, and Roar & Thunder.

Dark Discoveries was my favorite, it took them a total of 11 months to respond to the submission, even after I had queried them after waiting for 6 months. I even followed there rule not to submit it simultaneously to another place. Some writers say that you can usually ignore this rule but I always follow it out of respect for the publication. I don't want to sound to bitter however I've realized a long time ago that writing is a game of many losses before you win, and I am patient with those considering my works, but a year is a hell of a long time. All the other places were much swifter with their responses; the last two rejections were attached with personalized notes, which is almost as good as getting published.

I hope you have enjoyed this story, more than the others who have read this work, but if you didn't I can understand.

End Note.