

Ghosts Before 30

By Gabriel Bergmoser

He would sit there and smile as Josie's friends kept going, talking about things he pretended for her sake to be interested in. Politics and pop culture and the rest. Maybe part of him really was interested. Maybe he had just successfully convinced himself. He didn't really care either way. He was past the point of complaining about minor things. So he just sat there and laughed when Andrew cracked jokes that caused Sarah to shriek about how he was 'just the worst' and how he 'shouldn't say things like that' and he tried to look conspiratorial as Andrew would wink at him as if to implicate him in that dreadful attitude (whatever it was) and all the while he felt his attention turning towards the laptop in the corner.

He didn't want it to go there. He didn't want to think about that. But he had long since learned that what he wanted and what happened were two very different things and there was no point getting angry about that. What was that thing his mother used to say? *You've made your bed, now lie in it.*

Then he was standing in the doorway with Josie, promising Andrew that soon he'd take him up on that golfing trip while Sarah moaned about how drunk she was and Josie apologised for providing so much wine and Andrew laughed her off, saying that was the only reason they were friends and soon Stephen would be at an age where he needed the booze to stop from sinking into depression and all the shrieks of outraged laughter would start again and he had to actively try to smile while the laptop tugged at him.

He agreed with whatever Josie said as they walked upstairs together. They had a nice house; spacious and afforded only by his decent salary as a teacher and her well-paying insurance job. It was the kind of home he had laughed at as a kid, so boring and clean, so *perfect*. He still didn't know if he liked it or hated it, if he appreciated the cleanliness or saw the perfection as a blank canvas on which his thoughts had no choice but to play out, taunting him like a terrible film. He could believe it was both. But that didn't matter. Josie loved it and that was enough for him.

She made a feeble attempt to drag him into bed, but he told her he wasn't tired yet, that he had a couple of reports to finish off. He kissed her on the head and she was asleep in seconds, snoring in that way that she denied she did but he found cute. He watched her for a moment, and smiled despite himself but his stomach twisted.

The laptop.

He took his time walking downstairs. He itched to see the answer to the question that taunted him so often, that he only allowed himself to investigate once a week. But that didn't mean he was necessarily in a rush to see that answer. Logically, of course, he was safe. It made very little sense that *this* was the week in which it all fell apart. But anything, sadly, was possible, and he was never going to be stupid enough to write off that slimmest of chances that today would mark the end of whatever it was he had been in the last few years. Not a holiday. Holidays were fun. Not a prison. Prisons could be escaped.

For a moment he paused in the living room. Of course Andrew and Sarah had made no offer to clean up. The mess of Josie's parasite friends was left to him. He cast an eye over the table and thought about how much he hated them but he knew he was just distracting himself. Rip the small band aid off now. Bigger ones would come. He walked over to the laptop.

He opened the lid and waited for it to come to life. For a few moments all he heard was the ticking of the clock until the hum of the old machine started. But it didn't drown out the ticking. Nothing drowned out the ticking.

First he typed in his name. *Stephen Moore*. The search engine came up with nothing, not even when he clicked on the news tab. That was normal. That was the easy part. He gave himself a moment, let his heartrate pick up, then he typed in his real name. Nothing. Maybe being a common name hid news articles, but he doubted it. Some things always made headlines. But he wasn't finished. He had three more names to check and he did, one after another, until

he knew, as he suspected, that nothing had changed. He remained obscure and forgotten. He remained Stephen Moore.

He leaned back in his seat. He felt tired, as he always did after the check. It took a few moments for his heart to slow. The fear left quickly nowadays. He glanced behind him, towards the staircase. He could go back up. He could climb into bed next to Josie and fall asleep, content in knowing that for now everything was as okay as it would ever be. But he wasn't tired. Not in the way that would allow him to sleep, anyway.

He deleted the history then shut down the computer and soon the only sound was the ticking. He got to his feet and walked into the kitchen. He rifled around under the sink until he found the packet of cigarettes he kept hidden down there. Then, heading back out into the dining room, he grabbed the still full remaining bottle of wine, before heading out the front door and into the warm night. The sky was clear and the moon was full. He took a moment to observe the stars as he lit his cigarette and took that first long drag. He didn't really enjoy smoking, not any more. But at this moment he felt it was appropriate. At this moment, it was a feeling he sought, not the taste.

He started walking, past the rows of boring suburban houses, opening the bottle as he did and taking a long swig of Josie's good wine. Tomorrow he would tell her that it had been drunk, that she must have gotten it wrong. He would claim she was drunker than she thought, that he had slept beside her all night, that nothing was wrong. She would believe him, not because he was convincing, but because it was just easier that way.

How much did she know? Maybe that was the wrong question. It wasn't about how much she knew, but how much she suspected. He saw the way she looked at him sometimes. He heard the subtext in the questions she tried to make sound casual. But he gave her nothing. Perhaps he should have felt worse about that, but it was better for everyone if he played dumb, pretended that her suspicions were laughable and absurd. That he was who he said he was.

A slight breeze picked up, lifting his hair. He paused and closed his eyes. It was cool and refreshing and at odds with the taste of the cigarette. He dropped and stepped on it, grinding it into the road. But the taste was still there and even the freshest gust of air wasn't about to remove it.

And for a moment, there he was, on a different road, years ago, surrounded by trees beneath another starry sky. In the shadows around him were people, young, innocent people, giggling as they moved together through the darkness. One of them came forward and took his hands with that smile, that smile that made him want to cry. In the present, his hand closed around nothing as years ago she took it.

The breeze was no longer comforting. It was cold. He allowed himself one more moment in that place, a second in which he could almost forget that those memories belonged to different people, a different time. Four kids had run together beneath that starry sky so long ago. Now three were dead and the last one left lived far away under a fake name.

He kept walking.

He could try to move past one memory, but that didn't stop the rest. And that didn't stop those names circling in his head. Some had died. Others, like him, endured. But at this time he didn't care about the now. Not really. What he cared about was back then, was the kids they had been before life took them on roads he couldn't understand, down paths he'd never chosen to walk. Memories were a comfort, to a point, but he wondered if the memories of those kids were ruined by what they would go on to do. Innocence, to him, was hardly worth celebrating. Innocence was only the holding pattern until you did something you regretted. After that, it was hard not to look back at the kid with bitterness. *How innocent could you have been? You had the potential all along to do what you did.*

He kept walking.

The wine helped him relax. He wasn't sure what the cigarettes were doing, but it was something. Maybe it just represented some kind of childish irresponsibility. *What do you mean? This can't kill me. This can't hurt anyone. It's all fine. I'm just a kid, it'll all be okay.*

Without his noticing, the memories had picked up with the wind. They flashed past him, almost too fast to see. He and Amy dancing together in the orange light of the cold morning. He and Damien, sitting in a backyard, pretending to enjoy smoking while they looked up at the night and talked about what they would be one day. And the rest, all the friends he had either lost sight of or who had lost sight of him, the ones who went on to bigger and better things, the ones who languished and did nothing, and the ones who had died along the way. The people he had loved, the people he had hated, all of them. He let them all wash around him and he didn't realise he was crying until his knees buckled and he had to sit down in the road. But he didn't resist. He didn't fight away the tears. He let them come and he let the memories and the guilt attack him, he let all the faces surround him and he let his own voice, snarling and furious, hiss in his ear, his voice demanding *how could you have done that, how could you have ruined your life, how could you have turned yourself into this empty fucking wreck crying on this strange street so far from home?*

Of course, through all the memories, good and bad, there was one he could neither escape nor accept, one that he ran away from as much as he relived it every single day. One that he knew was coming, like water poured over the warm fire of all the good ones. The memory of a man in an alley, thinking he was alone, peeing against the wall. A man who didn't realise he was being watched until someone grabbed him by the neck and slammed his head into the wall. Until the fists and the anger came and then that man was dead, eyes staring up at yet another starry sky while blood pooled out behind him.

Yeah. That memory wasn't going anywhere.

He had revisited that night so many times, hoping that he would find a context that would justify it. But in the end it was simple. The kid wasn't his. Years had been stolen from him. So he went to confront the man who he believed had stolen them. There was context, sure, and there were other factors, but the simple truth remained the same. And nothing changed the fact that that man was now dead and Stephen Moore ran away and lived in a nice house in a different state with a beautiful girlfriend and friends who made him angry.

But all the same, nothing changed the fact that Stephen Moore was really Chris Hawkins and Chris Hawkins found it very hard to believe that he could be more than the thing he had done.

Like he had so many hundreds of times before, he whispered to the night that he was sorry. Then he took a deep breath, wiped away his tears, stood and kept walking. He drank until the bottle was empty, he lit more cigarettes and still none of the memories he loved came. That one face, blank and staring, covered them all like his blood seeping across the pavement.

He walked until he reached the place he had come to so many nights in the last few years, the place he knew the road to like the back of his hand.

He could see the lone policewoman behind the desk, writing something. Maybe paperwork, maybe a pointless distraction. This was a quiet corner of the world where all they ever had to really deal with was the occasional bit of vandalism or maybe a fight down at the pub. He wondered how they would react when he walked in there and told them the truth. Would they laugh in his face, would they be horrified or even excited?

And how would he feel? Free, maybe. More likely regretful the moment the cell door slammed shut. Or, and this scared him the most, nothing. Because regret he could deal with. Pain he could deal with. Any of those things he could accept because he deserved them.

For so long he had been scared that one day he would get what he deserved. He had run from it, had lain awake at night dreading the moment it would happen. But, years later, it never

had. And now here he stood, days away from his thirtieth birthday, settled and comfortable and happy. And slowly, day by day, he had realised that the only thing worse than getting what you deserved was not getting it.

He closed his eyes and dropped his cigarette. He breathed in that cool night air, still tainted by the cigarette smoke, and he let the future unfold in front of him. A birthday, then more work, then a wedding and children and the slow crawl of the peaceful life he should not have. When he played with his children, then grandchildren, would that blank face and the spreading blood still dance in front of his vision? In old age, would he rest his aching bones only to remember the cry and the crack of skull on concrete?

He opened his eyes. The policewoman had looked up and, although he couldn't quite tell at this distance, it seemed her eyes had met his. For a long moment he stood there. Then he took out another cigarette and lit it. He breathed in that terrible taste then turned and started to walk.

Upon arriving home he replaced the last of his cigarettes below the kitchen sink, then headed to the shower in the laundry. He stripped off and jumped in, scrubbing himself clean beneath the hot spray, dousing himself in soap and brushing his teeth until any smell of smoke was gone.

After flicking off all the lights he crawled into bed next to Josie. She wriggled and mumbled something beside him, then rested into his chest. He pulled her close and felt her breathing. He closed his eyes and tried to ignore the lingering taste of the cigarettes on his breath. He pushed it all away and tried to let himself feel this moment, only this, a tiny second of peace before a fitful sleep.

But he could still hear the ticking of the clock.