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Kerry Jones

The Ghosts in the Glen

By mid-July, the heat and humidity moved in and seemed intent on not going away, on not loosening the reins. People were dying in Atlantic City, New York, Philadelphia. In the Poconos, in towns like Shickshinny, the heat wasn't quite as oppressive, but it was there. People lived with it day in and day out; from the time they got up in the morning until they went to bed, the stilted, unmoving air remained a constant. The heat was smothersome and wooly, like a thermal blanket. People woke up in the mornings with their tongues thick and dry, their limbs heavy and weighted down, as though they had laid on a good drunk the night before.

In the evenings, when it was still too hot to think straight, but endurable— *a stay of execution*, her mother liked to call it—Annie would slip quietly from the apartment they shared and make her way to the complex pool. She was seventeen and her real name was Annabeth. When she met people for the first time, they often asked why she called herself Annie instead of Anna or Beth, and when she had time to really think about it, she realized that she hadn't started the 'Annie' in the first place and couldn't, for the life of her, remember who had. Like everything else around her, some things just stuck and you didn't ask why.

One evening she walked across the parking lot to the pool with the still-hot macadam snapping at the soles of her feet. Earlier that afternoon, around three o'clock, she had looked out from her bedroom window and watched as the heat shimmered up in waves and taunted her. *I've got you now*, they seemed to say. She opened the gate to the pool and closed it behind her, then tossed her beach blanket on the ground and jumped directly into the pool. It was only after she surfaced that she saw there was no else there, no one lounging in the dark recesses of certain corners. Over the course of the past two years, men had begun to notice her, and there was something disquieting about their stares, the way they would watch her as she passed, the way she could still feel their stares hours later like the dull sting of a slap. Their stares were not Daniel's; the smiles did not mirror the way Daniel or his friends smiled at her. The anonymous men were older, and she sensed they were looking beyond her to something else; she feared they knew her better than Daniel or his friends, or even her own friends, did. The first time it happened she was with her mother. She was going into Pudgie's

convenience store for a pack of gum and some hair spray while her mother waited in the car. Two men in a pickup truck got out and smiled at her as she walked past them, and one of them quickly ran past her and held the door open for her as she entered the store. He had smiled and nodded at her, and something about the way he had smiled told her this was no act of chivalry, and she had blushed and ducked her head as she whispered, "Thank you." At the stoplight on the way home, her mother turned to her. "I'm going to have to start watching you," she said, and Annie pretended she didn't know what her mother meant. Later, as she stared at her bedroom ceiling and watched the fan spin lazily around, she wondered what her mother *had* meant. Why would her mother watch *her*? There wasn't anything desirable about the man who held the door. She wasn't about to run off with some guy with yellow teeth and a faded black T-shirt. *He was just a Shickshinny redneck*, Annie thought. *And*, she added as she laboriously rolled to one side and thrust a throw pillow between her legs, *if she thinks she's protecting my innocence, she's wrong*.

The water felt cool and wonderful. She made her way to the middle of the pool and swam to the wall, then turned around so she could look out at the dark water and propped her elbows on the gutter. She relaxed her body, let her legs float out in front of her, and closed her eyes. The warm night breeze drifted across her face, and just when she felt as though she might fall asleep, a splash at the other end startled her.

A duck. She smiled and watched as it swam and cut an elegant 'V' through the water and began to swim in circles, unknowingly dodging its way in and out of the shadows cast by the porch lights from other apartments on the opposite side of the small pond that separated the complex buildings. Annie closed her eyes again and imagined she was some place years ago. Her blonde hair would not be matted to the sides of her head with sweat, but tucked neatly beneath a bathing cap, and surrounding her would be flappers in sparkling dresses and men clad in brilliant white suits with fresh gin and tonics in hand. A duck in the pool to keep her company amidst the splendor, every once in a while disturbing the laughter and chatter in the air with a muted 'quack,' would be the most natural thing in the world. As long as she kept her eyes closed, it could be 1927. It could be before a crash would bring them all to their knees. She could be anyone, anywhere, anytime. She could reach her arm up into the air and have Fitzgerald take her by the hand and lead her through the crowd. They could catch a cab and ride through the streets of New York and could swim again, this time in the fountain outside the Plaza.

But when she opened her eyes, it was still mid-July and it was still 1979, and she was still alone with a duck. Annie knew that people didn't easily escape Shickshinny, and when they did, they always seemed to come back, either to Shickshinny or Kingston or Duryea. They went to work at the baseball card manufacturing plant or took jobs at the Charmin paper factory

or went to work for Coca-Cola. They never said where they'd been and never talked about it, as though they'd never left in the first place. She knew her life wouldn't be any different. She knew she would get married and spend the rest of her life wondering why, would think about all the things she once wanted to do as if she'd actually planned to do them in the first place. She would have two or three children and shuffle them back and forth between school and football practice and dance lessons. She would save Campbell's soup labels for their recipes and make chicken pot pies and tuna casseroles for dinner. In the evenings, the children would be in bed by nine and she and her husband would watch Johnny Carson and go to bed because he'd have to get up at six and there was a good chance that, as the kids got older, she'd be working part-time herself. A secretary in a doctor's office. Working the check-out at Insalaco's. The middle shift at Topp's.

She glanced down and found that one of the subsurface night lights of the pool was directly behind her; it made her right foot seemed magnified, looming, grotesque. For a moment, she refused to believe that the limb was in any way attached to her body. It looked gray and bloodless and pickled, and she thought, *When I am dead, this is how it will be. This is how I will be look beneath a sheet.* This is what my body will look like when I am no longer a part of this world, part of anything at all. She stared at it for some time, then closed her eyes and sank beneath the water, which whirled around her head in a rush and convinced her that yes, she was still part of the living. When she surfaced, the duck had vanished. She placed both feet on the sidewall and pushed, propelled her slim body forward like an arrow that had just been shot from a bow.

The next day, as she lay on the floor in front of the box fan and tried to read a magazine article about the various ways she could remove unwanted hair from her body for the summertime season and look her absolute best in a bikini, Daniel called.

"Have you heard?" he asked. "They're closing the Ghost Town."

She was still thinking about bikinis and how she might look if she could ever actually bring herself to buy one and that it didn't really matter anyway because Daniel didn't like pools (the smell of chlorine, he always said, made him feel lightheaded and dizzy). They always went swimming in the Susquehanna despite her mother's insistence that she would drown one of these days in one of the whirlpools that were apt to open up swiftly and without warning. "When I was a kid, one opened up that was so large they threw a coal car into the river to plug it up, but it just sucked that coal car right down with everything else. You make sure you think about that the next time you're paddling around where you don't belong." It was a familiar tale that her mother repeated when she was particularly anxious, not so much about Annie's welfare, but about other things she couldn't name so easily, things that didn't have a story to drive home the point. When Annie and

Daniel went to the river to go swimming, Annie always wore her maroon one-piece, a pair of old cutoffs, and her tennis shoes. She would emerge from the river soaked and weighted down, and never felt refreshed. Her hair smelled like dead fish and rubber tires and would hang in clumps, and she always managed to get silt from the riverbed in her shoes, the cup of the bra of her bathing suit, her crotch, and it didn't matter how careful she was or what precautions she took.

"So," Daniel asked. "Do you want to go? I'm going to warn you now, though. Keith wants to check it out as well, and I told him he could come along."

But she was thinking about other things, in particular the way the river always felt as though it might swallow her, especially when she allowed the undercurrent to carry her too far downstream.

"What?" she said. "I'm sorry, I wasn't listening."

"Christ, do you ever listen to anything I say?" he said, and sighed. "Jesus H. Christ." It was an old argument. He spent a lot of time complaining that she never listened to him, never paid enough attention to the things he said, and more than once she had been tempted to tell him that he never said anything worth listening to, that he was at his best when he didn't say anything at all.

Most of her summer had been spent broiling in the apartment. Occasionally, she met with some of her friends at Grablick's for ice cream or would listen to records in the bedroom of one of her girlfriends. There was the mall, but she didn't have a summer job and she grew tired of looking at things she wanted but couldn't buy. The town pool had been drained two weeks ago and closed because of the water shortage, and the pool at the complex was only really free at night. During the day, small children armed with water wings and Winnie-the-Pooh inner tubes invaded it ("Think of all the *piss*," Annie's friend Denise once remarked) while overweight mothers clad in skirted bathing suits lounged around reading paperbacks. Daniel got his refuge by working at the air-conditioned Texaco on Graff Street. What was more, he got to listen to people, to trade brief pleasantries, to listen to the things they had to say.

And that was how he'd heard that the Ghost Town in the Glen was closing. The Ghost Town had always seemed almost ridiculous in comparison to places like Hershey Park or Great Adventure, places that lately were springing up all over the place, but there was something comforting about the Ghost Town's presence. Annie hadn't been there since she was eleven, since the Saturday afternoon her father took her there after a dentist appointment. "You can eat anything you want," he told her because she'd had no cavities. "Just don't get sick and don't tell your mother." It was a guarded secret she'd held with her for six years. She'd never told anyone about it, not even Daniel in their most passionate or drunken moments.

Annie was getting dressed when her mother came home just after six.

"Where are you going?" she asked when Annie came out of her bedroom in jeans and a halter top.

"Daniel's taking me to the Ghost Town."

"That's nice," her mother said as she sank into the love seat and turned on the news. "It's closing down for good after the summer."

"I know. That's why we're going."

"I heard they're going tear the damn thing down. There's talk about making the space into a place for concerts. Just what we need with all those winding roads and drunk kids." She glanced at Annie's shoulders. "You should put Noxzema on your burn."

"Noxzema stinks."

"You'll peel."

"I don't care."

"Well, if they do turn the Glen into a place for outdoor concerts, at least it'll be some place new for you to go." Her mother leaned forward and clicked her way through the dials, settled on the weather for the week and lit a cigarette. "You'll have something to do around here other than get into trouble you don't need. Dammit, no rain. Nothing but more heat."

"The only people this town'll bring in are Anne Murray and John Denver. Music for the good people." Annie leaned in close to her mother's face.

"I put some foundation on. Do I have any lines?"

"No."

"How do I look?"

"Fine," her mother muttered as she stared at the television, and Annie thought, *I could be wearing a hula skirt and coconuts.*

Daniel honked the horn of the pickup and Annie kissed her mother on the cheek. He was waiting with Keith next to him in the cab. Keith slid out of the truck and held the door for her. "Your pickup awaits, m'lady."

"You and chivalry don't exactly go together," she said to Keith, then to Daniel, "This truck sounds like it has an empty coffee can for a muffler. You work in a gas station. Fix it."

"If you got money for a new one, I'll fix it."

She rode sandwiched between Daniel and Keith with her head tilted closer to Daniel, not because she wanted to be any closer to him than she already was, but because she didn't want to be near Keith, didn't want to smell him. Her Charlie perfume filled the cab, but it wasn't enough to overpower Daniel's slight odor of gasoline and oil, an odor she'd grown to love, maybe even more than she did Daniel. It was a working smell, one that made her squeeze her inner thighs together and settle deeper into the seat. On those nights when he was kissing her in the truck and finding his way across her body, she'd lean against the passenger door, her head every now and then bumping against the window. The oil and gasoline never completely washed out of his clothes, and when she needed inspiration, which was often, she would grab his shirt, bury her face in it, and finally take his hand and thrust

it between her legs.

Keith, on the other hand, was a welder, and the sour smell of sweat never left him. He was working his way through a six-pack, and the smell of the beer intermingled with sweat made her gag. She looked at him briefly, then at Daniel, who was humming along to the radio, and while her body wanted to move closer to Daniel, she kept her place in between them.

“Man, this is some place,” Keith hissed, his breath snaking through the air and finding its way to Annie, who looped one arm around Daniel’s waist and pulled him close. He looked around at the rides and sneered. “Ain’t like when I was a kid. Talk about rundown shit. Holy hell. No wonder they’re closing the goddamned place down. I’d blow it up tomorrow and not think twice about it.”

“Why don’t you go find one of them dart booths and ask someone to aim at your head for practice?” Annie said wearily, then looked up at Daniel. “I want some cotton candy.”

“Cotton candy’ll make your mouth sticky,” he replied, and smiled.

“And sweet.”

“Sappy,” Keith muttered, and kicked some of the gravel, sending up a small spray of pebbles that gently glanced Annie’s shins. “I didn’t come here to watch you two lick each other’s faces, you know.”

“Why’d you come then?” Annie asked.

“Damned if I know,” he said, and kicked some more pebbles. “Don’t remember it being like this, that’s for sure. Holy shit.”

A slow *click-clack click-clack* made her turn her head to watch the roller coaster’s slow ascent to the top of its first drop. The cars hesitated for a moment, then screams filled the air as the coaster plummeted downward and disappeared into the trees.

“Forget cotton candy,” Keith said, poking Daniel in the side. “Let’s take a ride on that.”

Annie let go of Daniel’s waist and walked slowly to the candy stand. She turned, saw them laughing and pointing at the roller coaster, and watched as they headed to the ticket booth. *Go*, she thought. *Disappear*. She stared at the cotton candy as it whirred in a circle, thought better of it and bought a caramel apple.

As she bit into it, her father came to her. *Careful*, he said. *I don't want you losing any teeth here. There'll be hell to pay when I get home. You just tell your mother we went for a drive and got a burger and some fries. Promise? 'Cause if you say anything about this place after a dentist appointment, you can be sure your mother'll be taking you from now on.* He tousled her hair, and while she usually ducked away when she saw his hand rise to do so—she was getting too old for that sort of thing—something told her it was okay just this once. She knew he didn’t like it that she wouldn’t help him wash the car without a fuss, that he was grumpy all night if, on a Saturday night after

supper, she wouldn't walk with him to the park and shoot a few hoops. "I'll get sweaty," she usually complained, and he'd grumble, "You're turnin' into a girl more and more every day." Once she whined to her mother about it, snapped that she should have been a boy in the first place. "Why didn't you have any more kids? Then Dad would be happy." Her mother, who was washing dishes, slapped a plate into her hands to dry and said, "We didn't have any more children because he had you," and that was the end of it. Annie didn't complain anymore, and she found herself taking him up on those suggestions of basketball after dinner, found herself letting him tousle her hair more often. *I mean something*, she thought. *This, everything, means something to him.*

Suddenly, Daniel was there beside her: "Hey. Where've you been? Thought we lost you for a sec."

She stared at him, didn't recognize him until, with a laugh, he grabbed her shoulder and pulled her forward, into the crowd, without waiting for her to answer.

The Teacups. Tilt-a-Whirl. The Whip. The Lazy Ghost River Flume. Even the old sack slide was still there. *This is ridiculous*, Annie thought to herself, all the while letting herself be pulled forward, all the while laughing, all the while thinking about her father.

"Having a good time?" Daniel asked, and instead of replying, she took his hand and squeezed it tight.

She told him things on the nights before they snuggled close in the front seat of the pickup over a bottle of Boone's he'd managed to get one of the customers to buy for him. She wanted to go to Phoenix after she graduated, see the Grand Canyon, maybe get a job at a casino in Las Vegas. She'd never been to any of those places but she wanted to *get away*, although maybe not with Daniel (and she was careful, no matter how much booze she drank or joints she smoked, not to tell him *that*. No, never *that*. Never that she was looking for a way out, any way out, and that if it really came down to it, his face could be any face, any face at all). Daniel fulfilled his role, knew his part well enough. *We can do anything you want*, he'd say to her, and she'd let those words mingle with the sweet lightness of the wine that was cheap, just like everything was cheap. The clothes she wore. The perfume she bought. The food she ate. The apartment she lived in. But she liked the *We* that rolled off his tongue so easily. He never noticed that when she told him things, she never mentioned *We*. It was *I want*. *I want*. Daniel seemed to say, so easily, *You can have*, while they both knew that beyond the strawberry or kiwi-flavored wine that never cost more than three dollars, and the front seat of the pickup, they'd never move any further. On certain nights, though, when the wine was just enough and the heat didn't bother her as much as it usually did, she would rise, weightless as a full moon, and feel that she could get away if she wanted to. She could fan herself out, become more

direct, pierce into something real, something more. Those were the moments when she felt as dangerous as a weapon, like the sharp hook of bone of a waning crescent moon.

And then she *was* rising, and falling, too, with both arms raised high above her head, her mouth opened wide to let forth a scream like no other. *I'll scream until I'm silent*, she told herself as the coaster careened wildly around the first turn, her body slamming hard into Daniel's, so hard he put an arm around and hollered, "Are you okay?"

This is it, she thought over dips and falls. *This is what I want. This is how I want to be for the rest of my life. One turn after another. One scream after another.*

"You're gonna get out, I want you to get out," her father had told her that weekend, the weekend he took her to a Saturday morning dentist appointment so her mother could sleep in, and then afterward—when she'd expected him to take her straight home so he could wash the car and she could play with her friends—suddenly began taking unfamiliar roads until they ended up at the Ghost Town. She was smiling as he'd parked the car, and just as they got out, he paused and looked at her carefully.

"Is this all right?" he asked, and she smiled at him, leaned over on an impulse she couldn't explain and hugged him.

"You don't get many surprises, do you, Annie?"

She didn't know what he meant, but the question stayed with her as she watched him buy a handful of tickets, as he clambered into the Tilt-a-Whirl with her, as he bought her cotton candy and caramel apples and hot dogs. It was she who made him stop, when her stomach was so full it hurt and she almost threw up when he spun their car too fast. He didn't seem to be able to notice when she stopped laughing, when fear took over. *Why didn't you say something*, he'd said after he finally saw her face was white. *The last thing I knew, you were giggling the way your Mom used to on these damn things.*

Two girls she knew from school were at the park that day, and after her stomach finally stopped spinning dangerously, she skipped over to them and talked about their new math teacher and about the Girl Scout meeting that was coming up. When she said goodbye and walked back to her father, he was smiling. *He must have gotten a raise or something*, she'd thought. *This isn't like my father. He's too happy.*

"You're something, special, you know that?" he said. "I watched you talking to those girls, and I really think you can be something one of these days. You just keep at it in school and hang onto your friends, don't let yourself fall in with a bad crowd like I did. Maybe one of these days, when things start looking up a bit and your Mom and I can start saving a little more money, maybe we can send you off to college. Would you like that?"

When she didn't respond, he'd tousled her hair again. "Would you like that?"

I would like for you to have lived, Annie thought as the coaster came to a violent halt that threw her against the restraining bar, and when she looked at the faces waiting in line for the next ride, at the expressions, they all seemed to say, *We'll go for this ride. But we know what's coming. Didn't you? Didn't you know all along it would be like this?*

While Daniel and Keith played skee ball, laughing as the line of prize coupons grew longer and longer, Annie drifted away from the flashing white lights that lined the game booths and walked down a small slope to where the real ghost town was, the one that the park was named for. She ignored the "Closed to the Public. No Trespassing" sign and walked past the Old Saloon, The Macintosh Hotel, and the souvenir shop which had once sold airbrushed T-shirts, peppermint sticks, and snow globes with minuscule replicas of the roller coaster tucked inside. The shops were empty now, and the door to the Macintosh Hotel hung from one hinge, showing through its opening that the roof had collapsed. The two sets of wooden stocks still stood in the center of the town, the three holes in each of them gaping like windows into nothing. Her father had taken a picture of her that Saturday, with her posed as a prisoner, her hands flailing and her head cocked to one side, but after the accident, neither she nor her mother could find the camera. Afterward, Annie had remembered that as she and father were driving home, he'd asked her to put the camera in the glove compartment so he wouldn't forget to take it with him to work on Monday and drop the film off on his way home from work.

You've got to meet everything head-on, her father always told her. He was especially fond of simple phrases, probably because they were the only kind he knew: *The early bird catches the worm; The things you do come back to you*. As she grew older, the phrases began to change, if only slightly: *A good man is hard to find; Always rely on yourself*. But it was a police officer who had given her the phrase that lulled to her to sleep every night: *A severe head-on impact*. She'd lie in bed at night creating conversations between her father and the police officer.

You've got to meet everything head-on. A severe head-on impact. Meet everything head-on. Head-on impact. Head-on head-on head-on.

"Annie!" Daniel called, and she turned and walked toward him, his figure silhouetted by the lights behind him. *Don't play this game. Don't do it*, her mind warned her, but even so, when she finally reached Daniel, he wasn't her father and her eyes stung.

They rode silently, except for Daniel humming to the radio. The remains of the six-pack that Keith had worked on earlier had been finished off in the parking lot, and the three started on another as Daniel wound down the mountain roads toward home.

Annie felt light, a little dizzy, was relaxed enough to push her memory of

the Ghost Town further and further away, like she did with all things she didn't want to think about, and soon it seemed so far away that the evening might not have happened at all. When Daniel put his arm around her, she welcomed it and rested her head on his shoulder. *Maybe, in twenty years, we'll be doing the same thing. Or maybe we'll sit on the back porch over a few beers and talk about it, talk about the last time we went to the Ghost Town in the Glen. We'll take our kids to see John Denver and tell them that once upon a time, right where that stage is, we rode a roller coaster, and once upon a time, where those people are lying on blankets, there really was a ghost town, and when we get home, I'll find that old snow globe I have just to prove it.*

Later, Annie would not be able to recall whether or not she actually saw the deer coming, but she would always say *It was like a flash. It was like something in a Dark Ride.* It leaped out from the trees and bushes at the side of the road, and when Annie actually *did* see the deer, it appeared to be flying, suspended in front of them as if it had always been there and they had simply never noticed it before. Daniel saw it, too late, and stomped on the brake, but the body of the deer connected squarely with the windshield of the truck. She heard a dull, heavy thud, then felt a cool wetness spray across her as Keith slammed into her, beer in hand. Then the deer slid off the truck, and they couldn't see it anymore. The spidered glass of the windshield was peppered with blood, and scattered dust gently settled down in the glow of the headlamps.

"What the hell?" Keith muttered.

"Is there anyone behind us?" Daniel asked. "Any cars coming?"

There weren't. The three of them slid slowly out of the cab and stood in front of the truck, staring at the pavement where the deer should have been.

"It's true," Keith whispered. "That stupid shit they always say in the movies. I saw my whole life flash before me."

"Me too," Daniel said, his voice equally soft. "Where'd the goddamn thing go?"

Annie was the only one who seemed able to move beyond the truck, and when she did, she saw the deer at the other side of the road in the grass. She approached it quietly, slowly. She could hear breath snorting in and out of its nostrils, rapid and shallow. It was a doe, and as Annie drew closer, she thought *It sees me, it knows me.*

Quietly, as quietly as she could because she did not think the moment was to be shared, she whispered, "I'm not going to hurt you."

The doe exhaled loudly, and Annie thought, *I'm not going to hurt you. I won't. Let me. Let me come near you and I can help you. If you let me help you, you won't die.*

Just as she was about to place her hand on the doe's heaving side, it leaped up on its hind legs, its front legs rising, swiping blindly at the air, then turned and disappeared into the woods. She heard it making its way through the brush, strained to hear it as the sound moved further and further away,

and then she couldn't hear it anymore.

"It was alive," Daniel said at her side. "Maybe it'll be okay."

"Goodbye venison steaks and hello insurance claim," Keith muttered.

"Man, this was some night. And Christ, it's still fuckin' *hot*."

They walked back to wait for her in the pickup, as she told them to, while she stood and looked into the gaping blackness of the woods. *Are you still there?* she thought. *Can you hear me? Are you all right? She crouched down, got on all fours, and crept quietly to the edge of the woods. Are you there? Are you there?*

Daniel called her name, but she ignored him. The woods were dark and silent, so silent she could hear her own breathing. Somewhere, somewhere in that blackness, the injured doe was either healing herself or dying. The ribs would take time to mend, a great deal of time, and for days the doe would rest, save her energy. Or perhaps, knowing she was dying, she would continue to move silently and slowly through the forest until she couldn't walk anymore, until she lost so much blood that she would simply go to sleep.

Annie crept back from the woods and went to the spot where the deer had lain. She bent down, ran her hand through the grass, then stared at her palm, red and wet with blood. She sniffed it, took in the strange odor, brought her face closer, touched the grass again.

"Jesus," Keith said as she got into the truck. "What happened? You all right?"

They drove toward home like that: Daniel driving, his eyes never leaving the road; Keith muttering, "Oh, sweet Jesus," like a litany; and Annie between the two of them, staring at the road as though she was seeing it for the first time. She kept her bloody hand curled tightly and held onto her secret, and every now and then she brought her hand to her face and sniffed its wildness. When the air from the open windows lifted her hair, she leaned back against the seat and closed her eyes.