

Martin's Ghost

By William Mellen

Part One.

Birthday card and favorite faux fountain pen in hand, Martin plopped down at the desk in his den. He sat back with a wry smile and jotted, "Happy 40, you geezer!" He thought it clever, as very soon he would be one year younger than his friend. But, having made this grand beginning, Martin's train of thought quickly derailed.

"Who in the hell is that?" Martin exclaimed, his eyes focusing on the framed photograph sitting on his desk.

He picked up the picture and scrutinized it from various angles. He even pulled it out of its frame and examined the front and the back, as well as the glass and the cardboard backing. It was lightly covered in dust, having sat in the same place without dusting for the past couple months. There was no visible sign of tampering. The picture appeared to be the same one he'd been looking at for years – with one critical exception.

As usual, Martin saw a much younger version of himself standing next to his buddies, Jim and Kirk. He had the same goofy smile on his face that he'd always sported when hanging out with his friends back then. Martin had celebrated his twenty-fourth birthday on the day of this photo, and from what he'd heard of it later, he gathered it had been a good one. His strongest memories were of the hangover the day after.

The picture had been taken while the night was still young. The three modestly handsome young men, clearly a happy bunch, were standing in front of Martin's '69 Camaro, ready for a night on the town. This was the scene that Martin's father had captured on film for the three young bucks, and for posterity.

However, now the photo showed a fourth party to their boisterous trio making it more of a mismatched quartet. The faint form of an older man, almost ghost-like in his silhouette, stood just behind and to the left of Martin. Martin was completely baffled.

Martin had always kept this photo around. Ever since he moved into his current house six years ago, it occupied a prominent place in his den, right next to his computer. Jim and Kirk had long since taken jobs with Silicon Valley start-ups and moved out to California. It was great to see their faces, better yet their *younger* faces, whenever Jim or Kirk sent an IM or called. As a result, Martin looked at the photo at least once a month and glanced at it daily. And here it was, again. Except, this time, he didn't see just three bright-eyed twenty-somethings trying to look cool in front a dented, primed

'69 Camaro. This time, behind those twenty-somethings, there was a shadowy silhouette — an intruder of inexplicable origin.

Martin stared at him intently. There was no mistake. For the past fifteen years, the man did not exist, at least not in this photo. Now, there he stood.

Martin thought, "Oh shit, am I seeing a ghost?" Upon inspection, the man had all his appendages, at least those not obscured by the boys standing in the foreground. He didn't appear to be levitating; no background objects shown through him; no church spire appeared to have hurled itself into him where he stood; his head had not spun itself around full circle; and he carried no bloody knife or open noose. Yet, although he lacked such obvious otherworldly traits, there were other strange aspects to his countenance. He wore a hat and overcoat that didn't suit the season. More puzzling, his image was blurred and his face was difficult to make out, as if the camera had managed to loose focus on just that portion of the photo.

Martin vigorously scratched the top of his head and repeated under his breath, "What the hell..."

For Martin head scratching was a sign of utter confusion. Years ago, he'd nearly scratched himself bald trying to comprehend certain portions of the tax code before a CPA exam and was saved only when his professor explained to him that the code was, like so much bureaucratic excrement, indecipherable, indigestible, and quite malodorous in close quarters. Martin always appreciated the professor's candor and colorful turn of phrase.

In this case, however, he had no chowder-headed Congress or special interest group upon which to blame this conundrum. The enigma stood right in front of him.

As Martin stood in puzzlement, these thoughts seemed to waft up from his ears, bind themselves into a large, messy knot, and then plummet to the pit of his stomach like a rock striking dry earth from on high.

"Leah, come look at this!" He was scratching more intensely as the rock-solid knot lolled about his empty stomach.

"Honey, c'mon! We're late for the party. Let's talk about it in the car," came Leah's response from the living room.

Leah, his wife, was the practical one. Or, as she would put it, *focused*. He knew the tone in her voice. Ghostly interlopers or not, she was not prepared to wait for him.

Martin considered taking the photo with him, but decided against it. He knew the party would not be the place to spring mysterious apparitions on his wife.

He climbed into the passenger seat of Leah's Turbo350Z and she backed out of the driveway. Leah had turned on the stereo, opened the sunroof, and smoothly shifted into third before Martin had even started to gather his thoughts. Eventually, he got there. When he did, he couldn't hold back on spilling his guts about his mystifying discovery.

"You know that picture on the right side of the desk in the office. The one with me, Jim, and Kirk?"

"The picture of your twenty-fourth birthday, when you guys drank too much and you almost got arrested for trying to swim naked in the community pool? Nope. Never saw it."

"Yeah, well, what I never saw was the guy standing behind me in the picture. I mean, I've looked at that picture almost every day for the last fifteen years and I've never seen this man... And now, he's there!"

The dramatic rise in Martin's voice was abrupt and startled Martin as much as it startled Leah. Just like the uninvited specter in the photo, Martin's anxiety was sudden and out of place.

"Martin, you were really drunk that night. You probably just didn't notice."

"Think about it!" His mind started cranking numbers. "Fifteen times three hundred and sixty-five. That's...uh...almost 5,500 times I didn't notice." Martin was getting more flustered as he thought. He was starting to wish he'd brought the photo after all.

"Okay Mr. Human Calculator, so you didn't notice some guy in the background before. What's the big deal? I can't recall seeing anyone in that photo other than you and your friends, but that doesn't mean he wasn't there. We all focus on what we expect to see and miss the details." Now, she was gathering steam. "You remember that article about how scientists miss major discoveries because they focus on their expected results. So what if we didn't pick up on everything in the background before? I bet you can't remember which shoes I'm wearing right now."

"I'm talking about a picture that I've looked at almost every day for the past fifteen years! And, this guy is not a little figure off in the distance. He's right there behind me!" Martin stopped briefly to emphasize his point, "The big deal is that this guy wasn't there and he's never been there. And, tonight, he's there. Whatever he is!"

"Well, Martin, this isn't Harry Potter. People don't move around from picture to picture," she argued back and then waited momentarily for this to point to take hold.

"Are you okay? I know this whole firm thing has been stressing you lately." Leah paused again, and simultaneously downshifted both the car and the conversation. "Hey honey, I've been waiting all spring to go to the beach. Can't you take a day off next week? I know things are crazy at work, but we both deserve it. Let's go have some fun."

Martin could see this discussion was going to be as productive as trying to nail tofu to the wall. He didn't need a day at the beach; he needed the picture. He took a couple breaths and stifled his growing frustration.

"No. I'm fine. Really. You're probably right about the photo." But, what he really thought was, "Yeah. Well, seeing is believing. That *thing* is in my photo. Wait 'till we get home!"

"Let's enjoy the party, Marty!" Leah always liked the upbeat sound of that rhyme. Martin never said anything, but he hated it.

Part Two.

They arrived at the party a fashionable ten minutes late, and headed in for the celebration. Martin, however, spent the rest of the night making small talk and stewing on that odd stranger, standing uninvited in his twenty-fourth birthday.

On the drive home, Leah was chatty. She relived her discussion with Beth about how Beth's ex-husband was still the same rat he'd always been and how she'd gotten into a political discussion with Stan's parents and wasn't sure if she'd offended them by offering her views on the problems with the city council. Martin did all he could to keep the conversation going, despite the fact that his mind was constantly gyrating back and forth from the night of his twenty-fourth birthday to every time he could recall looking at that picture. It was like trying to add figures with a broken calculator. No matter how he punched the numbers, things just didn't add up.

When they arrived home, Martin went straight to the den and grabbed the photo. Jacket and keys still in his right hand, picture frame now in his left, he stared with disbelief. Once again, the locomotive of thought that had been building steam within him all evening launched itself off the track. The large rock that wobbled about in his stomach earlier returned with new vigor. The specter was gone.

Martin repeated the process of scrutinizing the photo from different angles. He held it directly under the desk lamp and moved it about. He pulled it from its frame again and scrutinized it. Nothing — just three young, goofy guys and an old car that desperately needed body work and a paint job.

"I just don't get it!" he exclaimed, as frustration battled with bewilderment. "Maybe I do need a day off, or something." He sighed heavily and sat down hard, placing the photo back on the desk. It was surreal.

Martin simply didn't know what to think. He was ready to blame it on overwork and exhaustion. Still, a little voice in the back of his head quietly spoke to him, "Yeah, ignore the elephant in the room just because you don't know how to deal with it. Just because he's quiet, you think it's best to let sleeping pachyderms lie. You know what you saw."

Leah came into the den with two glasses of chardonnay. She'd heard his earlier burst of frustrated astonishment.

"What's that hon'?"

There was no hint of teasing or gloating in her voice. Martin could tell it was a sincere question and tried not to be defensive. He instinctively chose the easy road. That direction was well lit and held the promise of normality.

"Well, I just don't get it. Whatever it was, it's not there now. Maybe you were right. Maybe I do need a day at the beach."

Leah was relieved. There would be no arguments or wasted time. Problem identified, fix found. Back to regularly scheduled programming.

It really wasn't too much of a surprise though, she thought. It had been less than a year since Martin joined Smith & Vett, a local boutique accounting firm that specialized in corporate valuations. However, the firm was having difficulties lately, and Martin had heard rumors that they had started looking for a buyer. With only months at the firm under his belt, Martin was very worried that he had not had a chance to prove himself. As a result, he was almost obsessed with concern that he might lose his job now, during one of the worst recessions ever. This, on top of having to cope daily with a new boss, a cast of characters that he often said reminded him of *The Firm*, and the strain of a typically stressful job, was a lot to handle. The pressure was clearly weighing on him.

Leah put her glass of wine on the desk, slipped her hand around his waste, and handed him the other glass of wine. With a gentle squeeze, she hugged him and said, "Don't worry, sweetie. You're the best man they've got and they know it. Let's go to the beach next weekend."

Martin thought about the beach now that he'd agreed to go, but he had difficulty generating honest enthusiasm. Time at the beach meant more time to mentally agitate about work and less time to do it.

Part Three.

Over the next few days, Martin gradually put the mystery man out of his mind. The pace at work left him with little room to ponder such enigmas. Rumors both inside the firm and without kept all but the executives guessing. And, truth be told, though it seldom was, the execs did a lot of guessing themselves. The routine pressures of the work were enough for most, but the

added weight of uncertainty bore heavily on Martin and others. Martin's hours at the office were long and the week slipped by in a flurry of meetings, spreadsheets, and memos.

The following Saturday was sunny and warm. Martin, still lying in bed, gazed out the window and saw a few lumbering, puffy, white clouds high up in the sky. They seemed to be inviting him to follow them out to the warm, sandy beach. On the other hand, he had not finished a particularly challenging opinion letter for a client on Friday and he'd committed to getting it out by Monday morning. It was a very bad time to irk clients, he knew.

Leah came out of the bathroom, having showered and changed into one of her favorite beach-going outfits. Martin could see that Leah had intentionally started the trip to the beach before he awoke, and before he could raise the subject of incomplete projects and demanding clients. The jousting was over before he'd even known it had started.

"C'mon sleepy-boy! The ocean waits for no man," chided Leah as she firmly squeezed his shoulder.

Martin quickly decided there was no point in fighting a battle he'd already lost and rolled himself out of bed.

"And, neither does the wife," he retorted climbing out of bed. As Leah turned to head downstairs, Martin quickly tossed his Blackberry into the day bag Leah had prepared. He wanted to keep tabs on the office and his clients from beachside.

Martin's thoughts drifted back to the office as he stepped into the shower. His work rarely left him, wherever he was.

Having completed his shower on autopilot, he stepped out onto the plush, chocolate brown colored bathmat, his mind now reconsidering comments he'd overheard between two senior partners on Friday morning. They were ambiguous comments, but it sounded as though they were speculating on a possible major defection within the firm. The prisoner's dilemma had begun on high, he thought. The idea of updating his resume flickered through his mind, yet again, and his stress level began to rise. Looking into the foggy bathroom mirror, Martin could hardly see his own reflection through the condensation on the glass. "Geesh," he thought, "this is no better than trying to see what's going on at the bloody office."

As he reached out with a hand towel to wipe off a patch of mirror, he froze, blood turning ice cold. Fight or flight reflexes instantly kicked in hard. There, in the mirror, he could see a faint image of a man standing just behind him.

Martin immediately turned, head first, body following in a quick jerk. As he turned, he raised the blow dryer as if preparing to subdue the intruder with a bad hairstyle. To his utter amazement, no one awaited his

attack. Other than Martin, the room was empty. Except for his own frantic, heaving breath, there was no movement or sound in the bathroom or the bedroom. He frantically looked around both rooms, scanning intently for any sign of an intruder.

He was certain of what he'd seen, but he was also now very certain that nobody could have been in the room. It just wasn't possible. It was at least twenty feet from the bathroom to the bedroom door, which, as before, stood closed. The door hinge was old and made a loud, annoying squeak when open or closed. He knew it well because he'd been meaning to fix it for months. But, he was fairly certain it had been silent.

There was no place in the room to hide, at least not without significant effort and noise, and the window was shut and locked. The man had appeared over Martin's right shoulder, closest to the open doorway between the bathroom and bedroom. That was the direction Martin had first turned. Martin knew that no man could have covered that ground or hid in the instant it had taken him to spin his head in that direction. On the other side of Martin lie most of the bathroom and the walk-in closet. But, that area would have been unreachable for the man without running into Martin.

Martin put down the previously weaponized hairdryer and sat heavily in the overstuffed armchair in the corner of the room, his eyes and ears still scanning on high alert. His heart pounded and his head reeled. The knot inside his stomach returned in greater proportions. He recognized that faint outline of a man. He'd seen it before. "Damn it! It's just not possible!" he screamed inside. Martin started to hyperventilate.

Minutes later, Leah found Martin slumped forward in the chair, his head clearly heavy in his hands. Her first thought was bad news from the office. She looked around, but could not see the likely messenger of bad tidings, the Blackberry. Perhaps he'd had second thoughts about the beach and was trying to position himself for some excuse. However, as she sat down on the bed in front of him, thinking of the best approach, she noticed that all the color had drained from his face and the dampness on his forehead looked more like perspiration than shower.

"Are you all right, hon?" she asked with deep concern. She reached out and lightly caressed his damp hair.

As Martin tried to gather his thoughts to speak, he became very aware of a new danger. He could not simply blurt out that the guy from the picture had now materialized in the bathroom mirror. She'd think he'd gone off the deep end. He was starting to think she'd be right. In fact, he didn't think he could even gradually lead up to describing these events, whatever they'd been.

"Uh, yeah, I'm okay." He tried to sound convincing, for his own benefit as much as hers. His mind raced and then found some footing.

"I was trying one of those super-hot therapeutic showers Ted was talking about at the party last night, and I think the heat and steam got to me, that's all. I'm fine. Silly, huh? When did I start listening to Ted?"

"Yeah. When did you start listening to Ted?" Leah jumped at the chance to harp on 'Crazy Ted,' "Ted's nuts. Jeez. Do you remember when he got onto that sesame seed kick and ate nothing but black sesame seeds for two weeks? Sarah told me his skin started turning grey. It drove her crazy. I won't tell you what she said it did to his shit. I wish *I* could forget it. If you're listening to Ted, you *do* need some time at the beach!" She paused, as if rethinking his explanation. "Are you sure you feel okay?"

"I'm fine," he said, slowly standing up. He didn't feel fine, but he put on a brave face and started getting dressed. "Did you make some lunch, or shall we pick something up on the way?" He knew she loved preparing picnics and would insist on filling a cooler with sandwiches and other goodies. He hoped this line would inspire her to head back downstairs.

"Almost done," she said, regaining her enthusiasm. She'd taken the bait. "If you're really okay, I'll go finish up." She rose and started toward the bedroom door. "I'll be ready when you are!"

"You know where to find me." Again, his attempt to sound upbeat was only moderately convincing, but he noticed it more than she, and Leah continued out the door.

Martin took a few tentative steps back toward the bathroom, looking around cautiously and listening closely for movement. He decided to quickly double-check the closet, but found only idle, unoccupied clothes and the other usual items inside.

Without any idea of what he really wanted to do, or should do, by default he did the obvious and restarted his morning routine. It wasn't easy. He nicked himself three times shaving, poked himself in the back of the throat with the toothbrush, slopped on the deodorant as if using a trowel, and decidedly had the worse hair day he could remember. It was on his fourth attempt to find and don a matching pair of socks that he realized he was still distracted to a point near panic. The elephant was bounding around the room again, demanding attention.

"Breathe," he thought, "Damn it. Breathe."

He sat down again and tried to speak to himself in calming tones, "Breathe slow and even. There is clearly no one here and there is no danger. I don't know what happened. I can't explain it, but it doesn't matter now. One foot in front of the other. Left, right. Baby steps. Laying on the beach will help. Probably just stressing. That's got to be it. 'All work and no play...'"

This last unfortunate phrase brought visions of a totally whacked-out Jack Nicholson maniacally typing away and wielding an ax in *The Shining*. “Heeeeere’s Martin!” he thought.

“Woe! I’m being ridiculous!” he scolded himself and shoved the image out of his brain, opting, as best he could, for his last recollection of lying on the beach next to Leah.

He walked over to the day bag, removed the Blackberry, and dropped it into the drawer. “Enough!” he thought. But, the elephant wasn’t sleeping.

Part Four.

It was a beautiful day at Fairpoint Beach. The handful of fluffy, white clouds that greeted Martin earlier in the day appeared to have made good on their promise and followed him out to a spectacularly deep blue sky floating above warm, clear salt water and soft sand.

They found a nice spot near the surf and laid out their blanket. For the rest of the afternoon, Martin and Leah had what was, for them, a typical visit to the beach. Except, for Martin, his day at the beach was no day at the beach.

He did his best to enjoy all those things he loved about their trips to the ocean. Leah was still quite beautiful in her bikini. Splashing about like kids and the ease of lifting and holding her in the surf were things he’d cherished.

The picnic food was, as usual, wonderful. There were thick sandwiches, each with generous helpings of supple roast beef or turkey, a fine slice of cheddar or havarti, as dictated by the meat, crisp greens, and a spicy brown ale mustard (Dijon for the turkey) with a dab of real mayonnaise mixed in. Leah’s family-famous potato salad, salt and vinegar chips, chilled sangria in a thermos, and a small basket of double-chocolate chip cookies purchased by Martin at the nearby bakery that morning rounded out the modest feast.

Over the years, many of their likes had coalesced, and food was no exception. But today, a large and gruesomely dark cloud in Martin’s mind overshadowed all these wonderful things — the delicious food, the sun and sky, the warm water, and his beautiful, caring wife. It rendered them distant and muted. That cloud had the figure of an unknowable, inexplicable, pernicious intruder. Martin’s unshakable sense of unease made the whole day an ordeal for him. The quiet spaces in the otherwise pleasant day seemed to create a vacuum in to which his anxieties flooded.

Leah sensed his distraction, but she tried her best to enjoy the day and make it fun for Martin. A couple of times Leah attempted to gently remind Martin to relax. She still suspected his stress stemmed from the

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office. She had chalked up his earlier episode with the photo as a “work-stress thing” and had not considered it in any other light. Certainly she had no inkling that the stranger had reappeared, let alone in their bathroom mirror.

On the way home, they decided to stop at The Two Johns, one of their favorite seafood restaurants. Ironically, the place was run by two guys, each named Phil. The inside joke was that the restaurant name wasn’t intended as a namesake – common knowledge in the area, nor did it reflect the worse rumor that the two owners had first met when visiting the same house of ill repute. Rather, this nom de plum arose from the two Phils’ dream that someday they’d be so successful that they would need to expand into a bigger space sporting not one, but two bathrooms. Fortunately for the Phils, their sense in the kitchen was much better than their marketing sense.

The crabs were fresh, as were the hushpuppies and asparagus. All of the food was excellent, as usual. And, also as usual, Martin’s thoughts flicked from his present surroundings, to his worries, and back. He unenthusiastically picked at his food and did not talk much. His responses were generally limited to one syllable each. Leah was enjoying the food, but getting a bit frustrated with her stick-in-the-mud dining companion. She decided to take a more direct approach.

“Martin, I know you’ve got a lot on your mind, but you really need to relax. You’ve been tense all day. It’s not fair to me, either, you know.” She waited to see which way Martin would blow her trial balloon. He just sat, looking at his crab and letting her words hang between them. The air felt heavy. He didn’t know what to say. Leah tried again.

“Look. I don’t want to make light of this because I know it’s bothering you and it’s not a trivial thing, but what’s the absolute worst that can happen?”

This drew a look of strong surprise from Martin that bordered on shock. He practically turned pale right before her eyes. Leah had expected to tweak him into a reaction, but this was much more than she anticipated. To make things worse, he didn’t say anything.

Finally, Martin spoke. “Sorry, I think I got a little too much sun. I’m going to go splash some cold water on my face and wash my hands. Be right back.” With that, he quickly rose and disappeared down the hall toward the single washroom. It was Leah’s turn to feel bewildered.

“He’s really freaking out,” she thought. “How far is this going to go... What am I supposed to do with a husband who’s going off the deep end? It’s not as though I don’t have enough to worry about at work.”

Part Five.

While Leah puzzled and worried, Martin locked the bathroom door and immediately began splashing cold water on his face.

“I’ve got to maintain. I *cannot* do this. I’m a grown man, a professional, not some nut who talks to himself on the street corner...” Martin’s inner voice was wavering, cracking; now, shouting inside.

Then, he had a horrifying thought. “What if I look up and that demented thing appears in the mirror? Could he follow me? Can he leave the house? Can he come back again?”

Martin felt himself walking toward the edge of an abyss. He tried to force himself to back away. “What the heck am I thinking? There is no “him”. Be a man. Get a grip!”

With this newly found resolution he looked up into the mirror to prove to himself there was no “him”. In the mirror, Martin found his pale, sweaty, tense face and the empty bathroom behind him. Nothing else. He let his breath drain from his lips like a tire with a large puncture, his shoulders practically heaving with relief.

“See. It’s all just overwork and stress. Whatever he was, he’s not here and I’ll probably never see him again.” Martin was having a bit more success at convincing himself this time. He rubbed more cool water on his face and dried himself, taking care to ensure that he didn’t look like the wrung out washcloth he felt like. He walked back to the table a slight bit more his usual self. By the time he reached Leah his color had mostly returned.

Leah stood up as Martin approached. She didn’t seem to know what to expect. Martin quickly moved to reassure her.

“I’m sorry, love,” he started as he gestured for her to sit down at the table and did the same himself. “You were right. I’ve been stressed. But don’t worry; I’ve got a handle on it. Maybe I got a little too much sun this afternoon. The heat, stress... lack of sleep,” he let out an audible breath as if signaling he’d gotten past all this, “Ya know. But, really, I’m okay. Let’s enjoy the rest of these crabs. I’m still hungry.” He cracked a small, slightly tilted smile.

The rest of the evening actually started to feel like old times for the couple. They had the waiter, Phil, bring them a bottle of French Chablis to finish the meal and they talked about the ‘old days’ when they’d first met.

As the evening wore on, they realized they should either order more wine and find a motel room or get going. They hadn’t brought an overnight bag, so they opted to hit the road. Leah had a bit more wine than Martin and, being much smaller and lighter, felt the effects of alcohol sooner than he. Martin knew she wasn’t drunk, but just to be safe, he took command of the keys as soon as they’d paid the bill.

After they’d bid thanks and farewell to Phil, the chef, and Phil the host, cashier, and waiter, they found the door only to discover that it had begun pouring buckets outside.

“Okay, my love, you hold down the fort here and I’ll bring the wagon,” Martin said with a gentlemanly flourish and bow.

“Why thank you ever so much, my handsome, stud-muffin cowboy,” drawled the slightly pickled Leah in a poorly feigned southern accent.

With another silly flourish, he dashed out into the downpour. He turned the corner of the building and trotted quickly along the side toward the back lot, taking advantage of the nominal protection offered by the small jutting eave that ran the length of the restaurant’s side alley. He reached the end of the partially covered path where the small walkway met the parking lot under the eave. The rain was falling even harder. It looked as though a sizable front had blown in from the coast.

Part Six.

The lot awaited him in near total darkness. The kitchen was located at the far corner of the building. A dumpster hunkered nearby, surrounded by a tall wooden fence. The fence blocked any light emanating from the kitchen that tried to reach the dark lot. There were no windows on this end of the restaurant to feed spare light in Martin’s direction. The building sat, squat and black. Two grimy, yellow lights on opposing sides of the parking lot were curtained in by the heavy rain. Each dirt-painted fixture cast a feeble glow that radiated little further than a small patch of mixed gravel and grass at its feet.

Martin could barely discern a partial outline of the 350Z. He clicked the door unlock button on his key fob and the car responded in kind with a welcoming flash of its parking lights. From what he could make out and what he remembered, his car was the only one in the back lot. He felt the wind and rain gaining energy.

Taking a breath, he hurled himself across the lot hunched like a football player plowing into the scrum. The wind scrapped at the lot and caused the rope on a nearby flagpole to slap and clang. Now running completely unprotected, the rain came at Martin in angular sheets, slashing sideways at his face and body. Globbs of muddy rain splattered off of his shoes as he ran, soaking into his clothing from the waist down. Thunder deafeningly crashed and rolled close by. Despite hitting land, the storm was still on a heavy boil.

By the time he reached the car he was soaking wet and his good mood was vanishing. He quickly piled his large frame into the car and was painfully reminded that the driver’s seat was pulled fully forward for his

much smaller wife. He was certain that he would find a bruise in the partial shape of a Nissan steering wheel across his chest in the morning.

He tried to adjust the seat, but his groping search for the controls around the base was frustrating and fruitless. Looking down the side of the seat, his eyesight fared no better. While he had been preoccupied with untangling himself from the steering wheel, the dome light had faded.

He stretched and twisted his right arm over his shoulder enabling him to reach back and flick on the dome light. As he pulled his arm down from the light, he knocked Leah's precariously perched cell phone from the middle console into the front passenger-side foot well.

"Damn," he groused under his breath.

With the cabin now again under a pale white light, he searched and found the seat controls. After quickly moving the seat back, he stretched across the mid-console and picked up the phone only to realize that his spare office cardkey had been with the phone when it fell to the floorboard. The sight of the key was like a ticket to ride. Instantly, his mind raced back to the office. It destroyed his mood even more than the storm and his current physical discomfort.

"Why did Leah put that there?" he grumbled to himself, now starting to think about the difficult opinion letter he still needed to finish by Monday morning, and placed the phone and the key inside the console.

He fine tuned the seat adjustment, clicked on the wipers, cranked up the engine, and gave it a gratuitous hard rev, as if that was going to help finish the opinion letter.

"Awe, screw it. I'll leave the light on. Leah will need it, anyway," he thought.

Thinking the lot was clear for at least thirty or forty feet, he started to back the car as he reached for the rearview mirror. The engine was still revving well above idle and thrust the car backward faster than was wise in a dark, wet parking lot. As he touched the mirror, his eyes locked on it in horror and he slammed the brake pedal with full force. The wheels, trying to bite hard into the surface below, skid roughly on the slippery gravel. In the mirror, Martin saw a man sitting in the backseat; he was face forward, glaring back at Martin through the mirror. Martin instantly recognized him — the same slight build, the same overcoat, and the same Stetson-like hat. He could now see the man's face, although it again seemed partially obscured, perhaps by a watery smudge on the mirror or something.

Panic instantly set in, as though no time had lapsed between their meeting in Martin's bathroom and now. Martin threw open the car door and almost wrenched his body into multiple pieces with the unfastened seat belt. His chest and leg muscles heaved violently against the unyielding restraint, exacerbating his terror and the pain in his chest. He found the buckle and

managed to lunge out of the car back into the thrashing squall. Hitting the ground on a running skid, he whipped around to face the car, and stared into what appeared to be an empty back seat. The driver's side door hung open, the dome light still lit the cabin, and the door-ajar chime seemed to mindlessly call attention to the surreal nature of the evenings' events.

Completely bewildered, scared witless, and, at the same time, angry as hellfire, he lunged again. This time he headed in the direction from which he'd come, but a little askew, toward the rear passenger door. Martin's fists were balled tight and his muscles strained to lash out at something. Blood pounded through his body and sweat mixed thickly with the rain.

Raising his slightly shaking right fist like a hammer, Martin again searched the backseat and rear floorboards with an ever-increasing sense of fright and rage. He hadn't decided, but he was pretty sure he would put his fist through the window if he saw the monster somewhere within. Then, if the thing inside didn't kill him first, he'd wring the bloody bastard's neck, if he had one. But still, the bastard was gone.

Just then, a train barreled through the adjacent field. Trains here went in and out of port and rarely came through at night. Martin was unaware how close the restaurant's back lot was to the tracks. To a very preoccupied Martin, the hard charging engine and grinding wheels came on extremely sudden and loud. The mechanized thunder hit him harder than the real thing. He reeled again.

It was a short train that passed as quickly as it had come. Yet, the train's blasting through had been another hard staccato note in Martin's nightmare. Receding, it seemed to Martin that the sound of that train had sucked away his very soul and disappeared with it into the night. Perhaps that menace was on the train right now, hunting for it.

Martin bent down feeling spent and grabbed his knees, breathing deep. However, still on alert, he kept his head up and continued to search the parking lot as best he could for signs or sounds of movement. "Breathe," he thought, "breathe!" Rain washed down his face and continued to soak into his clothes. The wind gradually lost some of its earlier fury, as if consumed by the train, as well. He forced a few more deep breaths and tried to calm the pounding in his head.

Martin, ignoring the weather, walked around the car alternating his probing stare between the car's interior, the far sides of the parking lot where the impotent bulbs hung, and the blackened countryside that lay beyond. He could barely see anything other than the faintly illuminated cabin of the car. Gradually, the rain bought him back from his trance-like search. He continued to scan the area as best he could, but at this point he knew he'd see nothing. Then, a terrible thought hit him, "What if he didn't leave? He could be here somewhere...invisible. How else can he do that!" He paused. "No, I'm losing my mind... I am losing my mind!"

Suddenly, his body responded to the harsh adrenaline rollercoaster he'd ridden the only way it knew how. Martin instinctively ran a few paces from the car and puked into the rain-soaked gravel.

He stood up and slowly walked back toward the car feeling much the worse for the wear. He couldn't help but search again, scanning the darkness, and then peering into the car. True to his intuitions, the menacing specter did not show. As he arrived at the open car door, he carefully looked again, fists re-clenching. Empty.

He sat down in the driver's seat and felt slightly better, as if somehow vomiting had partially purged him of whatever it was that was haunting him. Most of the interior was soaked, but he barely noticed it. He looked up into the rearview mirror and felt his body tense again. He saw only the top of an empty rear seat and the dark space that lay beyond through the rear window. He couldn't help but continue to be wary, but it was the logical part of him, the left-brain, that was still on alert. He tentatively grabbed a water bottle from the back seat and rinsed his mouth with a few big swigs. He spat them out flatly into the lot. The water tasted sweet compared to the acrid stomach acid in his mouth. He took a couple drinks. Swallowing the cool water had a calming sense of reality to it. He sat back in the seat and, still watching the rearview mirror, concentrated on slow steady breaths for a minute.

Feeling that the immediate danger had passed, he managed to pull himself together well enough to get the car back in gear. As he pulled around to the front of the restaurant, the sight of the bright entryway and the thought of Leah waiting for him helped the surreal world of the ghostly menace slightly fade.

Arriving at the restaurant entrance, he found it vacant. It was then that he realized he must look a sopping mess. He grabbed the light sweatshirt that Leah had left in her seat and patted his hair and wiped his face and arms as best he could. For a moment, he was glad she had gone back into the restaurant. It gave him a moment to compose himself and continue his rough wipe-down. However, after a few minutes, frustration set in. He did not want to have to go in and find her, not in his state.

"Awe, c'mon Leah. Don't play games now!" he thought plaintively. He tapped the horn, but with a bit more vigor than he'd intended. Leah appeared at the door, waiving at one of the Phils inside as she came out.

"Hold yer horses, there, Lone Ranger," she admonished him loudly from under the awning, "a girl's got to take care of business, too, ya know!" She covered her face from the rain as best she could and hopped in.

"What happened to you, forget how to drive a stick?" Clearly the wine was still having a merry effect. "So, let's go home and play cowgirl and Indian," she quipped with a wink and gave Martin's thigh a firm squeeze.

It was Martin's soaking wet leg that first caused Leah to realize something was amiss. "What's with the soaking britches? Did you go dancing in the rain without me?" Feeling more of his leg and untucked shirt, she looked at him more carefully now.

"You're not wet... you're drenched, honey!" She peered closely at Martin's face for the first time since she'd hopped in the car. From what she could tell, he had no color to his face, his hair and clothes were dripping, and his shirt was askew, as if he'd been in a fight.

"Oh my gosh, Martin." Buzz-kill started to set in. "What happened? Are you all right? Did someone attack you?"

"No, no," he started, "Nobody... nobody attacked me." He looked down as his mind raced for an excuse. "I think I had a little too much to drink — I ran out to the car... because of the rain and all, and, uh, I felt a bit sick, and... maybe the sudden run with the crabs and wine didn't mix. I didn't want to get sick in the car, so I walked around a bit. The air helped, but I guess I got a little wetter than I thought... It's okay, I'm good, now... I'm good."

"Are you sure? You don't look so good. You're just soaking!" Leah wasn't really buying it. She knew Martin was not the type to get sick over a little wine and a short jog in the rain, but the situation was just too odd to figure out. "Why don't we go back in and have a cup of coffee? We can dry you off and see how you feel. Jeez, Martin!" She also wanted to get a better look at him in the light.

However, Martin still had no intention of presenting himself in public and did not want to extend this trip any longer than absolutely necessary. He didn't think that thing would reappear again tonight, but on the other hand, how could he be sure. No, if that thing was coming back, he wanted to at least be at home when it did.

The thought then struck him, "What if the monster appears in the back seat again, while I'm driving. How could I maintain if that bloody jack-in-the-box pops up when I'm on the freeway? I'd probably run the car off the road or into oncoming traffic. That fucking thing could kill us. What if that's what he wants?" Still, Martin didn't want to return to the restaurant.

"Hey, do you think you can drive?" he asked as casually as possible. He'd rather take his chances with a slightly looped Leah than risk wrecking the car himself or return to the restaurant.

Leah didn't really have many qualms about driving with a bit of a buzz, and Martin knew it. She prided her self on her ability to maintain better than most, as long as she wasn't truly blitzed. Sharing a single bottle of wine over dinner was far from what she considered hammered. Nevertheless, she used the opportunity to take one more run at getting Martin inside.

“You know I can drive, but if you don’t feel well, are you sure you don’t want to go in and have a cup of coffee or glass of water? Maybe dry off a bit in the bathroom...”

“Naw, I really just want to get into bed,” he said as nonchalantly as he could muster. “I’ll be okay.” He felt like this last line was becoming his mantra.

“Well, okay hon’. If that’s what my baby wants.” She caressed his hair and gently kissed his cheek, but inside Leah frustration was brewing.

They switched places and Martin reclined in the passenger seat, shutting his eyes and trying to keep his mind blank.

“Oh shit, Martin!” Leah blurted as she slid into the driver’s seat. “It’s a swimming pool over here! What the hell happened?” Her frustration started surfacing together with her surprise.

“I forgot to shut the door when I went for my walk,” he replied pathetically. It was the best he could do. He shut his eyes to feign sleep and ward off further cross-examination.

Part Seven.

The drive home was uneventful. Leah kept quiet, thinking that Martin was trying to sleep. Martin tried to focus on the calm, fluffy, white clouds he’d seen earlier that day hovering in a sea-blue sky. How wonderful it would be to float like that without any cares. No work, no partners jumping ship, no demanding clients... no fucking jack-in-the-box spook scaring the crap out of you for reasons unknown. “Shit,” he thought. “Who or what is this thing? What does it want? Why? Why!”

Upon arriving home, Martin immediately adopted an “I don’t feel so good, really tired, must sleep” facade. He did not feel up to an interrogation and had made up his mind that he would never tell Leah about the reappearance of the ghostly invader. Wherever this led, he was going to have to fight this battle alone.

Leah was still very perplexed. She continued to suspect that Martin was stressing under the weight of his job and career uncertainty. It would only be natural. He had taken on a significant amount of responsibility when he joined the firm and the job was challenging. Clients, and occasionally partners, demanded results — sometimes overly specific results. He was talented and she knew he could handle it, but lately he seemed to have a very hard time mentally breaking free from work. He not only brought work home, but he seemed to carry it around in his head all the time. The rumors surrounding the firm’s instability certainly weren’t helping and fueled more and more of his worries. Nevertheless, none of that fully explained his freaky behavior of late.

“Even with the weather, how on earth did he get so messed up just running out to get the car?” she puzzled. “And, what was with him earlier, when I found him totally stressed this morning?” She started to think that something else must account for his recent behavior, but she couldn’t fathom what.

“What is he hiding?” her brain started checking off the list. “Drugs? No, not Martin. Besides, nothing else points to drugs and I don’t think he could hide that from me... Has he done something wrong, or gotten involved with the wrong sorts of people? What could that possibly be? Martin is so straight-laced. It’s just not him.”

She resolved to gently probe more when he was feeling better, but the resolution just didn’t satisfy.

“Honey, did you see my round brush in the bathroom tonight?” she gently asked an apparently half-asleep Martin. She knew it was still sitting in the bottom of the day bag.

“Un uh,” came Martin’s sleepy reply. His response was an affectation. Sleep was still somewhere off in a more peaceful distance. Somewhere where ghostly apparitions did not dwell.

“Sorry,” whispered Leah in a planned response. “I must have dropped it in the trunk. I’ll be back in a minute, hon’. You sleep well.”

Neither fully understood, but they had just had one of their first fully choreographed conversations since they were married; each fulfilling their own separate, calculated goal. The unearthly visitor was affecting both of them now on a full time basis.

Leah hurried to the garage. Though she had flicked on the light, she also grabbed a flashlight from the shelf. She didn’t want to miss anything and she knew she would have to be quick to avoid arousing suspicion. She started with the trunk. Since Martin wasn’t feeling well, she had been the one to unload it earlier, but with Martin nearby, she only had time to quickly remove the day-bag, cooler, and beach blanket. She now removed a few smaller items and carefully searched the inside of the trunk with the flashlight. She swung the light slowly in a left-to-right, back-to-front sweep, looking for anything unusual. She even lifted the carpet and searched around the spare tire. However, judging by the dust, it did not look as though the compartment had been disturbed in a long time.

She next moved to the driver’s compartment. Aside from being drenched and much muddier than she expected, she found nothing unusual. She repeated her search throughout the car, but other than finding her phone and Martin’s cardkey, came up empty. She wasn’t sure whether she should feel relieved or more concerned. She settled on the latter. The Gordian knot remained.

She returned the flashlight to the shelf and plodded upstairs. Martin appeared to be sleeping, or trying to sleep. She quietly completed her bedtime routine and turned in. After adjusting her pillow, she rubbed his back gently. He rolled over in a fetal position and hugged her tight. It was odd for him not to lay face up with his body stretched out and draw her to him, but Leah couldn't bring herself to say anything more than a gentle, "I love you, Martin."

"I love you, Leah. Forever." The word 'forever' carried an ominous tone in his voice, but Leah couldn't put her finger on it. It rested unevenly in her mind. It was not a typical Martin phrase, but that was as close as she got to pinpointing the disquiet she felt with his words.

Martin spent the night of the fitful. The ticking of the clock next to his bed relentlessly reminded him how slow time could pass. It was as though, with each tick, the clock was visiting upon him death by a thousand thin, crisp cuts. In cadence with the clock's tormenting beat, his mind continued to flash through recollections of each meeting with the damnable ghost. Even work could no longer gain a foothold in his thoughts. He tossed and turned, as if he could leave these malicious memories behind him with one quick turn or another. By morning he was exhausted.

Sunday was their day to sleep in. Between Martin's ominous use of the word "forever" and his flipping about all night, Leah had not slept well either.

Lying sleepily in bed and gazing at the warm, cozy room that had become their nest, she pondered how Martin had changed. Since they'd first moved into the house, they spent many quiet Sunday mornings reveling in the peace and warmth of their bedroom — and, each other. But, the past several months, it had become harder and harder to enjoy these moments. Leah didn't want to point fingers, but Martin was the problem. More specifically, she thought, Martin's new job and his difficulty in managing the stress that came from it rained too often on their sunny weekend mornings. It seemed that lately, particularly since the night he freaked out over the guy he thought he saw in his birthday photo, that his distraction and worry had intensified.

She considered lighting into Martin with the exhaustion and frustration that had been building inside her. However, the thought struck her, "You catch more flies with sugar than vinegar," and she decided to try to start the day on a positive note rather than a rousing argument. Perhaps then, she could get Martin to loosen up and talk more.

She headed down to the kitchen to make breakfast, which she planned to bring him in bed. Breakfast in bed was their standard routine for birthdays and they'd previously talked about extending the tradition to mother's day and father's day after they had a child. She could tell him that she was practicing for a future father's day. That would bring up thoughts of a future life and a son or daughter. Leah thought this might spur Martin to

tell her more about what was going on now, particularly if it could have any future impact on their family.

Martin was still pretending to be asleep. Actually, he was wrapped in combat with his demons, and losing. He could now clearly imagine, or he thought perhaps he'd really seen, the details of the phantom's face in the rearview mirror the night before. The short, dark hair partially obscured by his hat looked trim, as though recently cut. His eyes were small, dark, and sharp. The pupils were unnaturally dilated, almost to the point of swallowing the sclera. They gave his eyes and face a lifeless appearance and suggested a violence greater than the invader's physical stature. His nose was sharp, but correctly proportioned for the face. The mouth was small and lips thin. His chin was not bold or chiseled, but it had a sharp, well-defined cut. His skin was tan and healthy, in direct contradiction to the lifeless look to his shark-like eyes. Martin tossed about and broke into a sweat.

Feeling the futility of lying in bed, he forced himself to sit up and looked around the room as if expecting the devil to jump out at him. He heard Leah hard at work in the kitchen, but the thought of breakfast did not break his concentration on the room around him. Except for the distant kitchen noises rising from below and his tense breathing, the room was silent.

The armchair across from the bed sat vacant. The bedroom window was closed and locked. Leah had partially opened the horizontal blinds so that bright sunshine softly filtered into the room. The daylight gave a gentle glow to the beach sunrise print that hung kitty-corner to the window. Martin and Leah had placed it there specifically for this effect. The bedroom door was closed, but slightly ajar.

Sitting now in the peaceful warmth of their bedroom, the contrast between the sweet serenity of the room and his escalating fear served only to bring the surreal closer to his own sense of reality. "Could he be here?" thought Martin. "Is he still stalking me... right now? I can't take this anymore!"

He slowly arose from the bed, senses on high alert. He first directed his attention toward the mirrors and photos in the room. Glancing about, he did not notice anything unusual — no obvious sign of the malignant haunt. He walked toward the cherry dresser that stood in front of the bed for a closer inspection. Three cherry-framed photos stood on a tasseled, green runner that split the top of the piece into two well-polished strips of cherry. Above it hung a round mirror in a thick, dark, cherry frame.

The photograph to the left showed Martin and Leah together with his parents. The foursome stood gleefully around the folks' family Christmas tree two years earlier. The photo to the right held Leah's parents, clearly having the time of their lives on their thirtieth anniversary in Hawaii. The one in the center showed Martin and Leah in passionate embrace at the moment they'd been pronounced man and wife. The specter, however, had

not intruded on any of these blessed occasions. The mirror above similarly reflected only the usual, giving no signs of the demon.

Martin's head swiveled slowly toward the bathroom, but in doing so the summer beach scene in the framed print hanging near the window caught his eye.

"Could he appear in a painting, too?" Martin puzzled. "Why not? The bastard seems capable of anything."

Beads of perspiration condensed on his forehead and his body tensed as he approached the framed scenery. The print depicted a warm Atlantic beach, Florida perhaps, in quiet summer morning repose. A large, radiant sun was coming up on the horizon, scattering shimmers of light here and there off the waves. A couple of gulls drifted lazily in the light blue sky. It was no better than three-star commercial art to the trained eye, but they'd found it on their honeymoon and hadn't parted with it since.

Martin surveyed the print and finding nothing he chastised himself, "Well, what am I expecting, the ghost to show up sunning himself on the bloody beach?"

Then something struck him as odd. "What the hell..." he puzzled under his breath. There was still no sign of the spirit in the painting, but as Martin readjusted his focus from the beach scene to the glass covering it, his heart raced and his head started to swirl. Ever so faintly, a pattern became visible in the light dust on the glass. It had been imperceptible at a distance, but up close, he distinctly saw something. Leaning his head just off-center, the reflection of light at this angle clearly revealed the pattern; someone had scrawled a message in the lower right hand corner of the glass. He felt as though a cold, hard hand was firmly squeezing his heart as the words sunk deep inside. The missive was unmistakable. It was simple and terrifying, "*fear me.*"

Martin spun to face the room, searching frantically with his gaze. Nothing stirred.

"Where are you?" he demanded in hushed, but vehement tones. "What do you want from me? What the hell do you want?"

As he spat the words, he was trying to ignore the fact that his body was failing him. His legs were weak and his skin had gone cold and clammy. His breathing was rapid and shallow, his strength dissipating.

Then, he heard it...

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Thanks for reading the first seven parts of *Martin's Ghost*. I hope you have enjoyed it.

Martin's Ghost may feature a menacing phantom, but don't be fooled. It's not a horror story, and it's not a story about ghosts. It's a story

about life. Ask yourself if you're really living, right now. Martin's ghost may be closer than you think. The mind-bending conclusion will give the story, and maybe you, a new dimension.

So, **don't stop here!** The mind-bending final Part 8 awaits. Go to Kickstarter.com. Then select Martin's Ghost to support this project, and get the nail-biting conclusion, Part 8. The finale will give the story, and maybe you, a whole new point of view.

Author's Note.

This is a purely fictional work. Any similarities to any persons, places, or events are wholly coincidental. By way of example, this story is not autobiographical. It can't be. I haven't seen that bloody apparition in at least a month.

No animal testing was used in the creation of this story, although I did try out a few lines on my cat. He seemed to like it, although he did take the opportunity to drone on about the Freudian implications in my choice of vehicles and the odd juxtapositioning of the hairdryer with a naked man. I told him I just liked the damn car and suggested he get over himself. He's been pouting behind the couch since, but purely of his own fricking Freudian volition. He eats the same bloody kibble everyday without complaint, but you tell him just once that Freud was a kook and he gets his whiskers in a tangle. Cats!

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