

# The First Ghost I Ever Saw Was

Marshall Moore

1.

The first ghost I ever saw was a column of golden light at the foot of my bed. I was nine or ten. There was no doubt in my mind it was real. Ghosts *were* real. Both parents said so. My grandmother too. When her newborn son, the baby boy who would have been my uncle, died in his crib, a trio of ghosts appeared at the foot of her own bed. She recognized them all. They were family, women who had already passed but were back now to escort this sick child to farther shores. One look at them and she knew he wouldn't make it through the night. My parents had seen ghosts too, had sent and received psychic messages, had kept careful biorhythm records for years. There was a Ouija board in one of the downstairs closets. My sister and I were under strict orders never to touch it, so of course we did. Somewhere in the house, we had a deck of Zener cards. This was our reality.

This first ghost would shimmer into being late at night, after I had gone to bed but before I fell asleep. It would linger, curiously flat, just at the edge of my vision. If I opened my eyes and sat up in bed, it would vanish. But if I waited long enough, squinting into the dark through half-shut eyes, in time it would reappear: silent, flickering, gleaming but somehow roiling, shot through with a paisley lacework of darkness. I wasn't afraid of it, not exactly. Even at that age, I was as rational as anyone in that context was going to be. If the ghost meant to hurt me, it had passed up plenty of chances.

By day, to stave off boredom in school, I considered possibilities. Ghosts tended to appear in old houses and other buildings, or along lonely highways. Perhaps you could see one drifting along a stretch of treacherous railroad track or clinging vaporously to a widow's walk atop one of the old houses on the riverfront down in New Bern. But we lived in a new-build house in a neighborhood with a golf course and a country club. Although the fairways out beyond the tree line at the back of our yard could be misty and creepy late at night, as could the swamps they adjoined, the house hadn't been around long enough for anyone to have died there. I was certain of this.

What about distant dead relatives? There seemed to be no lack of them. The baby uncle, dead in his crib. Spinal meningitis took the little girl who would have been my aunt if she'd survived. My father's sister. And on my mother's side, there was the great aunt who'd been struck down by a car one Christmas night. Her own

car broke down. She was walking to get help. Someone hit her and kept going. Ever after, sadness festooned the holidays. Since more of our family seemed to be dead than alive, it seemed possible one of them wanted to reach me. I just didn't know what they might want to say.

2.

A darkness had always surrounded our house. Locked boxes, empty rooms. Secrets hinted at, but never discussed. My sister (we'll call her J.) and I were characters in our own ghost story as it played out in the modern manor house in the country-club suburbs. There was no fence between our backyard and the golf course. I never knew where the property line was. The yard was a ragged patch of grass, never landscaped, that merged into a dense scribble of woodland and briars. One side was almost impassable, but you could walk toward the pond and back through the trees to get to the fairways. There were two ponds: ours and the one on the golf course. The stumps of four dead trees jutted up from the one that formed a water trap between the eighth hole and the ninth. Lightning struck one of them not long after we moved in, left it charred and smoking. An electric charcoal reek hung over the neighborhood all the next day. Blackened splinters and twigs floated in the brown water until the country club sent a man with a boat to skim off the flotsam. We could go out and explore the golf course on our bikes. There was very little contact with other kids, though. Our parents didn't socialize and didn't want to. A heavy sadness hung in the air, and the silences were the kind that echoed after shouts and the sound of slapped faces.

Like most troubled kids, I thought constantly about running away from home. Although I didn't *think* I'd go through with it, we sometimes couldn't go to swim practice until the bruises faded. Both parents were often drunk, and had guns. Although I didn't *think* they were going to kill us, Mom had already told me of their plan to do just that. If the Russians dropped the bomb, she once told me, everything would be terrible afterward, unlivable. So, our parents had decided that the night civilization ended, they were going to shoot J. and me in our sleep, and then themselves. We could then be together as a family. Permanently.

When I got old enough, I'd sneak out at night and go for long walks. Practice runs, so to speak. Could I creep out without making the floors squeak, or the stairs? Well, yes, it was a new house. We had sliding glass doors. Outside, it didn't matter how much noise I made. I'd tromp through the woods to the golf course. In fall, ground fog would seep up from the earth and eddy around my feet. During our first year in that house, I had gone through a phase—just a week or two—of

having an imaginary friend. Being older and a bit horrified by my own lonely awkwardness then, I cringed when I looked back on this. Perhaps if I'd ever been able to settle on a name for this imaginary boy who liked me for some unknowable reason and chose to stick around, I'd have been less appalled. But I could never decide what to call him. Before long, he retreated to the back corners of my mind, anonymous if not forgotten altogether. Now, with leaves rustling underfoot and twigs snapping, thin mist swirling around my ankles, I didn't feel so embarrassed. Having someone who didn't exist to walk through the woods with me would have been very welcome.

Being as rational in that context as anyone was going to be, I kept to the middle of the greens. One side of the course didn't scare me at all: the side where the houses were. Hedges and low split-rail fences separated the links from the backyards. Clumps of azaleas and stands of ornamental pampas grass formed some of those borders. My family's patch of woods didn't scare me much either. However, the far side of the course butted up against a forest wall of swamp. The manicured grass formed a sharp boundary on the other side of which were tangles of briars and deep mud. If you could push your way through the thickets without shredding your flesh, you'd find yourself on ground that sloped down into the dark. Cypress knees poked up from pools of black, stagnant water. There were snakes and mosquitoes. Clumps of poison oak. Gigantic frogs the size of your foot. Possibly alligators.

And the ghosts. Nothing visible, of course, just the weight of unseen eyes following your progress across the grass and into the swamp if you were brave or insane enough to try that at night, which I wasn't. I sometimes walked along the paved golf-cart lane to see where I'd end up. Once, I saw a human figure off in the distance, or imagined I did. The fingernail moon cast very little light. If there was someone there watching me, he merged back into the trees when I tried to look closer. He might have been dead and come back to menace me; he might have been alive and intending the same. Preferring the safety of familiar dangers, I hurried home.

### 3.

The best ghost stories involve glimpses at twilight, whispers in darkening rooms, hints of madness. Doubt spirals; gaslights flicker. A sense of unease rolls in like the fog. According to my grandmother, the Croatan National Forest near New Bern was one of the most haunted places in the country. Since the earliest days of colonial history, the eastern end of the state has had issues with people going missing. An

entire colony of British settlers vanished back in the late 1500s, leaving behind the word CROATOAN carved into a perimeter fence, and little else. Much of eastern North Carolina is swampland. Barrier islands—the Outer Banks—absorb the worst of the hurricane damage, but the coastal mainland has drowned time and again. It's a desolate area, sparsely populated. Shadows, tree branches garlanded with Spanish moss, tumbledown gravestones behind abandoned churches like broken teeth in rotten gums. Legend has it there are plenty of ghosts.

If the Great Dismal Swamp forms eastern North Carolina's northern boundary, the Cape Fear River is arguably its southern one. These names cast an apt, descriptive pall over that end of the state, and every town seemed to have its own stories: Bath, Beaufort, New Bern, Nags Head, Ocracoke, Arapahoe. The ghost of the vicious pirate Edward Teach—more commonly known as Blackbeard—was said to appear near his former home, perhaps searching for his severed head. The cemetery in New Bern where many of our family were buried was said to be haunted. The main gate wept, drops of water that felt like human tears. If one hit you when you passed through with a group, you'd be the next to die. Even the church next door to a family friend's house was said to be haunted: if you waited in the cellar long enough, objects would be thrown at you; if you squinted into the gloom, you might see a human-like shape coalesce, drifting toward you.

Over the years, the details of the stories ebbed and flowed with each telling. My grandfather died and came back shortly thereafter, manifesting in a cloudy state at the top of the staircase in the house where he'd lived. The Little Red House on Johnson Street, my mother called it. She and my grandmother would smell pipe smoke, the same tobacco he liked, and see a dim figure forming in the sunlight on the landing of the stairs. Missing him, they'd hurry up to stand in it before he disappeared again. There were the mysterious lights in the Great Dismal Swamp, not too far away, maybe an hour. Now and then, we'd drive through it on the way to Norfolk or Williamsburg. Highway 17 skirts the eastern border of the protected area. Coming back at night, we'd squint out the car windows into the darkness, straining to see spectral flashes. The name of the place imparted a sense of menace. Every time we passed by, we'd remember the warnings: Never go in there. The waters are deep. There are no roads, no settlements. There are wild animals, things that will eat you. You'll get lost and you'll die. It stood to reason scores of other people *had* died, so we made sure to lock the car doors on each of these trips. We never stopped.

My adult self finds the details apocryphal, if not the stories themselves. Except in upheavals, bedrock doesn't shift. How could that apparition have been my grandfather when my mother didn't live in that house at the time? He died when I

was an infant. We lived in a different city then. Was it her own grandfather? That would have made more sense. And those pulsing lights I thought I saw once or twice in the depths of the Great Dismal Swamp as we sped by. Those could have been ... but no, I'm not convinced I imagined it all. Our reality was cracked and tattered at the edges, and it stayed that way, the real bedrock.

4.

There's a story I like to tell about the moment I knew I was a writer: elementary school, a creative writing assignment I read aloud, applause from my classmates when I was done, the realization I knew I was good at this and meant to do it. But that's not the whole story.

Not long after that success, I wrote another story. Halloween was right around the corner. October Down East is crisply glorious, almost a caricature of what autumn in America should be. The summer's miserable humidity drops away, the skies clear, and nights are cool enough for fires. Winter will be a cold, rainy, gray mess, but that's still a couple of months away. In the meantime, there will be bales of hay, the last of the tobacco curing sweetly in barns, endless leaves to rake. Back in the '70s and early '80s, stores didn't put up Christmas decorations on the 5th of July like they do now. You could enjoy the autumn for its own merits, not as foreplay before Father Christmas comes. With all those paper ghosts and skeletons and vampires as inspiration, and pumpkins gently rotting on every other porch, I felt inspired.

My first ghost story involved a lot of setup. At the time, my mother was a real estate agent. I saw the inside of a lot of empty houses. When she took us along for showings, we'd explore them top to bottom. I don't recall anything menacing us. There would be dust swirling in afternoon slants of sunlight, and the occasional vacant cobweb. Crows outside, because there were always crows. Vaguely disappointed that nothing creepy ever materialized, I channeled this into a story. I've forgotten the beginning of the story. It's no loss. But the climax and anticlimax have stayed with me. The characters discover (o horror!) a skull hanging from the eaves outside, empty eye sockets gazing in at them. Exclamation points and screaming ensue. The end.

"That's *all*?" asked one of my classmates after I finished reading it aloud.

Everyone looked bored.

"Well, yeah? A skull? Isn't that scary?"

"No."

I learned a lesson about being a writer that day, but it wasn't the storytelling

experience that cemented things for me. Yes, the disappointment stung. Where was the applause? It wasn't that I felt entitled to it. But the baseline was usually some version of "you talk funny" or "you walk funny" or "are you a queer?" and I wanted to be not terrible at something, to have a respite from the frantic sadness that was already gnawing at me, even at that age.

A few weeks or months after that, my friend Johnny came over for a sleepover. When he took his overnight bag upstairs, my father pulled me aside for a warning: "No ghost stories. Ghosts scare him. His parents told me on the phone."

I didn't believe him. In fact, it might have been the first time in my life I flat-out refused to accept he was telling the truth. How could he be? After a lifelong immersion in what my sister now calls "the family woo-woo," I thought ghosts were normal and expected. Besides, we barely visited other people's homes. I assumed everybody had Ouija boards and books from Nostradamus and Edgar Cayce in the house. Wasn't that just ... how things worked? Especially in the South, where someone had bled out on every square inch of real estate at some point in the past?

"I'm going to tell you a story," I told Johnny that night. "It's about the Wind Ghost." I'd like to say I scared a puddle of piss out of him, but I didn't. It wasn't much of a story, barely an improvement over that skull improbably suspended from the gutter of some idiot's house. I didn't get very far into it because the phrase "the Wind Ghost" popped into my head, but nothing else did. I tried to improvise but gave up: I knew the story wasn't a story, just a half-baked idea. More like a quarter. He didn't cry. I thought that was the end of it.

Somehow my father found out afterward and beat the shit out of me. It wasn't the worst belting I ever got, but it was solidly in the top five. That's how I knew I was going to be a writer, or already was one.

## 5.

Being a teenager is difficult even when your mother is not a self-professed powerful telepath, medium, and clairvoyant. We were under constant psychic—or psychotic, as it were—surveillance. She claimed to know everything we were thinking, everything we did, everything we wanted to do. However, outside of the home, we couldn't talk about that, just as we couldn't ask our father questions about Vietnam. He'd survived the war, in the sense that his body returned to America intact and more or less functioning. But between the ears, there was a screaming black static that he numbed with regular hangovers. He couldn't talk about his experiences there. He could barely talk. He could drink, though. The list of off-limits subjects didn't stop there, either. We couldn't talk about Vietnam; we also couldn't talk

about his family down in Louisiana, none of whom we'd met. There was some unspeakable, undiscussable tragedy surrounding his mother's death. Something involving a car crash. She and her husband, my grandfather, ran off the road. The car caught on fire. He was thrown free, but she couldn't escape from the flames.

"But didn't she have a manicure set in her purse?" I would ask from time to time. My mother had one. There were nail clippers, cuticle scissors, that kind of thing. She kept the kit in her purse with the gun and the bottle of Valium. "Couldn't she have cut through the seatbelt strap and gotten free?"

"I think she was knocked out."

"But she must have had *something*, right?"

"Be that as it may." The Southern phrase to smother further discussion. It was never the logistics of her mother-in-law's death she wanted to talk about it, it was what followed: "I was dead asleep, and something woke me up. It was like being wrapped in a cold gray blanket. I knew something had happened to her. I just *knew*. And when the phone rang right after that, I already knew who was calling. When your father answered the phone and heard the news, he just turned white as a sheet. Bless his heart."

Being as rational as anyone in that context was going to be, I figured that if she could do all that, I probably could as well. I was already reading Stephen King, Clive Barker, and other horror writers, less for excitement than guidance. Maps of the familiar, as it were. I was writing stories, too. Terrible ones, no doubt: there was the tsunami of bacteria that washed away some prissy germophobes, and there was a garden-variety poisoning story involving a large amount of rosemary from the characters' backyard. Since I hadn't had much luck with the Zener cards, I latched onto the one other thing I could test: the Ouija board. She said she could get it to work by herself, no seance table of nervous friends needed. I decided to give it a try.

Over the next several years, I went through phases of using the board. By myself, I couldn't get the planchette to move unless I shoved it around on the board on purpose to spell out profanities. If I had J. or a couple of friends, though, we got different results. We kept our fingers light. I was strict about that. Not every session was a horror-movie success, of course, but enough questions got answers that we couldn't unsee the weird pattern.

In my freshman year of college, I used the Ouija board for the last time. I was in somebody's dorm room with friends. Beers had been had. And I made the grievous mistake of trying to summon my grandmother. One or two of the guys knew the whole story, but not all of them. When the planchette began to inch its way from letter to letter, there was the inevitable "whoa, dude, what the fuck?" moment. Then it got worse. We weren't talking to my grandmother, but to her

murderer.

She didn't die in a car wreck.

"You should probably not use that thing again," my father advised in a rare moment of coherence. "I don't know who or what you were talking to, but it knew things. I do think Ouija boards work. We just don't know who's on the other end of the line. I think they can retrieve information from our heads. For your own safety, you should leave it alone."

That time, I took his advice.

## 6.

In the years that followed, I found more distance from the cauldron of material I'd grown up in. One way or another, as foretext or subtext, the ghoulies and ghaesties and long-leggedy beasties went into my fiction, most of which has since been published. A series of unpleasant events—the mundane kind, no ectoplasm or moaning apparitions in the night—saw me ricochet from North Carolina up to DC, then to the West Coast, from Oakland up to Portland and then Seattle, and then on to Korea before settling in Hong Kong, where I spent more than a decade.

In Hong Kong, ghosts were suddenly front and center in my life again. How much of that was Chinese culture and how much was just my superstitious partner-now-husband? All these years later, I've decided there's no clear demarcation. Before I moved into my first apartment there, in a forty-two-story high-rise overlooking Victoria Harbour, S. insisted we perform a cleansing ritual. He instructed me to buy oranges, red candles, a sheaf of hell money, bags of candy, and some pork. The oranges would serve as candle holders. I had to put one in each corner of the flat. In the center, we'd burn the hell money as an offering. It serves as currency in the afterlife: the higher the denomination, the happier the ghosts will be. The candy was meant to be scattered around the center of the room. I'm murky now on what the pork was for. I think we left it in its package until the ceremony was over, then threw it away, the garbage can being a debased and secondary ritual portal to the beyond.

I also had to buy a broom for the ashes, a dustpan, and of course, a fireproof bucket. It was as messy as it sounds.

Did I do it because the ghosts were real? If I'm honest, no. It's not that I didn't believe in them, but Hong Kong's ghosts don't require authentication from American expats. Ghosts in Chinese culture have more agency than Western ones do. They can manifest as material beings. They can affect the physical world. They can eat and have sex and, if not placated, cause a great deal of harm. Western ghosts



are less substantial, perceptible via only one or two senses: visible, perhaps, and accompanied by a chill; or only as a disembodied voice; or as a fragrant cloud of pipe smoke in a sunbeam. They return to places of significance and repeat actions almost as if programmed to do so. This is both boring and tragic, not scary. On the whole, Chinese ghosts get the better deal. They can enjoy a meal, get drunk, fuck, and then fuck shit up if they want to. Hence the need for regular, routine appeasement measures. It's not that any of this mattered to me, but it mattered very much to my boyfriend, so I did it.

I did the cleansing ritual at the next apartment too, over in Tsim Sha Tsui, just on the other side of the harbor from where I spent my first four years there. As nearly as I can tell, the first ritual made no difference whatsoever in my quality of life. I had a major health scare, endured a terrible job followed by an even worse one, got illegally sacked, and had to take that employer to court. Quite a change from the misty fairways and bizarre apparitions and bruises on the back of my legs from childhood. Perhaps without these interventions, my circumstances would have been worse? In any case, the new apartment was on Prat Avenue, a street lined with sidewalk restaurants and bars. On weekends, it was crowded by five and loud until three. As if that weren't enough, at the end of the block, right across from my building, a karaoke bar installed speakers outdoors to entice or deafen passersby. That November, they put Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas Is You" on an endless loop at full volume. It was a direct portal to one of the lower circles in Dante's hell. It was also what convinced me to put my foot down when the landlady sold the flat for some twenty times what she'd paid for it, and I had to move again. At the new flat—back on Hong Kong Island this time, over in semi-suburban Quarry Bay—I decided to take my chances and skip the ceremony. The smoke made my eyes and my throat sting, the ashes and melted candle wax made a godawful mess on the floors, and despite all that ritual supplication, I had still ended up driven to the edge of a screaming breakdown by a Christmas hit.

Hong Kong's ghosts occupy prime real estate in the culture there. You can walk down almost any street in the urban parts of the city and smell the smoke from burning paper on certain holidays. Shopkeepers haul their braziers out onto the sidewalk, stuff in colorful sheaves of hell money, give it a few squirts of lighter fluid, and toss in a match. The next day, you'll see blobs of solidified red wax next to the charred spots where the fires were. The mystical is part of the very infrastructure of the place: there are little shrines built into many buildings right at sidewalk level. Reflective tiles, pots of ash and burnt-down incense sticks, the stumps of a few candles. These are everywhere. Ghosts manifest in the business world too: a couple of the major property agencies have pages on their websites that

list apartments people have died in. The information given includes the age and sex of the decedent, the manner of death, and for suicides, the motivation. These flats are thought to be haunted. Because of the obscene cost of living there, these tend to be bargains, relatively speaking. Before I moved there, I wouldn't have thought of ghosts (even the malevolent kind) as being helpful, but as it turned out, we had more reason to be scared of the living than the dead.

7.

The first ghost I ever saw was in my B&B in Aberystwyth, Wales. I did my PhD at Aberystwyth but commuted from Hong Kong, as one does. Each time I went, I'd stay the requisite week at the same waterfront guest house on colorful S. Marine Terrace. I never got a room with a sea view, a mercy considering what the storms there are like. Despite all the horror stories that surround the process of getting a PhD, for me it was more like writing another book with yearly trips to remote coastal Wales thrown in to keep things interesting. (The horror descended every time I got a bill for my tuition fees.)

For my research, I focused on ghost stories. Before starting the program, I didn't realize that ghost-story purists—scholars as well as genre enthusiasts—saw the form as distinct from horror. Ghost stories, as I've mentioned already, were meant to be about the fleeting glimpse, the mounting sense of dread. Hints, withholding, delicate reveals, implications of madness. In contrast, horror was vulgar: monsters shambling, blood splattering the walls, psychopaths slashing virgins with kitchen utensils. Flashiness, not the dignified restraint of Henry James and Algernon Blackwood.

On my final trip to Aberystwyth, the proprietress put me in the same room I'd stayed in the first time. I was there for my viva (or defense, as Americans would call it). The research was done, the writing was done, and this would be it. I was meeting friends for dinner and wanted to take a shower before going back out. It was early evening. The sun was still up. In the shower, I got a strong, prickly sense of someone watching me: the same subtle weight of a gaze I'd felt so many times back in North Carolina late at night. This seemed unlikely, as there were two doors to my room: an outer fire door that let into a landing on the stairs plus an inner one that served no clear purpose. I kept them locked. No one could have come in. But the feeling persisted. I finished, rinsed off, and dried myself quickly. As soon as I stepped out of the shower stall, that feeling intensified. Somebody else was in my room.

“Hello?”

Then I saw it: not a human form, exactly, but a sort of curvature to the air. I could see it out of the corner of my eye, in the same way you can see things at night as long as you don't look straight at them. When I looked slantwise, I could see it moving through the room toward a window. Then it was gone.

An hour later, I still had goosebumps.

Later, I asked the proprietress if the house was haunted.

"Oh, of course! We started seeing it as soon as we moved in. Now and then it moves the books around on the shelves. I had to have a word with it about knocking teacups over. It doesn't bother the dogs. You'd think it would."

"It hasn't tried to harm anyone, has it?"

She made a dismissive raspberry sound and waved a hand. I decided to let it go at that. On previous visits, I'd gotten a peculiar vibe in that room, but it wasn't my first encounter with ghosts that had passed up opportunities. I've long been familiar with the comfort of safer dangers. And as long as I had a few pints with dinner, I thought sleeping ought not to be too much trouble. Jet lag is a good mixer.

Before that, I'd never thought much about ghosts having helped me, but they have. Even the malevolent ones. I've turned out about as rational as anyone could, given the context, which is to say not at all, and opted to work with the material I've been given. And that ghost in my bedroom when I was a kid, the one I thought was my first? After a week or so, I finally told my mother about it. After all, she was the expert. She waited in my bedroom with me one night to see if the thing would appear. It did, and she recognized it right away: lights from passing cars outside, briefly filtering through the trees and shining on the wall at the foot of my bed.

### **About the Author**

Marshall Moore is an American author, publisher, and academic based in Cornwall, England. He has written several novels and collections of short fiction, the most recent being *Inhospitable* (Camphor Press, 2018). He holds a PhD in creative writing from Aberystwyth, and he teaches creative writing and publishing at Falmouth University. His next books are a memoir titled *I Wouldn't Normally Do This Kind of Thing* (Rebel Satori Press, 2022) and a co-edited academic collection on the subject of creative practice. For more information, please visit [www.marshallmoore.com](http://www.marshallmoore.com), or follow him on Twitter at [@iridiumgobbler](https://twitter.com/iridiumgobbler).