

A Ghost Storia

By Elaine McArdle

“Here good?” Trevor jerked the wheel and swerved to the curb, throwing Callie hard against the door. It was the first thing he’d said in half an hour.

“Hey, look at that! ‘Hotel Elliott—Wonderful Beds.’” Skye laughed. “If you stay there, Callie, you can sleep forever.”

Trevor drummed his fingers on the wheel. “Gotta go.” He kept the truck in drive.

They’d picked Callie up thumbing outside Cannon Beach, offering to drive her a few miles north before they cut east on 26. Trevor agreed to take her all the way to Astoria only when Skye insisted. But he’d grown quieter with each mile, and by the time they hit the New Youngs Bay Bridge he was pale as a ghost.

“Wanna stay a couple days?” Callie suggested. “I’m gonna rent someplace cool, a factory loft or something.”

Trevor’s eyes shifted left to right, scouring the streets.

“Come on, Trev, it’ll be fun.” Skye leaned over to kiss him before pulling back. “What?”

Something passed between them, something Callie couldn’t see.

“Sorry,” Skye murmured as Callie climbed out.

As soon as her feet hit the pavement Trevor gunned the engine and peeled off, Callie’s backpack caught in the door.

“Wait!” she yelled.

The pack ripped loudly, spewing three pairs of sustainable cotton underwear; her spare Keen’s; two Hawaiian shirts from Goodwill; a cotton dress from H & M; and a used copy of *Infinite Jest*, its pages assiduously marked by some other reader. She had failed to get past the first chapter.

Swearing, she retrieved her belongings and retreated to the sidewalk. The bristles of her Tom’s toothbrush were coated in grit. She peered down the street for a recycling bin to dump it.

The sidewalks were empty. Streets, too.

An herbal shop, a bookstore, a café, two art galleries—all closed. Good sign. People sleep late here, she thought. Like Portland and Tacoma before they got ruined.

Astoria's the next Tacoma, everyone said. Get there while it's still affordable, before it's swamped with hipsters-come-lately, they all agreed. Except that guy at River Pig who'd bought her a Hazy IPA. His eyes had widened when she shared her plans. "Not there!" he'd blurted before bolting.

Astoria, she could see, was everything she dreamed. The charm! Below her feet, the sidewalk was embedded with amethyst squares like a concrete patchwork quilt. On the hills the marine layer draped a shroud atop faded Victorians. You could get one of those cheap, she'd bet. Turn it into an Airbnb or something.

Where was everyone? Anyone?

"Hey!" An old man beckoned with a long, thin hand. He hovered in the dark beneath a green awning that read *Liberty Theatre*. Quaint.

"Hi!" She waited for the traffic light, then realized there were no cars and hustled over. "Are you from here?"

"I could trim me a seventy-pound Chinook in less'n a minute," he answered. His eyes were sunken and papery flesh stretched over his skull. His teeth were long and yellow.

"I hear there's a scene starting to happen. Artists and musicians."

"Oh, there's a scene all right." He cackled loudly as he receded into the shadows.

"Authenticity. That's what I'm after."

"Authenticity!" He roared with laughter, his hairless skull whipping back so far it threatened to snap off its stem. He swiveled his loose frame to shout into the doorway behind him. "I won, Johnny Jake!"

He turned back to her with a cadaverous grin. "I took the under," he explained.

"The what?"

"The over/under was five minutes. On authenticity. How long before you said it."

From deep inside the theatre a long, muffled sound emerged. Like a moan. She peered past him into the dark. A funny smell emitted from it, musty and foul.

"You from San Fran?" he asked. "Santa Monica? Seattle?"

"Portland." She eyed him tentatively. Well, if you wanted real, he was real.

"Not too many tattoos. They'll like that."

"Who will?"

"Nobody. Nobody'll like it." The grin tugged the flesh around his cheekbones too far, like it would tear the edges of his face.

She felt a shiver and backed into the sunlight. "Not a lot of people about," she said.

"Not today."

"I'm moving here. My new home."

"Oh, so easy," he susurrated.

"Excuse me?"

"You head over to the pier now. You'll find what we want."

"What who wants?"

"What *you* want." He dissolved into the doorway.

The hoarse warning of the sea lions grew louder as she drifted down 12th Street. Rotten pilings like snapped-off finger stubs pleaded from the gray water.

Under the pier, something was dangling inches above the river. Somethings. Big strips, long and flaccid, hanging in clusters. She tried to make them out. Salmon? In one cluster, each carcass sported a fuzzy half-circle a foot below its top.

"That was the year of the James Harden beards, I think they called 'em." An old woman emerged from the mist gripping a metal gaff. "Nabbed us a bunch of 'em."

She was very thin, like the man at the theatre. Lots of vegans here, Callie thought.

"Year before, it was them pork pie hats." With a skeletal finger, the woman pointed farther under the pier where another clump hung. Atop each salmon, or whatever they were—the fish were awfully large—sat something square. They *did* look like hats.

“Every year we get more of ‘em moving here, from up and down the Coast. We gotta trap ‘em, and faster. Before we ain’t authentic. Ha, ha. Last year was them head-to-foot tattoos. Mostly from Portland, like you. Some got away. That didn’t stop ‘em from coming, though.”

What is she talking about?

The woman reached a bony forefinger and thumb into her mouth and yanked a tooth from her jaw.

Callie wasn’t sure what she’d seen.

“This year it’s girls with bangs,” the woman said, rubbing the tooth on her rubber apron. “Them short, short bangs.”

Callie’s hands flew to her forehead as from the mist a thousand specters materialized, pulling at her, clutching her, tearing at her. Her mouth opened to scream as the gaff descended.

The roar in her ears was the sound of the river. A sound she always knew she would hear, and never.

END