

A Ghost Story

We stopped at an old village inn. It was a low-beamed, creaky place, a fire in the hearth and a small huddle of locals at the bar. The food was home-made. We decided to stay the night.

I signed in for both of us. I'll call him my companion, for he isn't my husband. The landlord didn't mind, they don't ask questions any more.

After dinner we went for a walk through the village. Suitably padded in furry coats against the late-autumn chill. And he wore a Russian-style hat, though I like my hair to blow in the wind.

It was only a nominal village, not much to it. Within minutes lights and buildings were receding as we sauntered along a narrowing lane. Arm-in-arm, our hips and shoulders pushed against each other, for love and warmth.

The lane came up to – and through – a grand gateway, tall stone-built pillars with urns, like the entrance to a country house. There'd been no 'private road' or 'keep out' sign, not that we'd noticed. So as there were no gates in the gateway, we walked on through.

It seemed, from what little we could see, like parkland, like a driveway to a great mansion. Though ahead was only darkness.

The breeze had subsided. My hair was still. Leaves that had swirled about our feet as we approached the gateway just lay to be trodden on once we were within the park, or whatever it was. Stars were in the sky. I shivered my shoulder against my companion's.

The sound we heard was a quiet, gravelly rolling sound, a bit like a gardener pushing a wheelbarrow.

We turned in unison, our arms being linked, though I'm not sure which of us initiated the movement. I think we heard it at the same moment.

The car was right beside us, moving slowly, only slightly faster than we'd been. An old-fashioned car, black, and the strange thing was (or so it seemed) it was in complete darkness – no lights at all, outside or in. It rolled on past us at an even speed.

A little way ahead, at about the edge of visibility, it curved to the left and disappeared into darkness or trees, or both.

And then we realised what was stranger, stranger than it having no lights. I think it came to us at the same instant. The only sound was the

tyres, rolling along the road surface. That was the only sound we'd heard.

We were both certain. There was no engine sound.

We didn't continue. We shivered again, and told ourselves it was probably a private driveway after all. Anyway, we'd had our fresh air and little dose of exercise by now. We hugged, and headed back.

None too soon. For outside the gateway it was suddenly windy again. My hair caught the breeze and blew into his face, leaves leapt over our shoes. And the stars disappeared. We'd no sooner arrived back at the inn than rain started tapping at the windows.

The blazing fire was very welcome, and a night-cap at the bar. We asked the landlord, about the road that led through a grand gateway, into stillness.

No it's not private, he said. Leastways it's a right of way, but it only goes to the church.

I said we didn't get that far, it was all in darkness.

Yes it's hidden in trees, he said. Little way up, road curves to the right and there it is. Have a walk up there in daylight, if you've time – nice old church.

To the right you say? And, to the left?

The Old Manor, burnt down in the fifties.

We looked at each other, my companion and I. That was the approximate vintage of the silent car.

Just scrub there now, the landlord continued. Drive used to fork either way, church and manor-house, but they blocked it off with rubble and it's all overgrown now.

Our room upstairs was warm, and the squally rain continued outside the low window. That and the usual effect of crisp clean sheets on a strange bed, or the slight frisson of anonymity, made us want to make love.

We climbed into the cool bed. We wondered if we should have asked about the car, if there was a phantom car. We kissed. Or if anyone died in the fire. We caressed in a loose embrace.

My companion thought it didn't make sense, a phantom car, since cars don't have souls. Well that's probably not what ghosts are, I said, as I

nestled closer into him. What if they're imprints of the past? I think he scoffed slightly. Orphaned memories – our own minds reading them.

Then would we both? Of course we would.

You're not really in the mood are you? Turn over ... I usually take the passive role, but I was more aroused than he was, what with ghostly talk and the sound of rain on the window.

I caressed his back and bottom, kissing his shoulders. Like picking up an emotional echo, I said. A moment of intensity ...

Our own moment was perfect, but I managed not to cry out.

We snuggled together. The thing about ghosts, I said, yawning, is that it's us seeing them, not them actually being there.

The room, and the whole inn, was somewhat unkempt or run-down by the harsh light of morning. After breakfast in a rather chilly dining room, I packed my case and paid the bill.

Rain's stopped, said the landlord, if you were thinking of a walk up to the church.

No I won't this time, I said, as if I expected to come that way again.

It was a lonely drive home, as it always is. I don't remember the name of the place.

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