

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

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Ghosts

One of the worst things about divorce is the ghosts. I expected to be haunted by the absence of someone who'd been in my life for over 30 years. This haunting is not unlike the haunting you feel after your dog dies. Although I will admit, I cried and miss my dogs more than I do my ex. This is not a slam against my ex. I really do love my dogs more than I love most people. The people I love more than my dogs number in the single digits. Small single digits.

The ghosts I'm thinking of are not the haunting of absence or the other hauntings I've heard divorced people talk about. This particular haunting can poison a relationship if left undiscussed. These ghosts are the ghosts of pleasant times past. At some point in the past relationship, you were happy. You did things together as a couple that were really good times for the both of you. Fast forward through the pain, the separation, now to a new relationship. You do things together as a couple and you find yourself crossing the same territory you had with your previous relationship. This territory may be a physical event or an emotional response and you find yourself thinking "the last time I was happy here was when I was with somebody else."

That is a ghost. The image of someone else imposed on the image of who you are with.

Classically, ghosts exist because they have unfinished business in the mortal realm and until that business finished, they haunt. In horror stories, people haunted by ghosts react three ways. They succumb or surrender to the spirit, they fight back, or they heal themselves and the spirit. I've seen too many people surrender. They are walking wounded and use their grief as a shield, sharing too much because it keeps people away. People that fight back are fueled by anger and bitterness about how horrible their spouse was and how every other person of the same gender is just like them.

Divorce ghosts are not like classical ghosts. The presence of the divorce ghosts signifies it is you, not them that has unfinished business in the mortal realm. You have to heal yourself before these ghosts leave you alone.

Healing is hard. It's especially hard if you hate anything to do the former partner. For I believe that in order to put the ghost to rest, you need to accept that you did have good times and there's no need to remember those good times when you're with someone else. That it is okay to build new memories even if it's memories of the same old thing.

One way to make new memories is to be mindful of what you are experiencing with your new partner. See him or her sitting in the seat next to you in the car, not the memory of somebody else. Put your arms around them and feel their warmth, their solid flesh and not the empty ghost of someone who's gone. The more you see the person, the more the ghost retreats. Sadly, like a horror film, ghosts will pop out again to scare you but it is just a ghost. It doesn't exist except in your mind and is insubstantial thought which will pass as you are mindful of the one you love.

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The haunting the divorce doesn't need to last. So much divorce advice circles around duration of waiting and being alone etc. I focus on ghosts and mindfulness because I think it's the fastest way to heal. . If you're brave and approach the ghost first instead of waiting for it to find you, you will recover faster, you'll recover more completely because you faced something you fear will never go away. Once you face the ghost, like in most ghost stories, the haunting is finished. You will live, forever changed by the encounter but you will live and do well.