

## Ghosts of the Present

By Grant Flint

I don't believe in ghosts, Hell, the Loch Ness monster, UFOs, or much of anything. This may explain why it folks say I am the kindest man they know.

13 days until I'm 80. There will be a party. They will gently urge me to stand up and say a few words.

What will I say? I should plan something. Tell them the truth? True life? Or should it be "creative nonfiction"? Or terribly satisfying fiction?

True life -- two of my sons committed suicide, the last one 76 days ago. Yet no one blames me. At least not to my face.

"He is a good man," they say to each other. But there is a whisper. "Why does a good man's sons kill themselves?"

"The Summing Up". Somerset Maugham wrote that memoir in 1938, when he was an old man. He was a master of slick fiction, yet wrote one great book, "Of Human Bondage". One of the 100 best novels of all time. But he was a homosexual. I'm not, but I have "man boobs", not large, not unusual for my age. I'm manly enough. Tall, gray-haired, trim gray-bearded, Paul Newman blue eyes, boyishly ancient handsome face. Except for a bit of throat wobble and minor eye bags. A good nose.

"Not a Midwestern nose" said the Jewish Midwife. "A strong, good nose. A good man with a good nose."

26 years ago, she said that. When I was 54 going with those seven women at the same time: the Midwife, the Doll Maker, the Preacher Lady, the French Fashion Designer, the Chemistry Professor, the Sexologist, and the -- I forget. There were two fat ladies, it was one of them, I think. The fat soprano choir singer, or the fat astrologist who met Jack Kennedy once. Or maybe she was the one who met Henry Miller down at Big Sur.

That was then, but five years ago it was "C.", the artist/belly dancer/writer, who was 71 but took hormones, who thought I was a great lover, but very kind.

"A fantastic lover," she didn't reveal to her lady friends. She was too spiritual, modest, to relate such things. But she grinned a lot. Like a lady with a really good secrets.

"Of Human Bondage" was a strange, wonderful book, because it was about Maugham's own life, a great novel, despite the lack of form, its desperate life-like torment. Because of that.

"You don't believe in anything!" my 37-year-old son said proudly to me a month before he died. He jumped on November 24. My other boy, the firstborn, was 23 when he jumped off a 33-story office building in San Francisco. That was 28 years ago.

Fortunately, I don't believe in ghosts. If I write a short story someday about my sons, their deaths, I suppose I will have to enhance the drama with bits of fiction. Jazz it up. Which is a shame.

I could create tension for me, the recently bereaved father, by the father wondering if his son's ghost resides now in the vacant bedroom. Which in real life is always cold when I force myself to open his door.

There are squirrels or rats or chipmunks which run inside my dead son's bedroom walls behind the plaster. The father in a story could be spooked by this. Sitting at his son's desk, he could feel his son's presence. He could worry about going through the messages on his dead son's computer, going carefully through the desk and dresser drawers. Thinking his dead son's ghost is there, in the air, everywhere, watching him, hearing all his thoughts.

I did that, magic, ghosts, when my mother died 24 years ago.

"If you're still there, give me a sign," I said out loud, a half joke, warily, after the phone call said my mother was dead.

Immediately the rain did a violent downpour outside my bedroom window. Shook me up, mildly.

"You know I'm a doubter," I told my mother. "If you're really there, I need another sign."

The downpour stopped at once.

I told what happened to my children. They still believed in the tooth fairy, Santa Claus and God. They loved the story. I felt only half guilty for reinforcing their superstition. The bright glow in their eyes was seductive.

In real life, here, now, my son is not a ghost. If the father could believe in ghosts, could believe in the signals the wall rats are giving from his suicide son in Hell, the father could enhance the story, thrill people, make them cry, tell a successful story.

Similar, in a disgusting way, there is an 81-year-old woman who won't stop e-mailing me on the Match.com personal ads online.

"I just want to lick you all over your body," she said there near the beginning, three months ago.

Which mildly turned me on at the time, despite her advanced age and her refusing to submit a photo of herself.

She grew increasingly graphic, telling the state of her arousal for me when she awakened each morning, her need for me to dominate her completely, forcefully, manfully, beast-like.

Then on one entry she admitted she was still married, and her 85-year-old husband was impossibly mean to her and had not touched her intimately for 30 years.

And then when I tried to bow out, she brought the vile husband on the e-mail with her, he mad as hell that she was using the pet name, "Bear", for me now that she had once used for him.

"So long, she's all yours," I said on my final e-mail.

But she didn't give up, demanded my telephone number, denied her to this point, in case the old man had a heart attack on their upcoming car trip to Canada and back, and she might have to call me to come rescue her.

I didn't answer, still don't, but she e-mails little sexual information articles two or three times a week, such as how a man can give a woman multiple orgasms.

That is real life, the truth, nothing but. In a story, however, the hero, me, would have to have severe problems to overcome, dire drama stalking him, and I would now, in the story, have to enhance the danger, the struggle, the conflict.

"I know where you live," she would e-mail me. "You will never escape me. When you hear my knock, three bangs on your door, you'll know I have come for you."

Stories need, they say, "what ifs", tension, lots of tension.

In real life, my friends and family gently suggest I should sue the County for my son's wrongful death.

"You say you have to succeed at this new business you've started," my best, platonic lady friend says (we were lovers 12 years ago for 9 1/2 years). "Because you have to raise \$20,000 to market your seven life novels.

"Well then," she says, "you can sue the County for that amount -- or more -- for wrongful death. Their psychiatrist wrongly prescribed Adderal for your son's schizophrenia, right? -- which leads to suicide -- and then, they dismissed him after one night, from the County mental hospital when it was obvious he was having a breakdown! Died, what, the same day?"

"Yes."

"Sue them! They deserve it. You deserve the money! You can do all the marketing you want. Market all your books. You can be famous!"

That would be great in a story. Suing the county. All that drama, surprise, suspense. But in real life, I don't want to do that.

"It's so very nice of you to be understanding," the young female psychiatrist told me over the phone, without admitting guilt.

"I'm worried for you," I told her, partly the truth. "You work so hard, do everything you can. And sometimes the best you can do doesn't quite work out."

Yeah, you kill my son.

She talked to me for 20 minutes, astounded at my worrying about her feelings, her sense of failure.

In a story I could hop that up, drive it to the hilt, milk it upside down.

But in real life, I probably won't sue. I'm a nice guy, too nice, some say. Long ago I thought I wanted to be a psychiatrist.

Or I could rev up my dead son's infatuation with Janeane Garofalo, the movie star. Not exactly star, but semi-famous. Especially for her parts in sitcoms.

In real life she was too old for my son, 11 years older. Too short, a foot or more shorter than him. Mean as hell. Just this side of ugly. But he loved her, lusted for her, got his photo and blurb onto her web site, saw her semi-standup comedy twice in two years in San Francisco. Wrote a song for her, put it on a video. I have it.

"I don't know why," he told me on our torturous daily one-hour walks along the Bay. "I just love her. More than anything. I'd do anything for her. I'll never give up."

Which is fine, vaguely interesting, mildly curious.

But in the story would have to be ratcheted up 10 notches to where it became -- How ironic! How awful! How heartbreaking! -- too late now, he's dead, Janeane at last responds to his endless e-mails, letters, photos, videos -- too late, horribly too late, she responds. Glowingly. E-mails him to tell him he is her best fan by far. Wants to meet him. Show him around Hollywood. Show him how much she appreciates his adoration.

Unbelievable? Anything is believable with enough details.

Or I could exaggerate my physical troubles for some zesty drama/problems/challenges/suspense -- could tell about my horrible heart attack three years ago --

"Should I call 911?!" my son, now dead, asked in mounting worry, horror.

We'd been watching "Rocky 3" on TV, drinking a little champagne to celebrate some minor triumph in our simple lives.

I was gasping now, sweat on my forehead, no air, couldn't breathe, severe left shoulder pain getting worse, chest squeezed, torn apart. But not willing yet to admit...

"I'm calling 911, Dad!" my son, dead now, said back then.

I nodded okay.

Could exaggerate now, to make a story scream with tension, how I've had two subsequent attacks, how my feet are numb, am very afraid of a fall, how I huff and puff doing any minimal effort, my blood pressure rising again, how my Bukowski friend, he and I discovered Bukowski the writer together, how my Bukowski friend last week helped me walk to the car after the movie, "The Wrestler" (the star had played Bukowski in an earlier movie), how my friend treated me like an invalid --

"Curb, step down. Wait! Let the car go by. Are you all right? Can you make it?"

Ridiculous. I should be leading him around. I think he used to do that with his mother before she died of Alzheimer's.

In the story, I would have to exaggerate everything. The 74 pills I take a day. I don't know which ones to drop. The usual blood thinner and cholesterol-lowering and blood pressure pills, plus dozens of pills the daily arriving alternative medicine catalogs insist I take.

There must be a way to enhance these physical problems, the numb feet, the prostate forcing me to get up six times a night, the fear of a stroke, the fear the next heart attack --

"Don't talk like that," my other platonic lady friend, Dorothy, petite Dorothy, says like a schoolteacher. She corrects my grammar, my pronunciation, my driving, my life, and abhors my saying:

"These are the last days. Here at the end..."

"Don't talk that way," she insists sternly. Her face lift eight years ago really worked. The tops of her breasts show wrinkly, but all right. She limps from her ailments, she is only two years younger, we go for free hors d'oeuvres once a week in a restaurant with 70 feet of plate glass exposing the magic Bay water, green/pink, the windows of the houses on the Berkeley hills across from us a starry expanse, glittering, sparkling, the small ducks drifting by in front of us, then abruptly diving under a minute at a time. We eat the free hors d'oeuvres, drink two paid-for drinks, usually "Cosmopolitans", but Hot Toddy's on a wintry day, then the young Iranian waiter, would-be actor, gives us a free one because he loves us...

"Never let me do it to you," I warned her four years ago.

"Why?"

"I'm a commitment phobic. That will be the beginning of the end."

Which is fine with her, not doing it, though she lets me see her naked body, all creatures beautiful, thin or fat, tall or short, when naked, let's me see her naked now and then, means nothing to her, a gentle mischievous tease perhaps.

But in a story, to make a story, I would have to use story steroids on this real-life situation. In a story the "hero" would do the naughty deed, then feel guilty and smothered, boxed in, committed, and there would be drama, problems, and story value.

My son cremated. His ashes in the garage. I don't know what to do with them. Could bury them near the bridge near the Bay, bury them where he would say, "We can turn around now" when I was so tired from our fast walk. And ruined from trying to cheer him up for the thousandth time, put a positive spin on his damning, constant personal tragedies.

I read his sign in the newspaper every day now just like before his death. Though I know astrology is bogus. I read it because his sign always reads like mine, unlike all the others. If they rate my day four stars, they rate his day, dead now, four stars.

What did, does, his life mean? They will soon, a day, month, year, five years, ten, they will soon go through my drawers, closet, bookcase, computer.

"You should remove the porno film from your dresser," common sense warns me.

I have to tell his best friend about his death. But I don't have his friend's telephone number. He has been in L.A. trying to sell his screenplays for the last nine years. My son's only friend, ever. Will break his heart. Some people cried when I phoned them. His half-sister. And a man who worked with him, free, to help him try to do stand-up comedy.

"Oh no!" they said. "No!" Sobbing on and on. Disturbing. Doing my sobbing for me.

This could be a memoir disguised as a short story. Or a short story disguised as a memoir. Which old people should be allowed to do, upon becoming 80 ("Dad seems more like 60," my dear daughter emailed my surviving son two days ago.) A life here, stripped down to skeleton. Bare outline. Thomas Wolfe trying to ape Charles Bukowski. A short story of a long story. 80 years.

Baring one's soul doesn't always pay off.

"C." is coming to town next month. In my life I was carnally intimate with over 100 women. Which is not so much, not much of the meaning of life. But the 2000 plus orgasms I gave them counts. Five for them, then one for me. If little else, always kind.

"No, you bastard," my hard-assed soul cries out. "You loved to give them climaxes! It was more for you than them."

When "C." comes to town next month, what will she find? Four years later now. She has a lover, they're even going to marry this spring. She was a genius at love. Said I was. Now we are just two people who won't be glorying in bed 10 hours a week, savagely adoring each other, and ourselves.

But in a story -- in a story today I could imagine "what if?" What a story I could write about "C." and me, what will happen when she arrives...

First thing she would say is, "You're as handsome as ever."

But will she see something in my eyes? Disuse diminishes.

Real-life is not usually story-ready dramatic. The caveman telling stories around the campfire probably left out the four days of tedious stalking of the beast, the blunders and minor tragedies of real-life. No, they cut to the chase or rather to the end of the chase, to the actual, terrifying, exaggerated slaying of the beast, the beast three times larger than in real life, the bone-headed near-miss errors left out...

Which thrilled the young soon-to-be hunters around the campfire. But perhaps deluded them. Even distorted life, caused them trouble later on.

"What if" always inferior to what actually happened.

But that is only the opinion of a failure. My life dream was first to be a preacher, then a singer like Al Jolson or Janis Joplin. And finally to write "novels" about the "truth" as I experienced it.

Searched a lifetime to be famous, to be loved by multitudes, strangers.

"If you find and tell the truth, the real truth, the meaning of life, they will love you."

In the year 2008 I published 14 short stories, 8 poems, and 17 "creative fiction" pieces online.

No agents have contacted me. Little money involved. My friends and relatives have read little of the 47,000 words. I don't know why. It hurts.

All my life I sacrificed relationships, money, everything for the dream. Dream time running out. "The writing", how my two ex-wives hated that phrase. And my passive-aggressive surviving their cynicism.

"But all the little and large failures, accidents, embarrassments in your life were worth it! For the material!"

True. Nothing goes to waste. Damnable times far more valuable than sweet times.

The dangerous, ornery 24,000 miles of hitchhiking on land, 31,000 miles on military "free" hops. The multitude of jobs. Salesman, detective, boss of 73 appraisers, teacher, analyzer of German prisoner of war reports of those who escaped Russian prison camps, skid-row hotel nightclerk, listening to Russian air chatter when our planes invaded Russian air space, racetrack gambler, appraising most of the skyscrapers in

downtown San Francisco... On and on, like most people. Difference -- all my life is recorded. Extracted. De-coded.

"I don't want to go anywhere, or do anything," I let my match.com women know. I've done the desert the hard way between Casablanca and Tangiers, enjoyed indoor and outdoor whores in Frankfurt, Paris, Amsterdam, Rome, Athens, on the Nile in full flood in Cairo, hitched the French Riviera and enjoyed the French sales lady who picked me up, her favors...

The match.com women "want to travel, want to go to the symphony, plays, the wine country, Italy, Japan, Portugal, Turkey..."

Not me. The women who are under 70 also wish to ski, bowl, sail, jog, do tennis, mountain climb.

Older ladies don't have to do that anymore, but they do look their age a bit.

I don't have to do anything. I've done everything, written about all of it, 700,000 words, of which 2%, 14,000 words, is valuable.

Should I start taking the sex pills before "C." arrives? L-arginine, l-carnitine, "Long Johns", or any of the dozen other herbs, potions, sprays, shots I've collected.

Or not? Not. Probably not. But in a story I would.

Summing up. What have I left out? It doesn't matter. Why do I love so much to be in the hospital? No one knows. It just is.

"How are you feeling today?"

"I feel great! You're taking such good care of me!"

The nurses grin, humor the old man. They like me. Perhaps hunger for my -- perhaps it is only my soul. I love them. They tend to me, pat me, care about me, jab for

blood, ask questions, drawn to me like I am the ant, they the ant eater, sweet, honey, honey...

"That's sick," people, especially women tell me when I tell them I love to be in the hospital.

When I am there, I am a star. Adored, fondled over, stuck with needles, caressed as though accidentally, I am on stage, the beloved, center of attention...

Time almost gone. Only three days left until my birthday party.

Philip Roth, the writer, died recently at 78. World-famous. Did he enjoy the love of strangers, as I always thought I would?

My car has no hubcaps, a rear view mirror which falls off at bad times, the roof paint has bald spots, the seat belt doesn't retract properly... My car is me.

I was in jail once for four days.

"You can't just walk into a restaurant and hit someone," the judge said. He would've let me work it off with community service, but I thought the jail time would be an interesting experience to write about.

Like most places, I was the oldest one there, in jail. Among those who hit people. It was a simple thing, mistaken identity, the young man from some foreign country, possibly India, was very annoyed that I slugged him. My painkillers caused trouble at the time.

"10 years probation," the judge said. I should live so long.

That's about it, except for my extreme stage fright which dictated my life until I was 60, when I went to the phobia clinic, then Toastmasters, then Speaking Circles, then did standup comedy at open mikes. Not "mics".

I guess I'm surprised my family and friends don't love me for my stories. But I have their great love and support for all other things. Maybe it would have worked out that same way with the world -- had they loved my writing as I always dreamed they would, maybe it wouldn't have counted for much. Not enough.

My life now, because I'll be 80 in three days and am lately wise, my life now is warm and secure, I am enveloped perfectly, beautifully by love, my family and friends.

My wonderful surviving son, the one I always tell people I want to be just like when I grow up; my daughter-in-law who calls me "Dad" and is charmed by my kindness; my granddaughter and grandson who love me beyond all my childhood dreams of love; my beautifully kind and gifted daughter and her daughter, my other darling granddaughter, how I adore them, how they adore me, peace, joy, fulfillment, happiness...

And my many wondrous friends, all of whom love me like the greatest literary fan could never approach, love me for exactly who I am, think I'm special, wonderful, a delight.

That's it, that's what I'll say when three days from now at my birthday party they ask me near the end to get up and say a few words, that's what I'll say, the meaning of life:

"I spent a life time searching for the love of strangers. But here at the last know that the love of strangers could never bring happiness like the love of you, my family and friends."

They will smile gently, grin a little. Even a tear or two.

Then I will remind them that lately I have begun "slow burn" resistance exercises and aerobic exercises, and I have a new business just now beginning to flourish.

"So I will be getting younger, nearly every day now. And I hope above all else to see all of you, my family and friends, at my 90th birthday party!"

I might conk out tomorrow or next week, but I am a happy man, and that about sums it up for the first 80 years. No ghosts left in the present.

Even real life can have a happy ending.