THE PHANTOM GHORES
GREGORY PATRICK
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For him with two 8 pointed stars
    painted on his arms.
    One the color of fire,
    the other the color of water.
May you be forever shamed for what
    you’ve done.
PROLOGUE:

HOUSE RULES

Methods and Manners for Newly Dead Acquisitions

As transcribed by
Uwe Krieg-Ghore on behalf of
Marinus Halasz-Ghore, the Father of the House of Berlin,
the Father of Fathers.
Prelude to denouncement

Before becoming adept at the Phantom ways you must first denounce all associates and judgments placed upon yourself previously. You must bring nothing from your prior life past the grave. You are now in our society, in our Family, with the regal brilliance of a divine thing. To mark your entry into The Phantom Ghores you must consciously remind yourself with every action that you are beautiful, for to be a Phantom Ghore is to perform beauty as art. Your manners, your gestures, your speech, your inclinations will all excel in the art form of beauty and grace and will make you a formidable being. The instructions provided in this manual will help to acquaint you with your new Family. The one who Acquisitioned you will be readily on hand to help guide you into becoming flawless. Allow these instructions to help prime you into our customs and rules. We will teach you to master the techniques we Phantoms employ as our devices of seduction and charisma. You have all time possible to learn not only the aesthetic importance of being a Phantom Ghore, but of the mysteries that have made us such grand beings. So, be patient, learn well, and never abuse your death right.

The “living”
(the word is to NEVER to be capitalized)

Life and Death are viewed as class systems by Phantom Ghores, and as such, those in Death are considered of a much higher class and quality than the living. When you say “the living” please be sure to say it with such a sneer that it sounds like profanity. Give it a huff for punctuation and roll the eyes, batting the lash once or twice for profound effect.

We do not care for the living; we do not tolerate their odd and unusual methods of behavior. The living are secondary citizens
plagued with sickness and the possibility of an immediate, pointless death, a death from which no Resurrection can be performed. The living are bothersome creatures who waste their time on plastic pursuits in order to pass the time until they die. They harbor too many concerns for unnecessary materialism, and continually flaunt the strangest concepts of ego. We are not so mundane as the living. We are prized above their kind for reasons very clear to any Phantom Ghore. The living are ugly and the Dead are beautiful.

The Truth about Vampires

Throughout your life you were told awful tales about the nocturnal being made popular by fiction novels. The vampire was nothing more than a fictional protest against the sexual confinements of the Victorian Era. Remove such concepts from your mind. Those creatures you read of in books are mere rubbish! Vampires are not real, the Phantom Ghore is. Such romance was made from the strange bed ways of demons with overgrown teeth...all done very well to remind society of their sexual repression. Even now we see they’ve become a cultural concept that far too many are apt to swoon to. But, keep this in mind; those who desire to become a vampire and find that no such creature exists is a likely Acquisition indeed. For these sad living things, so ready to fall into escape, are anxious for a breed, for a clan, for a family to which they can belong, and we suit that need perfectly. They find, through their tireless ideas found in films and such, that perhaps no vampire will find them and remove whatever emotional pain has strained them to the brink of self collapse. The Phantom Ghore is ready to chore through the Acquisition process and bring that fettered darling into our own perfect realism.
Acquisitions

An Acquisition is a member of the living we deem suitable for the Phantom Ghore family. They are usually rejected by society at large, are misfits, and are outcasts on some levels. The pursuit of an Acquisition is a careful matter that must be approached with perfect ease. Do not simply acquire one of the living for the sake of having an Acquisition under your lists of conquests. An Acquisition must be smitten completely with the Phantom Ghore personae and presence, so do not ever attempt to solicit an Acquisition who wants nothing to do with you. Pursue only Acquisitions that have an immediate interest in you and only you. Challenges will lead you to boredom.

What makes a misfit of society such an easy Acquisition is the misfit’s desire to belong. The Acquisition usually has an inability to assimilate to the ready-made roles of the living. The Phantom Ghore House will give the Acquisition a purpose, a role, a home, a sense of belonging, will give the Acquisition a family he or she may have never had while bound to life. Not to mention the death of a misfit, of someone different or ignored by society does not lend itself easily to severe mourning. You know how the living can be. They would rather rid themselves of difference rather than tolerate it, would rather scorn and shudder those who are unique, rather than acknowledge their lack of conformity. Death to those who are different and troublesome is a common thought for the living.

If the pursued Acquisition should have troubles with their family or friends then they are especially easy targets, for their poor misunderstood, misaligned bodies found dead in alleyways will not be so easily mourned and will be quickly dismissed by the living.

It is a generally understood that many weeks are needed before an Acquisition can be killed and Resurrected. Do not speed the process! You want to be absolutely certain this person you have
chosen is the perfect choice for our Phantom Ghore Family. Do not give the uncertain Acquisition the honor of the third name “Ghore” until you are certain they are worthy of us. Physical primping is one concern, but more importantly is the psychological grooming needed in making an Acquisition complete.

All Phantom Ghores were once an Acquisition pursued by other Phantoms. Treat the Acquisition with an amount of respect that is appropriate for any initiate or protegé. However, do not feel for the Acquisition, do not care for them, for this will make the process of killing them so much more difficult.

**Killing the Acquisition**

The murder of an Acquisition is considered a highly important affair. Take caution not to be over zealous. One fatal wound is all that is required. Be careful where you discard the body, as well. The Acquisition will usually be so smitten with the Phantom Ghore sponsor that they have adopted the Phantom Ghore way of dress to show adoration and homage. Be sure to strip them of our uniformed style before you discard the body. Also, do not discard the body in a location that can be hard to find. You want the body found and buried before decomposition sets in.

**The Death Scar**

Every Phantom Ghore has a prized “Death Scar.” It is the wound that caused their death. It can be a gunshot to the chest, or a knife at the back. Be sure to always conceal this scar from the living. However, when in private, when amongst other Phantoms, flaunt it, describe it, discuss it, marvel at it. You see, the Phantom Ghore considers the Death Scar the invitation to be a member of our Beautifully Dead Society. The Death Scar is an honorable thing to have.

I wish to quickly give note here on the Death Scar and
methods of killing. There are some methods of murder that are \textit{not} acceptable:

1. Poisoning your Acquisition can lead to an undetermined death by a coroner, which can lead to an autopsy, and consequently, a body filled with stuffing. Your Acquisition will spend the rest of all time possible unable to pose eloquently, but instead will be subject to many a restless evening stoic and solid in an unbendable stance.

2. Broken necks will have your Acquisition’s head wobbling about in a most unnatural way for the rest of his Resurrected days. How unattractive it would be to have the beautiful darling you just murdered subjected to strolls through the streets, their head propped up on a stick.

3. A sliced throat exposes the Death Scar to the living public and is far too difficult to conceal. Stabbings are encouraged, of course, but be sure to inflict the would in an area that can be either dressed or decorated.

4. Burnings are obviously out of the question. Our race is based on aesthetics, and the appreciation of our own natural death state. We are not to deface or maim it with something that would destroy the Acquisitions ability to revel in his or her own beauty.

6. We have discovered through many years of practice that strangulations do no good for us either. The bruises brought on by such violence never fade, and your Acquisition will never be able to fully hide, nor conceal, that dreadful bluish and blackened Death Scar from the neck and face.

\textbf{Dress Code}

As a Phantom Ghore you are required to wear our famously typical 1930’s clothing. This sets us apart from the living in both style and grace, not to mention a formidable amount of attitude that
is required for such garments. You cannot be expected to flaunt yourself about in such beautiful clothing with a frumpy personality. You must shine, you must be better than the others, even your own fellow Brothers and Sisters in the House. Never forget that your only ambition in the House is to have ambition, to be the best and to always strive towards Phantom perfection.

Variations of the 1930’s look are acceptable however, extreme variations are not. For instance, women are encouraged to play characters with their clothing: the cigarette girl, the Gibson girl, the flapper, the “It” girl are all acceptable. However, such variations to disturb or tarnish the Phantom Ghore distinctness are prohibited. Female Acquisitions into the House are always given a clothier. She will teach the Phantom Ghore woman about the various styles associated with the 1930’s that are acceptable to the House; which haircuts, which garments, which shoes, etc.

For men, the task is quite solid. He should be svelte in a suit, or perhaps tuxedo. He should wear a tie, if possible. Other accessories are not enforced, but do make the Phantom Ghore man much more authentic. An ascot, a bowler, spats, perhaps, or a walking stick with a black lacquer finish and silver tip all bring a certain authenticity to the look.

The cigarette filter is definitely encouraged for men and women, as well as a cigarette case. Cigarettes will only be used as props, of course, but more on this later

Make-up

It is necessary for both men and women to use a touch of make up to hide the hue of their skin from the public. The women are allowed as much freedom as they wish. The men are given less liberty with it. The Phantom Ghore man should not go overboard with his attempts at hiding the dead flesh with make up. Just enough to hide the blues and grays of his skin, and enough for a
dramatic effect to bring out the eyes and lips to a more natural shade are acceptable. We do not want the living to know that we are dead, *not ever*. If one of the living should comment to the Phantom Ghoreman on his make up, then do not explain yourself. The more critical and judgemental of the living are not worthy of your time.

Some Phantom Ghores continue to reapply the make up that was given to them by the mortician before they were buried. There is no fault with this, however, take caution that the look is clean and never sloppy.

**Locations of Interest**

Cafés are perfect for sitting and posing, and possibly attracting an Acquisition. You see, the more Acquisitions a Phantom has made into the House, the better a Phantom he is considered. The darker cafés are more favorable for sitting about. The dim lighting helps to enhance the Phantom Ghore mystique, as well as hide the death defects from the living. The dim lighting helps to hide the blues and grays of the corpse skin even better with make-up. At a café you can sit for hours, simply sitting and posing, looking beautiful with a drink or a coffee on the table, and a cigarette propped from the hand. Discotheques (or clubs as they are called in America) are also very important places for a Phantom Ghore to be. The clubs must have the more eccentric clientele: the gothics, the avant-garde, the industrialists, and the artists. Furthermore, the music must be appropriate for the Phantom Ghore “To Parade.” The music must be danceable, fast, and pose-able.

**Sex and Flirtation**

Since the Phantom Ghore is unable to engage in sexual intercourse, it is advisable to use a method of flirtation for seducing your Acquisition. Coy chatter, clever glances, promises that are never fulfilled, the hope of eventually touching you, are all perfect
means for providing sexual tension. That is precisely the art of this sexual game that the Phantom Ghores have mastered: sexual tension. This leads to mystery and more importantly desire, all keeping the Acquisition, or anyone of your choosing for that matter, carefully under your control, always deluded with the hope that you will relinquish your prudence, will give into your sexual promises, and fulfill their wildest fantasies.

There are some Phantoms who do perform oral sex on the living, but it is terribly dangerous. The coldness of your lips could give you away and reveal the secret of your death state. Such measures should only be taken if your Acquisition is sexually frustrated and would not notice your corpse lips around or within their sexual genitalia.

Please be advised that we have learned throughout our decades as a supreme social order that expressions in the eyes can do more to melt your Acquisition than the nude body. The anticipation of touching, rather than the act itself, has proved to provide more rewards in the long run.

**Bisexuality**

There is no harm in homosexual tendencies in the Phantom Ghore House. It is often encouraged. If flirtations with the same sex can almost guarantee an Acquisition that is readily sought, then so be it. We do not fear those same ridiculous social ramifications felt by the living. Adoration is adoration, despite from where it should come.

**Resurrection**

Resurrection is perhaps the most important and final moment of an Acquisition’s move into the House of Ghore. This is when the body is removed from the tomb, or crypt, or casket and sung to in order to bring it back to functioning form. It is not
brought back to life; this is an incorrect theory, for the body in no way is living. It is simply a corpse that has been animated with the soul moving the limbs and causing action. These mysteries, and their operations are privy to only the most adept of Phantom Ghores. Once the mastery of the physical concepts of the Phantom Ghore right are understood, the metaphysical capabilities of our race become clearer, cleaner, and ultimately reveal themselves to us.

When an Acquisition is Resurrected the body must be removed from whatever ground it has been resting in, it must be in perfect earshot of the vocalist. Once the body has been removed, the vocalist sings to the body. And remember: only he who has been Resurrected can Resurrect.

At this point, the body will convulse and shake, and all fluids that had once remained in the body will be forced out of every orifice: the eyes, mouth, ears, anus, etc. The body will continue to shake and convulse for some few hours, as the soul makes its reentry into the physical form, as the soul is ripped from etheric properties and placed back, unnaturally, into the body

The body must be removed from the casket, or tomb, and wrapped and taken to the House immediately. A Resurrection should take place the day after the body has been buried. A moment later and decomposition could begin to set in. In theory, it is imperative to Resurrect the body immediately after death. However, some burial performed by those left behind is crucial for closure. It symbolically ends the life of the Acquisition and allows all who knew him or her to begin forgetting them. This ensures that all suspicions are vanquished.

After Resurrection there should be no sign at all that the body has been removed. Carefully and quickly return the coffin to the ground, and the soil to the pit. This chore is easily performed if the Resurrection takes place the day of the burial, for the soil has yet to rest and is already disturbed.
The Vocalist and the Digger

The vocalist’s responsibility is to utilize the dead vocal chords that rest in his or her throat to Resurrect an Acquisition. As with the living, not everyone is a proper singer.

The vocalist is warned to sing only when a Resurrection is in place and never anywhere else, or any time else, for the slightest shift or pitch can cause a Resurrection. It is their credo: “Careful of mourning for the dead too long,” for any dead creature within the vicinity of their voices can be reanimated.

Some Acquisitions are chosen specifically for the singing abilities and are brought into the House with the sole purpose of Resurrecting other Acquisitions.

In the Phantom Ghore hierarchy the vocalist is very important, for only he or she can Resurrect, and again, only he who has been Resurrected can Resurrect. Vocalists are treated in the House System with utmost respect and should be treated as such. Always.

The Digger however, is at the very lowest of the Phantom Ghore social order. A Digger is a Phantom Ghore, of course, but a Phantom Ghore that has been placed on restrictive notice until such time as determined by the Father of the House. A Digger is generally being punished for having done something against all codes and ethics discussed herein or elsewhere. Because of some insubordination or lack of proper conduct, they have been forced to the bottom of our social scale and have no merit or say in the House until another Phantom Ghore does so poorly they are booted down and the present Digger may retain a place in the House once more.

The Digger is responsible for digging the caskets from the earth. A Phantom Ghore, with all his fine clothes and arrogant nature, cannot be expected to accomplish a chore that is so messy and vulgar as digging graves and retrieving corpses that are filled with feces, urine, blood, and embalming fluid. Therefore, the Digger
has been given the gruesome task.

**Period Of Remembrance**

All Phantom Ghores move through the Period of Remembrance and the process works as such: for every one-day Resurrected your mind remembers one-day *prior to death*. If you have been Resurrected for three days, then you remember the three days before your death. There are a few that have passed through the Period of Remembrance and remember not only their lives, but also being *in utero*, and even before this, which is where the mysteries of our Phantom breed can be seen. It is only these few, along with the more advanced Phantoms, that are able to understand the ability of our reanimated death state.

These older Phantom Ghores, including the great Father of Fathers, Marinus Halasz-Ghore, have much to tell us, yet they resist. They do not wish to speak of it. It is a wordless matter for them, one that can only be discovered or known through time.

**The House System**

There are five Ghore Houses in the world. There is the House of Berlin (the House of Houses), the House of London, the House of Vienna, the House of Venice, and the House of Paris. With more Phantom Ghores being Acquisition, it is possible more Houses will be needed in the future. However, it is advisable that there never be any more than fifty to one hundred Phantom Ghores per House.

**The Mother and Father of the House**

Each House has a male and female leader that jointly move the House in the direction they see fit. All Phantom Ghores in that House are required to answer to these superiors. The male of the House is called the Father of the House. The female is called The
Mother of the House. They determine not only the direction of the House, but also which Acquisitions are appropriate for admittance.

The Mother of Mothers, Father of Fathers, and the House of Houses

Every Mother of the House and every Father of the House answers to a superior of their own. Mothers and Fathers of the various Houses answer to The Mother of Mothers and the Father of Fathers. They are the absolute rulers of our race and they are always located at the House of Houses, which is Berlin, the first House, the noblest House, and the epicenter of our Phantom Ghore existence. The Father of the House of Berlin, the Father of Fathers will always be Marinus Halasz-Ghore, the very first of our breed, and the generator of our beautiful species. The Mother of the House of Berlin, the Mother of Mothers will always be his companion, the Lady Pearl Carter-Ghore.

Special Events for Phantom Ghores

Gruftnacht is held once a year in Berlin. It is the evening all Phantom Ghores from all Houses meet and celebrate their existence. It is the most special event of the year for Phantom Ghores. It is a reunion that celebrates the lineage of the dead and the hyphenated Ghore name.

Release the Dead parties are a comical affair when all members of one House converge on a disco to Parade to the living. It is a night of tongue in cheek jest, arrogance, and authenticity. Every member of that House is urged to attend in their best frock to dictate to the living the issuance of this statement, “The dead are beautiful.” It is a chance to tease the living and instigate interest or disgust from them.

A Birth Party is the dead equivalent of a “coming out party.”
The new Acquisition is presented to the House for applause. These events are held behind closed doors, far away from live eyes. The new Acquisition is finally dressed, groomed, taught on all Phantom Ghore ethics, and then presented to the House, to their new Brothers and Sisters for inspection and approval.

The evening of the Birth Party is also a chance for the Phantom Ghore to “show shade.” Since Phantom Ghores cannot see colors, they do not wear colors in public. It is an opportunity to wear whatever color the Phantom Ghore desires, for only other Phantoms will see him or her. The result, when seen through our Phantom eyes is an endless mix of shades. The living may see one of us dressed in blue and green with a purple and yellow shirt. We do not see this; we do not see colors. We see various shades. And the compliment will be heard echoing throughout the Birth Party: “Oh my, what a glorious shade!”

The Birth Party is also the moment the newly Resurrected Acquisition is given the coveted third name “Ghore,” which is placed at the end of their current name with a hyphen. Therefore, if your name in life had been Richard Smith, your name in death, your name upon entering the noble lineage of Ghore, would be Richard Smith-Ghore.

To Parade

To Parade is a sort of pretentious dance. We never, ever call it “Parading.” “Parading” would make it an action. “To Parade” is a state of being. You stroll the dance floor while rhythmic music pulsates the air. This is the best music To Parade, since the Phantom has a tendency to be hard of hearing. It is best to stroll for a moment, then pose and show all others, especially the living, that you are the very best Phantom Ghore. Now, the best To Parade are dressed the best, and are the most arrogant. A certain style To Parade must be developed. For instance, the absolute epitome To
Parade is for the Phantom to walk the perimeter of the dance floor so that all the living can see how beautiful and wonderful they are, and how envious they, such weak creatures, should be of the Phantom Ghore. Next, the Phantom will take his spot on the dance floor, and arrogantly raise his chin high, hands stretched out, the body weight anchored on the right foot, which is positioned behind the left foot in a sort of stance, with an homage beginning with poses so rapid and quick that they look like a languid presentation, a fluid movement of the body that looks similar to a mix of pretentious presentation and posing.

Warnings
As a Phantom Ghore you are not exempt from certain defects. Even perfect beauty has its frail flaws. What follows are necessary precautions every Phantom Ghore must adhere to if he or she is to remain in good standing.

Ingestion of Any Kind is Forbidden
A Phantom Ghore can no longer digest food or liquids of any kind. You must always remember that you are not alive and that the bodily functions of the living no longer apply to you. To eat something would simply cause the food to sit in your belly and rot, never to be digested.

Nail Biting and Haircutting
Never bite your nails, for they will not grow back. And neither will your hair, so do not ever cut it shorter than you wish to keep it. The dead cells of a Phantom Ghore will not regenerate, so be kind to the body that you have. You will be with it for all time possible.
Loss of Senses

You cannot feel heat or cold, or any pain for that matter. You cannot smell. You cannot hear very well, so be sure to speak up, and play it off as boisterous arrogance. You cannot see very well, so pass that off as disinterest in anything that you cannot read or make out. You cannot taste anything, and as mentioned before, this should be of no concern since you cannot eat anyway. You physically cannot smoke, so do not attempt it, however, a cigarette, or even a drink is an appropriate prop to use, just be sure not to ingest them, simply have them at your side to enhance your authentic effect. You are color blind, as you now know, and cannot distinguish colors. Everything your eyes see is sepia and gritty. Be sure that when you dress yourself that you are wearing basic black and white, so as not to clash colors that you cannot distinguish with sight.

The Smell of the Grave

Remember always that the smell of the grave will forever haunt you. Remember also, that you will never be able to smell it since you have no sense of smell. Amongst the living this can cause more suspicion. Be sure to always douse yourself with cologne or perfume if you will be in public. Be sure not to use too much, for this can cause a stench more familiar with the living and will give the wrong impression. Watch for the eyes of the living you see on the streets when they pass you. If they should turn to you with that crinkled up nose, then you know that you have used too much, or not enough. Women are encouraged to carry gardenias with them. This is not only a very pungent and fragrant flower, but was also quite fashionable in the 1930’s and will help to complete your look.
The Dead Cannot Be Killed

There is no possible way to harm a Phantom Ghore. He who has been pulled from the grave cannot be returned to the grave in any way. As a Phantom Ghore, you have no nerve endings, and cannot feel anything. Therefore, a gunshot to the chest would do nothing but cause a hole in your torso. You would not feel the blast, and quite possibly would not know it was there until someone might have told you. There have been a number of the living that have tried there hardest to kill us, to harm us, alas, to no avail. There is no known method of ending a Phantom Ghore’s existence.... that is, except for dissection.

Dissection

Dissection is the most feared process amongst the Phantom Ghores. Although it is considered incredibly tedious and time consuming, it is perhaps the only known way to execute a Phantom Ghore. It involves the mincing of the Phantom Ghore body into very small pieces. It is not a painful thing to happen to a Phantom Ghore, not on a physical level. It is, however, a tragic ending and a very emotional finality. It does not kill the Phantom Ghore, but it does end his Phantom Ghore existence, for the small pieces of dead flesh that were once the body are now helpless, unable to function together, unable to move synchronically, leaving the soul of the Phantom Ghore forever in a vaporous state of confusion and an expressionless existence where he is no longer heard or known. The pieces of the former Ghore will still continue to move, so it is necessary to make them as small as possible, and to crush them. For one Ghore to do this to another is considered an act of treason against the House, and all Phantoms performing a dissection on one of their Brothers will meet the same end.
Climates

The Phantom Ghore is best suited for colder climates. Notice I said “colder,” and not “cold.” If the weather is too cold, the Phantom will have difficulty moving their limbs. Moderate climates are appropriate for the Ghores, areas where there are at least three seasons in a year. Very warm weather climates are definitely not encouraged for the sun can do two things to a Phantom. The first is the smell of the charnel house that continues to linger long after the Phantom Ghore has been Resurrected. The heat tends to warm the dead body causing the smell to be more prevalent than usual. The second is for reasons of vanity. Since many of us wear make-up to hide our skin tones and to accentuate the illusion of life among the living, the heat will often times cause the make-up to melt and slide right off the Phantom Ghore face, leaving this mess that is not only unsightly, but suspicious to the living. However, a Phantom can do quite well in warm weather climates if he contains his activities to nighttime hours.

Arrogance Amongst the living

Do not ever allow one of the living to treat you with disrespect or discord. Remind them continually that you are a better species than he, and that you are far more advanced intellectually, socially, and aesthetically. If one of the living should speak to you in a manner that is rude and offensive you are obliged at any time to take matters into your own hand. Pretentiousness is not tolerated from subordinate classes, which does include the living, which are the lowest on the social echelon. Therefore, you are allowed, in anyway that you deem appropriate, to punish them for their attitude. Many of the living are for some reason convinced that bitchiness is fashionable. Remind them that they are not beautiful enough to be bitchy. The dead are beautiful, the living are not.
When in Public, Remember That You Are in Public

Do not do anything in public that will draw attention to your death. By all means, let the living take notice of your charming style and your beautiful technique, but do not let them know that you are a different breed than he, do not ever let them know that you are dead. If one should discover that you are not of the living, kill them at once, with no possibility of Resurrection.

You will continue to learn about yourself as a Phantom Ghore as time progresses. A new world has been opened to you, one that is for the privileged only. Never forget that you are beautiful.

Welcome to our House.
One might as well begin with the lives left behind when Justine Sizemore died.

There was very little family to speak of. The mother and father of the young woman were already deceased and in their place had been supplied a set of elderly aunts that haphazardly assumed disciplinary roles. There was also an older sister named Susan, with whom everyone in agreement would suggest was a much unstable women, if we may speak emotionally. Apart from these three females in the Sizemore breed, there was no other true family to speak of. This Sizemore lineage of prestige that had once claimed to bleed through the marshy scenes of Savannah with prominence and fortune was now nothing more than a memory. However, it is the dead girl’s fiancé, Clayton Strickland, who requires much of our time.

Clayton’s rearing in the small town of Brunswick, a sweaty town just beyond Savannah, explains much of his personality, his
mistrust of society at large. Those low swamps were his home. He wished to go no further, did not dare go beyond what he considered the comforts of home and nothing at all could convince him to leave it.

By the age of 28 he was remarkably set to live a life in creeks that paralleled the memory of his ancestors. He would be born, he would be gone, and there would be nothing more to his personal history as far as he was concerned. Nothing exciting would be added to the Strickland memory or story because of anything he might have done and that was as it should be. Stricklands were simple people not involved in the grandiose of the world.

In those rural corners of Brunswick, Clayton was born into a life of toughly rough southern politeness and manners. Although it is never suggested, it is known that in these darker southern towns, placed in the smallest letters a map can contain, there is a class system, one in which Clayton was surely a member of the lower breed. Perhaps this is from where his good nature springs, this idea that although one may not possess wealth and money, one can always posses the manners and good rearing of a conscious Christian soul.

Clayton’s manners reeked of something far too humble and divine, belonging to a class that would feel guilty if they owned something too nice, or dined too extravagantly on food that was not grown on their own land. His people believed in the humility of a life devoted to God, in the presence of poverty, in the life of labor and strife. All things in-between were the filaments of leisure; most notably for Clayton, time spent with Justine.

The truth is, he was played for a fool by the woman he considered his fiancé. The relationship between Justine and Clayton was a dreadful sham unbeknownst to the country boy. The little Miss Sizemore used Clayton for social scandal and nothing more. It was not until after her death that this came to light.
Scandal had been Justine’s occupation for no reason other than simple, deplorable, young rebellion. Those young ones on the ever wealthy squares of Savannah often get bored, and chore themselves into drama for the sake of some sort of excitement. Even her death had been an act of revenge against her family clan and all their important associates. To make matters just a frail bit worse, it was her decision to be buried abroad, in a foreign land, that had caused an even greater uproar.

Some months before being murdered Justine had fled Savannah with the idea of seeing the world that Clayton was thoroughly against. And of all places she wished to begin her quest for self worth, she chose Berlin, Germany. The girl had to go there, she confessed adamantly.

However, long before anyone could convince the girl not to go, she was already there. And before anyone could convince her to return, she was already dead.

What was straining to the set of stained aunts left behind in Savannah was Justine’s desire to be buried in Berlin. Her final papers willed it, demanded it, and painstakingly paid for it in advance. Alas, all those tired blue bloods in Savannah that she belonged to (in name only) wanted nothing to do with that hethonistic concept. What could a European, a foreigner, possibly know about good Christian burials? Justine’s body must be brought home, they said to themselves.

Then one of the elderly aunts, who has always been depicted as a much-needed character in a Edith Wharton novel, stood upon her walker to express severe anxiety about the situation. “The good stay of our family name will bring some frowns in not only our parish, but our family tomb! We can’t have people walking by her dead body talking, telling stories about what she did! I am ashamed of her for what she has done to our family and I don’t care if her body ever comes back! That girl ought to be given what she
wants! She wanted to go there so bad? FINE! LEAVE HER TO ROT IN GERMANY!”

“And besides,” screeched the other old aunt, too tired to stand to her walker, “what would the tombstone read? I don’t know if I want a Sizemore like that being given a safe haven in our family plot. She had too much a mind of her own... And another question, where would we put the girl if she didn’t go in the family plot? It seems to me maybe her body should stay abroad! There would be whispering about why she wasn’t in our family spot! And I just can’t tolerate whispering. I won’t abide by it.”

The croaking voices of the elder Sizemores echoed throughout the old home on Troup Square. Voices that stank of mildew and gin.

Now, the reader may concede after hearing such things that the deplorable implications of what to do with the young woman’s body are far overshadowing the fact that the girl had actually died, and gruesomely for that matter. However, once you hear of the rapid decline in which Justine’s morality descended, perhaps you, too, will agree that the best thing for the girl was to have her memory severed and done forever more from the Sizemore tales to be told to future generations.

Much of the family, the cousins, the second cousins, the sister, and the elderly aunts, spent only a few nights reminiscing about the many unflattering things to their noble lineage that this pristine and deceased Miss Justine had done.

While the young woman was alive she did everything she could, made every attempt possible, to degrade the Sizemore family’s name, what there stock was all about, and what their blood represented. The Sizemore’s were an old family, troubled with an awesome amount of pride and contagious southern foolery. Justine would fill any stranger she might meet on the streets to a diatribe about how fascist and impolite good southern breeding really was.
“The south still has slaves! Oh yes, they do! Thanks to welfare. That’s right, keep all the colored confined to one area, and make sure they still have their own water fountains, and culture and food. Keep them out of sight until you need one of them to clean your toilets.”

And scandal would race and roar through the old marshlands that ran from Savannah down. She hated all things southern, found them deplorable, and said that southerners stank of the same wretched food they ate.

“You can tell when someone is from the south. They smell of collards greens. HAVE YOU EVER SMELLED COLLARDS? Oh, my! A terrible smell! I call it flatulent!”

Another comment was often heard being quoted: “The only difference between a good southerner and a bad southerner is who is better at being illiterate.” Comments like this if made in a terrain like New Jersey might warrant some chuckles. In Savannah, however, such remarks were often purposely made at Baptist revivals and family gatherings, (which were often times the same event), to which all who heard would instantly scream, “Blasphemous! Traitor! If she don’t like it here she can just leave!”

Sex was also a tremendously demonic issue of scandal for Justine. She denounced any man whose “property” did not equate with his ego and would verbally reprimand him for being born unfortunate in the endowment department. At parties, Justine would dart about the room with a few bashful girlfriends in red cocktail dresses and would point quite boldly from fellow to fellow. (Yes, Justine was a deplorable drinker, but in Savannah, who isn’t?)

Justine would comment with a verbiage quite loud that one could not help but hear her from the second floor landing all the way down, pointing from fellow to fellow, “That one, ...that one...and, oh yes, that one especially are all a waste of my time.” She would then extend the pinky to prove her point. “Rumor has it, though,
that there’s a hot little redneck that does lawnwork for the Popes that has an enormous...,” the sentence completed with only a giggle from behind her cosmopolitan glass.

Justine’s girlfriends, what few there were, and even fewer before she left Savannah, had begun to realize that it was terribly uncouth to be seen in the midst of a drunken haze with Justine. Anything could happen and stories would fly. While in the company of Justine viscous rumors were often much tamer than the truth. Guilt by association kept most of Justine’s acquaintances at bay, for many of these young ladies hoping to marry off well found they were often not welcome in homes where the “Sizemore Girl” was known to be a trouble maker.

No one can quite place the time or moment where this rebellious nature of Justine’s began to take effect. She had seemed to be just fine, even after her mother passed on.

“Don’t say passed on,” she told her sister, Susan, at the funeral. “You make it sound like she evaporated. Say died...She didn’t evaporate Susan, she DIED!”

The elder Mrs. Sizemore’s death came during Justine’s freshman year of high school. It was not until a little later that the girl became interested in arts and culture; derelict things that can tarnish a young mind. Justine’s life had once been filled with typically normal situations for a girl of sixteen or so. Football, dances, proper dresses, and proper boys. Real art and culture were not suited for the likes of her kind. That upper class, southern clan was only apt to appreciate the aesthetics of art if it had a price tag of impressive merit and made it something the common man could not obtain. People found Justine here and there slumped between the pages of books; young men were thwarted with a scolding if they were to interrupt her reading with a request for a date.

By Justine’s senior year everyone had grown accustomed to seeing her read what she called “literature,” but which turned out to
be nothing but vulgar smut as far as they were concerned. These particular books were considered vulgar because they were written by foreign men, and smut because they escorted the ideas of sexual conducts as normal interaction between people (not simply men and women, mind you, but between people.) The Lords and Ladies of the south Justine belonged to no longer considered her one of their own by the time she reached her early twenties, and presumed her way of thinking was too “high strung, volatile” while she constantly reaffirmed that their way of thinking was simply dead.

It was about this time that Justine met Clayton Strickland. Clayton had a cousin who did lawn maintenance for extra income and needed help at a very large home on a square...

And for those of you who are unfamiliar with such verbiage, the closer a home is to a square in Savannah, the higher the value, the higher the prestige. Should a home’s front view face a square then you are indeed entitled to your own version of self worth. The Sizemore home faces Troup Square quietly, without pretension, and full of silent arrogance. It’s blue, painted hue seeks shadowed prominence over the square.

“You’re gonna love this one. The family’s a bunch of assholes. But, they’ve got this hot daughter who lives there. She’s a total bitch, but fucking hot.”

Needing the money, Clayton agreed to go along with his cousin.

Throughout the afternoon Clayton would see the young, bitch daughter his cousin spoke of and would smile, while the cousin would respond with a shovel lifted high in the air. “Don’t even think about it, dude. They’ll bust your balls in a heart beat. You don’t wanna fuck around with chicks like that.”

The cousin was correct. You do not mingle with this breed on the squares of Savannah, unless you are invited. They are a private lot that redeem themselves through wealth and lineage. They
are spectacular and unique and not to be bothered with by common passers by. They have a plan in motion for their lives and for their deaths...and rarely does that plan involve an outsider.

Justine was standing at the parlor window investigating the two boys when Clayton took his shirt off, the sweat dripping down that well formed chest, and when he turned, the perfectly proportioned back glistening with a suntan. In the distance her father was saying something about marrying, “…and do your best to make me proud, Justine. Its bad enough Susan will be a spinster, you should at least marry someone I can be proud of.”

Oh, you bet I will...

The plan to strain her relationship with the rest of her family would require someone perfectly wrong, someone against everything her family believed in, someone truly opposite from the Sizemore breed. He would have to be a laborer, he would have to be uneducated, he would have to be dirty, and live impoverished. Being courted by a random redneck would be everything these families on Savannah’s Squares were completely against.

However, she would have to do more than seduce someone; she would have to get that someone to worship her so they would ask marriage. But, she didn’t want just anyone, for she could have just about anyone, her arrogance reminded her. Justine wanted the right guy for her plan, or the wrong guy, so to speak. And through all this, she could not take her eyes off the very sexy man in her yard mowing the grass.

After her father left to do some business of his own, Justine seduced the younger cousin named Clayton into the house with something as simple as iced tea. The other cousin was left on the lawn to finish the work, the other cousin not suitable enough for her plan nor even for her home.

This sort of invitation was not uncommon for Clayton. There had been many occasion where some lonely housewife would
be in some need of lawn care, would catch a glimpse of the shirtless Clayton laboring hard under the heavy sun, would ask him inside for something to drink, then a bit to eat, and before anyone could comment on the southern, summer heat, the bed would be toppled with two sweating bodies panting with fervor.

Miss Justine was no exception. She invited him into the parlor, allowed his dirty body to lounge on the creme colored furniture and offered him an iced tea. Throughout the while, Justine offered enough suggestive glances and innuendoes to make obvious her real motive for inviting Clayton inside. As these actions usually suggest, it was only a matter of time before they were well acquainted with each other in her bedroom. According to Clayton the sex was “awesome,” and “hot.” According to Justine the sex was “necessary.”

There was one noticeable difference between this tryst and all the others Clayton had enjoyed while on a lunch break from lawn work, though. All those married women who invited him in for infidelity vowed never to do it again, and confessed that they should never even say hello to each other should they see each other in church. Justine made no such quick departure once her sexual needs had been filled. Instead of falling into the solemn, head bowed, puffed fill of guilt, she invited him to a party later. Clayton obliged, surprised she would invite him in public anywhere. The two were instantly, as they say, a couple.

They were seen everywhere together, and Justine did not have to say anything to anyone about her ill fated romance, Clayton did all the talking, confessing with pride and loud smiles that he was seeing the “hot, rich daughter” his cousin had warned him about. News spread, news of not only their courtship, but of their evening liaisons that were often tawdry moments in the bed liner of Clayton’s pick up truck parked conveniently near the Sizemore home on Troup Square. Soon the family found out.
All involved in the Sizemore clan (and this lot would include loyal neighbors) soon came to shun the boy, abhorred at any invitation Justin had offered to bring him over for dinner, or to have him sit in the parlor. “Not on the creme colored settee, not while I’m alive,” shrieked an aunt exuberantly.

Implications of reproach were soon made by Mr. Sizemore himself, who suggested with coded verbiage that he would indeed “cut her off” if she did not cease seeing “the Strickland boy.” Never once removing his old eyes from his conservative newspaper, he mentioned quite soundly, “He won’t make a good living for either of you, Justine. And there may not be enough money for you to enjoy the life you’ve grown spoiled by....I know that type of boy. He’s uneducated, has no promising future, and he knows it. So he’ll use his good looks and charm to sweet talk a princess into giving him her money.”

But they hungered for this romance, you see. Clayton and Justine instinctively needed each other for some form or purpose that only they were willing to share with the other. The sagging need to bring her family down kept Justine quietly close to the putrid rudeness of Clayton Strickland, and yet, he cannot be held so innocently either, for he secretly held some need to be freed of the shackles of class restraint. Now, this isn’t to say that Clayton wished to excel beyond whatever border his own low family name had planned for him, it meant simply that his chilled ego could be warmly encouraged should the rest of society see that he was good enough for the likes of the Miss Justines of the world.

And why was Justine so adamant about pursuing a scandalous blemish on her own family? Dear reader, do not look for psychologies that twist the mind into finding subconscious answers to such riddles for the answer is too simple for many to fathom. Justine, much like her contemporary breed, was bored. These lives that travel quietly behind the doors of Savannah society, having
acquired more wealth and prestige than they needed, were bored. Manipulation is something to do, some drama to enjoy, as you cast your own characters in webs of deceit and trickery, the thrill being the unknown ending to whatever mad script you’ve put into play.

Alas this tryst, as we have come to call it, this sweet chill that should have forewarned anyone of serious romance was doomed from the onset, for Clayton unwillingly fell in desperate love with Justine. So the two carried on their cavorting, until at long last Justine had no need for her plaything, for Mr. Sizemore died.

It is unlikely anyone can rightly say what it is that Mr. Sizemore did for a profession, but whatever it was, it was done well and the old feudal lord left both of his daughters an awful lot of money. To Justine’s very happy discovery, Mr. Sizemore had died before he had the opportunity to dismiss Justine from his will for threatening to marry “the Strickland boy.”

As is the case with most siblings there are extremes that generally divide the personalities into categories as different as fire and water. Justine and Susan would have been no exception to this theory. Susan would have been water: calm and soothing, flowing through a pattern that had already been laid out for her, moving in no hurry, no fuss. Justine on the other hand, was fire: furious and curious on occasion, warming the next, destructive if not contained, vibrant and alight if allowed to grow just a tad stronger. The money they inherited from dear old dad brought the differences in personality to summit.

Susan decided almost immediately what she would do with her half of the small fortune, and indeed it was a small enough fortune to live comfortably off of for the next forty years or so, if prudence pays well. She opened a very small if not prestigious looking bed and breakfast, as can be typical for someone with money in Savannah or Charleston to do. She overpriced the rooms and ransacked the wallets of tourists with claims the beds the
infectious northerners slept in for $300 a night were once owned by a general in the Civil War, or the dining room table they had small continental breakfasts on was the actual place of some many births, also during the Civil War. Hospitals had been burned by the yankees, she protested to her guests, so the ladies of the house had no choice but to jump up on the dining room tables, (“yes, sometimes during meals,”) if only so the Negro farm hands (“yes, slaves”) could deliver the baby.

“...And would you believe,” she mentioned to a couple from Massachusetts, “one of the babies delivered on this table, this very table right here,” she said tapping it with her index finger, “was my great, great grandfather! So, you see now why it has such importance for us.” Should any of the yankee tourists been experts in the antique field of antebellum furniture they would have taken note that the dining room table was no older than Susan nor yourself.

Justine, however, was uncertain about what to do with her lot of the money, and as far as she was concerned, what was there to do? There was enough money for a house, and much left over for a savings account. The days might as well be spent in bed, the evenings spent at parties. The invitations to prestigious events were becoming less frequent owing to her reputation as a bad mouthed girl who conveniently displayed her bad tastes and manners at any and all social functions.

Now that her father was gone, the thought of Clayton at Justine’s side was not nearly as interesting. If anything the young stud was becoming a nuisance. She had shifted his heart into an unusual direction he was unfamiliar with, that of love. In his naive, albeit common thinking, you could have sex with a woman, that’s what they were for. He had no idea, until Justine came along, that you could actually love one, too. So, when Justine wanted nothing more than a violent episode to happen in bed, he wanted to cuddle,
kiss, and bring her flowers. She wanted heavy screams and sweat, while he wanted whispers of affection. When she wanted aggression, anger, and the sound of the bed hitting the wall, he wanted tenderness and pecks on the neck. Boring and tiresome, the image of Clayton had grown from less of a stud and more into a burden. She noticed how he had grown fond of her, too fond if one may add, and the chore of dismissing him grew heavy on her head.

Clayton was still a scandal as far as the timid aunts were concerned. But their old convictions only bordered the parlor doors now. Beyond their own threshold they were clueless to the rest of the world, or that the rest of the world had even forgotten the old aunts upon Mr. Sizemore’s passing on. The true loyal neighbors on all Savannah’s squares put the Sizemore name and Justine’s incident into memory, for new scandals were emerging elsewhere.

“She broke her father’s heart by dating ‘the Strickland boy.’ It killed him. Now she’s free to do what she wants. So sad, really....Oh, well.”

And the whole moment in this particular point in their lives would be now catalogued and placed into local lore. The families on the squares were now apt to move on.

However, behaving as shut ins, the old Sizemore aunts were unaware of how the rest of the world had forgotten them, only whispered occasionally about them, as these pristine spinsters still stewed in the idea of their niece dating someone common.

And what exactly was it about Clayton that most everyone protested? Even Justine? Well, as far as she was concerned, Clayton had only one purpose: to shake up her sex life, then shake up her family’s reputation. He would then be asked to move on. The sex was marvelous, considering his solid body, muscular form, dingy behavior and classless sort of behavior. But, as mentioned in the paragraphs above, the sex quickly dwindled into boring moments of “intimacy” the moment Clayton fell in love with her.
As far as the rest of the family’s dislike for Clayton: the blue-blooded brood could bare no liking for someone whose career was greasy. Clayton was a mechanic when he wasn’t mowing lawns, the sort of mechanic who can work on cars and make them run, but not smart enough to charge what he was worth for the chore.... or perhaps he was just simply too polite.

“You can’t bring that Strickland boy in here with those filthy hands, Justine, honey!” Would shout a stout aunt.

“Tell that Strickland boy to take his hat OFF when he comes inside a building...,” moaned the more morose of Justine’s aunts.

With no direction, no true family history, other than a number of infidelities, felonies, and possible bastard children running about, Clayton was truly off limits to Justine. But, this had been her fascination to begin with. The best way to piss off a parent or two was to announce an engagement to the least likely candidate, the least impressive suitor, the man who promised no promises of fame and fortune to their daughter. Perhaps that was what had killed the dubious Mr. Sizemore.... After all, the very notion of some matrimony between the princess and the distraught pauper was enough to send shrieks and shudders though ancestral Sizemore tombs and summon enough family meetings to consider just “what to do” about the “Strickland boy.” (Which reminds me. To call him by his name, to call him “Clayton” would have made him flesh, would have made him human, and the Sizemore’s had no intention of giving him such honor).

Shortly after dear old dad died, the princess saw less of the pauper and began to see clearly what it was about him that made her so upset, so repulsed by him. He wore a ball cap always, and not just any ball cap, a tattered and worn ball cap that was splitting at the bill, was darkened in spots with grease marks, and was fading into all sorts of separate colors. His class distinction was
overbearing, as if he was trying to look poor.

Justine spoke to him less, called him less, and invited him over to her home less. If the sex had been justifiably marvelous, then perhaps this young man would have had a chance to steal the complicated Sizemore heir. Alas, his affections prevented any sex from happening, for cuddling was more his interest at heart.

Poor Clayton did not see, as the days mounted, his Miss Justine pushing him away.

“She just needs some time. Her daddy just died,” he told friends.

After Mr. Sizemore’s funeral there was very little mourning to be done. She favored her father, of course, but a deep fondness for him was impossible. Justine was the distant daughter he knew so very little about. So, while Susan became an absolute wreck and wore clad black and wept an awful lot, Justine spent her time lounging in café’s alone since most of the debutante darlings had now altogether dismissed her.

Now, there was one particular café that she favored above all others. The Gallery Espresso on Bull street boasts a particular curbside appeal. With all the trappings of an establishment suited for those who wish to be looked upon, big glass windows and outdoor seating summon those that need to be seen. Its unique furnishings scream the dichotomy of the socially ill equipped. Big plush leather bound chairs request you sit independently, alas, in the center of the room where everyone may see you. You are the artwork in this café; in this particular gallery the absorbed and aloof are the center of attention, overshadowing the canvassed passions on the wall. And the quiet rumor whispered around the Gallery Espresso is that each of them, all of them with head down in books on the philosophies of self loathing and misery all secretly want to belong.

Justine was sitting at the corner of the room with her view
towards the front, with glances on occasion of approval or dismay making way across her face when the door screamed open... And there, just at the moment where Justine had become beleaguered by the constant stream of duplicates tripping through the door, came quietly stepping the most regal woman, an older women perhaps in her late thirties to early forties with the spirit, zeal and smile of someone much younger.

Justine was quickly transfixed by the woman’s style, her clothing, the way her chin was constantly, perpetually raised in arrogant self expression, enamored with the woman’s heavy lidded gaze that took notice of everything, but made no expression other than superiority.

The woman made way for the counter and took her place behind two very young girlies attempting to order something. Tart one asked, “Ummm, can I get a mocha, but without chocolate?”

The mysterious madam slipped off her leather gloves, huffing, soundly saying to herself, but loud enough for anyone to hear, “That’s a latté, darling. Don’t come across as a fool.”

Tart two turned round to give our lady a deadly vacant look. The woman returned the gaze with a stronger, more prompted expression of superiority, and with a tossed look at her wrist to a watch that didn’t even exist, began slowly tapping her foot....and those regal eyes shined back to tart two with a modified nod that said nothing more than, “Get on with it, dear.”

Tart one continued to order: “Ummm, can I get....ummm,” the sound of her voice irritated our great dame and she said so, again quietly, but with a resonance that ricocheted loud enough for everyone to hear, “Oh, quit whining and get on with it.”

“Ummm,” continued tart one, “can I like, get a salad with chicken, but can I get some bread and some olive oil and some parmesan cheese with it?”
“Yes,” said the counterman, “it’s an additional two dollars.”
Tart one looked to tart two for support. “Ummm, whaaaat? Really???? Like, they never charged us before....”

As the counter man begins to explain to tarts one and two why there should be an additional charge for things bought in an establishment, one could hear the snapping and revealing of a clutch, of money being hunted for in a wallet, of bills being crumpled. Suddenly from either side of tarts one and two came the flying two dollars wadded into balls at the counterman.

“I’ll pay the damned charge for the ‘ummm, cheese, and ummmm, bread, and ummmm, oil’ if you’ll just ‘ummm’ get them out of my way,” she said with the most sincere of sarcasm.

Tart two spun around quickly, “Oh my god. that’s like, so rude! What is your deal?”

Our dear rested her chin on a fist, an enormous diamond hitting the tip of her bottom lip. “The two of you remind me of five year olds whining for a candy bar. Is this how you present yourself to the world now that you’re in your twenties? It is appalling, young lady. Are you going to cry now? Are you going to go complain to your mommy that someone was rude to you,” her sneer sarcasm took on the snide voice of a toddler.

“Oh, my god! What a bitch! Who do you...”

“You’re about to ask me who I think I am? Terrible move, darling. I haven’t the time to explain to you my endeavors, my challenges, my successes, nor the things that piss me off. So, I’m showing off my ring. Do you see it? Don’t you think that ought to be enough to tell you who I am?” She leaned in closer to tart two. “I don’t care who your family is, where you’re from, nor what you’ve done with the 22 pathetic years you’ve been engineering your own little whinney game. This ring, I assure you, is testament to the fact that I belong to a class much better than you, a class you’ll never belong to. Your family may have a couple of bucks, but cash
doesn’t buy class. And it’s obvious the time your ‘daddy’ spent working hard for his money wasn’t worth any of our time if this is how you behave in common public. And I refuse to have discussions with people of such low class. So get on with ordering and go!”

Tarts one and two began huffing and shrilling as they stormed away screaming, “Oh my god, like tell the owner we won’t be back, cause we’re like—”

“At LEAST take the damned bread and cheese. I PAID FOR IT!!!!”

Tarts one and two, the woman now noticed wearing furry snow boots in mid May, stomped their way out of the Gallery Espresso.

With a cackle the woman made way for the counter and with a lovely, perfectly lovely nod to the gentlemen asked, “Do you mind if I just have an espresso? By the way, I’ll pay for what they would have had.” She laughed. “I apologize for that episode, I’m just tired of being subjected to bad grammar and ill manners...and whining, especially whining. Young ones like that know nothing of the world and good manners. Daddy has a few dollars and they think they’re entitled to whatever they want. They know nothing about class, hard work, nor of ambition.” Her voice had all the pleasantry of music, something pristine and vibrant. Something subdued, dignified and quiet.

From head to toe the dapper dear screamed of an era gone for so long, and indeed, everyone around the room, from the various clientele, to the coffee barrister, to Justine took notice.

With such perfect pretension the woman, while waiting for her steamed espresso, reached into her bag and pulled out a shining cigarette case, quite art deco in its formation, quite appealing to the jeweler who might have wanted to study it. The tough little lad behind the counter working too hard for too little money caught a
glimpse of it, raised his eyebrow and made a bewildering scowl.

The woman very proudly mentioned, “It’s a design called ‘The Berlin!’ Isn’t that grand? I found a company in Germany who makes them. It isn’t real, though. Its replicated just like they would have been made in the 30’s. I’m very proud of it! Would you like to take a better look at it?”

She clicked the fastener open and pulled out a cigarette with such a delicate movement, with such a sense of refinement that even the most practiced Phantom Ghore would have stopped to watch her. She made a slight-of-delicate-hand as if to show it to the boy, but he only recoiled a bit.

With one complete gesture the woman’s chin went higher as the cigarette case was closed and the filter of a fresh cigarette was tapped ever so lightly against the outside the polished pewter box, a ratta-tat-tat that yearned for a snare and double bass. Up to the painted lips went the tip of the cigarette. The watchful woman, knowing all proper tricks, motioned to the boy behind the counter with flirtation, the slight giggle of embarrassment, the shake of the head of disbelief that she could have forgotten such a thing, the rolling of the eyes to suggest her needing someone, “Do you happen to have a light? I seem to have misplaced mine....I can be so forgetful sometimes, you know. I spend so much time looking for this damned case that I often forget my lighter! Matches? A little flame in your pocket, maybe?” Now came a bat of the lashes with a punctuated wink.

“We don’t allow smoking in here.” To simply say it is one thing, but the method in which it was delivered was enough to be considered insulting. He spoke to her as if she were (dare we say, should we even mention the word?) common. What’s even worse, is that he had the nerve to look her in the eyes as he said it, turning his nose up to her.

Motionless and in bewilderment, the woman stared at him, a
coldness exposing itself in her features. Slowly she removed the cigarette from her lips. As if the rudeness in which the boy had dejected her was not enough, the young man added more to his offenses. The little bastard said while pointing with boney finger at the door, “You can smoke outside.” All the while the hissing and gurgling of the espresso machine gave guttural score to his annoying comments.

The woman rolled the unlit cigarette between her fingertips and the young man placed the demitasse on the counter before her. Oh, if the boy had not looked up to see those eyes, that face! Regality is rarely boisterous. So with a hushed and dark lean she came close to the boy, motioning for him to come closer with the extension of one long curling finger from her satin gloved hand. To much amazement he obliged.

“Boy,” she said with the trailing shake in her voice that tends to sound like a distant thunder, “...if you ever use that tone of voice with me again I’ll find that lighter of mine and I’ll set your low class ass on fire.”

“Excuse me?”

Her gaze was even tighter now. “You’re not entitled to speak now, sissy. Don’t you ever speak to a lady in such a tone again. If I EVER hear of you speaking with that tone to anyone older than you, even by just a DAY, I will buy this little crap café and have you fired. But I won’t stop there. Because once you’ve pissed me off, then its down right war, do you understand? I’ll buy the building you live in and have you evicted. Then I’ll buy the damned university you attend and have you expelled!” Gone now that motto on regality and boisterous. The woman was now loud enough to be heard outside. “And if you don’t think I COULD then just look at the rock on this one finger!” She flipped him the middle one, which was choked with the large diamond. “I’ve a handful more like it and they cost individually what you will make in one lifetime!
One small withdrawal from my bank account and I’ll do my DAMNEDEST to destroy you! DO YOU UNDERSTAND? Now, the name and phone number of your employer, please. I plan to notify them of your disrespect and contempt for the finer members of this society who have now decided to take their patronage elsewhere.”

The boy fumbled for a gasp of air.

“The number, please...” Said she, pulling out now a remarkably jeweled note pad case and an excruciatingly small pen.

“The number, boy, the number.”

As the lump in his throat subsided he said with a quiver, “I have some matches in my back pack...”

She laughed! After the simple beat of a staring pause at the boy with total, stoic silence, she laughed and continued to do so for a great length of time before finally saying under her cackle, “Oh, don’t bother. I really don’t need the cigarette. I just wanted to see your breaking point! Found it! Oh, I bet you’re a good little follower, too, aren’t you? My, what a ninny! HA! I don’t even smoke!”

His jaw dropped.

She laughed a little louder. “It was just a little game to see if I could make you flinch!” She cackled with the head flung back, before snapping back into a very serious scowl. “Now get back to work!”

The woman wandered off towards the back of the café towards Justine, with the words trailing, “Don’t worry, boy, just wanted to give you a hard time. Dames like me get turned on by that, you know.” A wink. “We get so spent on watching you little sissies quiver.” Giggles again on her part.

The grand woman caught the spying eyes and impressed smiles of Justine. “Is it the blouse, young lady? You like the blouse? Such a complicated fabric. Makes me feel special to know there is
something on the planet more complicated than I am. May I sit with you, dear?”

“Yes, ma’am, I would like that.”

“Oh, you would? And what is your name?”

“Justine Sizemore.”

“I am the Lady Pearl Carter-Ghore.”

“A Lady? Are you royalty?” Asked Justine so impressed by the title she felt inclined to courtesy.

“Bah!” shrieked the woman with a laugh. Keep in mind that when a Phantom Ghore laughs it is nothing short of a roar, heard from distances far away. “Royalty? Well....sort of. I am no queen, if that’s what you mean.” And without resisting she turned round and said, “No, that boy behind the counter, he’s the queen!”

The woman turned back to Justine. “In certain circles I am what you will call important. But, to be truthful, I’m only important because my husband was important. They call me ‘Lady’ because many of the people in these circles feel I am entitled to that sort of respect. I appreciate it. I welcome it.”

“You know, I think I have a few Carters in my family.”

“Well, of course you do, you live in Georgia! I’d be surprised if you didn’t have a Carter or two way back in that family tree.”

“What kind of name is Ghore? Is that your husband’s name?”

“Yes, it is. It’s Hungarian. Tell me, because I prefer asking the questions,” she smiled and winked, “are you from Savannah?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Listen to you. ‘Yes ma’am.’ You never hear that anymore. It used to mean so much to hear that. Is your whole family from Savannah?”

“Yes, yes ma’am.”

“Have you ever thought about leaving?”
Justine looked out her left, out the window to see Clayton spilling with some buddies into the Six Pence Pub, ready and eager to get drunk well before three in the afternoon.

“Every day!” And Justine laughed.

“I’m coming back. I was born here, from Savannah myself. But, I haven’t been here in,” she looked away to sigh and think, “...well, I guess too long to remember!”

“Where did you go?”

The smile was back, the light in the grin so convincing of life, the eyes shining when she said with a seductive hush, “Berlin....”

Justine rested her chin upon her hand, rested upon the elbow that was rested upon the table, the eyes rested on a woman she knew had stories to tell, but what’s more, she was convinced the woman had a trait that was similar to her own.

“Berlin is a marvelous place,” continued the Lady Pearl, “I’ve only been gone from it for wee bit and already I miss it. Everything there is just so different. The only word you can summon to describe the city is ‘free.’ It’s a completely liberating city. For God’s sake, look at me, girl! I look like a loon here! It’s funny, though. People look at me and I am not sure if they think I am crazy or what, but they speak loud enough for me to hear when they walk by on the streets, ‘Oh look at that one, trying to look so different! Did she steal those old clothes from her grandmother or something?’ Nonsense! All garbage! What I know about fashion would frighten those khaki wearing morons. In Berlin, these clothes mean something to people. You’ll find a lot of people dressed like this in Berlin. And is it given a second look? Yes, it is, but a second glance of adoration and respect. But, then again, no matter where you go in the world people will find you strange or beautiful. Berlin is no exception, there are those who will look at me and think I am different, and that being different is bad. In those circumstances you can just shake your head and thank God that you aren’t that
“I know what you mean! I know the type! Awful people!”
“You have to laugh sometimes. With all the discussion about diversity, being different is still treated by the masses as a plague that must be dealt with. Difference is a disease to the masses. Oh, and I think it’s a commerce thing, too. You can be a different color of skin, but please don’t DRESS different! Please don’t read different books, don’t watch different films! Be different because its something you were born with and not something you can consciously change.”

The weather was more dismal than one might have imagined, so the two women spent a great portion of the afternoon intertwined in some delightful conversations about what was proper and who really cared. There was much discussion about how the world in the last twenty years or so had fallen into a tragic misplacement of manners. No one said “yes, ma’am” anymore (even in Savannah). Rudeness and ill mannered mindsets were commonplace and expected. There was even more discussion about where the blame could be laid. “Television,” they both agreed. Parents so eager to keep up with the neighbors spent little time at home, but out making money, to get the house, to get the car, to get the raise, to get a bigger house, to get a bigger car, to get a bigger raise.... And the children left behind? Squandered little things spent shuffled before a television, unable to comprehend the world unless it was something fanciful. Reality was shoved to the side. The paradise of kindness and compassion God had created was considered unmarketable, and yet, explosions, demons, hell raisers, violence and murder were all quite easily packed and shuffled off for commercial praise on cable television.

The two women fell into each other’s company more rapidly than anyone might have supposed, and yet again, here was the trait the two women held close in confidence: an independence
and eagerness to be free from the drone and humdrum that hypnotizes the masses and leads them with arms outstretched to checkout lines.

With agreements nearly constant, and the slight disagreement on occasion (those being on youth, of course), the two women decided the day would be better spent looking at art in the rain. That is to say, the grayness, the bleakness of the sky and its pelting dissatisfaction would be symbolic of the world of culture at large, whereas the art they viewed in galleries would lend the surrealistic slant on reality that they craved, the colors in paintings vivid, and even those paintings considered stark would catch light like sharp prisms, slicing the dysfunction they noticed in the Universe around them.

“Odd, don’t you think, Lady Pearl, that God made things very much in order and man has done everything he can to create some disorder?”

“Defiance! Oh, yes! It’s not that strange when you think about it! Like rebellious children, they have to do things the hard way, even though the easy way has been laid out plainly before them. Just like children.”

From one gallery to the next the ladies stepped, puddles of mud no obstacles to the two women on a mission. When the galleries were finally spent, the cafés became their playground.

“The coffee here is dreadful. The kind they have in little foil packets. Not real. Let’s try it somewhere else,” hissed Justine.

“I don’t drink coffee, but I will be more than happy to oblige you with the company,” would confess the regal lady.

“I know! You can see how many people throw you out for smoking!”

“That’s the spirit!”

Throughout the quaint afternoon, which many would have spent indoors curled beneath an afghan reading a book, the Lady and
Justine spoke often, yet cryptically about their pasts. The woman confessed to Justine that she had lived in Savannah for a number of years before marrying the foreigner, the Hungarian, who had convinced her in a moment of passion, “Yes, darling, we were having sex,” to go to Berlin.

“And considering the things he had done to me that night, I had no choice but to believe every word he said about the place.” Again, the lascivious roaring laughter of a Ghore shrieked through the rain, muffled only slightly by a higher pitched crackle of thunder.

“Is he in Savannah with you now?” The naïve Miss Justine was never really able to pick up on subtlety.

The elder in question stopped for a moment and smiled ever so faintly, all emotion running from her face as she looked away.

The Lady Pearl turned back to Justine only to smile a little more, hoping to confess without speech a pain inside her.

“Oh, I am so sorry, Ms. Carter-Ghore...”

“You must stop calling me that, girl. Really. You can call me Lady Pearl, if anything, just don’t call me Ms. Carter-Ghore. We’ll reserve that name for the ones who kick me out of their establishments for smoking.”

“Is your husband....is he no longer......?”

“Life moves as it should. The end of life isn’t necessarily the end, you know. Things go on, people go on...time goes on. And I have a LOT of time left, trust me. I decided that it was time for me to come home, now. I’m not sure what I am supposed to do now that he is gone, I just know I can’t do it in Berlin anymore.”

“I feel the opposite. I’m not sure what it is I am supposed to do with my life, but I know its not going to be done here.”

“Have you seriously thought about going abroad, dear?”

“I have.”

“Well, you should. Go to Berlin, then go to Venice,
especially Venice. And don’t stop until you’ve either run out of money, or you’re just bored.”

“Maybe I will.”

“Oh, and I do so hate *maybes*. Be decisive, young lady! This is your life! Not a trip to the supermarket.”

At the end of the day the two women decided that their afternoon had come to an end. Before departing Justine asked the Lady Pearl for her address or phone number.

“Justine, I like the mystique of being able to happen chance our visits. Perhaps we will see each other again and perhaps we won’t. If we never lay eyes upon each other again then I will forever remember this solid young girl with a fine attitude for life that kept me from being moody one dismal afternoon...and I will hope very much that she decides to go see the world and be a part of it.”

Justine was nearly on the verge of tears, the echo of thought forever aching to be said. “It’s just my luck. You meet the perfect friend and suddenly-poof- gone!”

The regal lady lapsed into a grin revealing mottled yellow teeth behind satin red lipstick. “A bit of advice, Justine....” She outstretched her black gloved hand to shake the young girl’s. “If you should ever in your life meet anyone else dressed like me, claiming to be related to anyone named ‘Ghore,’ embrace them at once. I promise they’ll treat you very well.”

Justine took the woman’s hand, noticeably cold as it was, and nearly did give the courtesy.

Before Justine could mention any more solemn good-byes, the Lady promptly removed her hand and started strutting down Bull Street towards Forsyth Park.

“I’ll say it again, darling! Embrace anyone named ‘Ghore,’ do you understand? They are a lovely lot! And don’t sit around here for the next twenty years peering into the unknown! Go into it! Be yourself!”
Justine did follow the Lady Pearl’s advice and went abroad. Within a week a flight was booked to Berlin and all in Sizemore concern were against the notion. “Time and time again you drag our name through the mud, girl! You can’t run off to some foreign country, some place where they don’t even believe in Jesus! That’s your daddy’s money! You hear? He’s not even been dead a month!”

“It’s my money now and I will do with it what I want....”

The sister, Susan, was equally disturbed. “Justine! I’m begging you! Don’t you know what those people are like? They’re not good Christian people like we are. They have strange ideas. Sinful ideas.”

Justine could only look at her with pity. “You call yourself a good Christian woman?”

“I most certainly do! How dare you suggest that I’m not!”

“You go to church because if you didn’t you wouldn’t hear the latest gossip going on around town. Admit it. Half the crap you heard about me you picked up at one of your Sunday Socials after church with all the other lovely hypocritical women. You’re nothing but panty hosed, bull horns in big hats, Susan.”

Susan only gasped.

Poor Clayton was trying everything he could to prevent Justine’s departure. If he could not prevent it, then at least he could accompany her. But Clayton’s arguments were lost on Justine. She had already given up on the boy. Unable to convince his alleged girlfriend to stay or to let him travel with her, Clayton conceived of another notion rather abruptly. When they were just at the edge of Madison Square, Clayton dropped to one knee and proposed to her in the midst of some very ornery pigeons. She knew an argument would not satisfy him, so she complied, agreeing to marry him with a sense of distaste, just to keep him pacified. Why the boy did not see it no one will ever know. The “yes” she uttered with a rough huff, a rolling of the eyes and a hand on the hip came off less as a
“yes” and more as an, “I guess...”

“I’ll marry you when I come back,” which technically was not lying, since she had no intention of returning to Georgian soil. The next morning, she was gone.

All was lost for Clayton. Justine had made her decision to flee, flee all the way across the ocean, hoping and praying that whatever it was she was supposed to do with her life would make itself known to her while on the flight there. And if no purpose revealed itself, would that even matter? Should this life of hers, this purpose that had yet to expose itself, be nothing more than to simply explore the world and have fun then, couldn’t having fun be purpose enough?

Justine moved to Berlin with the intention of staying no more than three to four weeks at the end of May. At the onset of summer she would leave Berlin and venture somewhere else, anywhere else, just not back to Georgia. However, by the middle of June Susan began receiving letters, very frayed letters that hinted at something longer, even something more permanent. Everyone in account assumed that Justine’s desire to live in Berlin for good was done only for the enjoyment of knowing Susan was back in Savannah going into hysterics. There were still a few Sizemores left to piss off and annoy.

Postcards and letters, letters no more than half a page in length, were the extent of Justine’s correspondence. And by the beginning of August all word from the expatriate ceased. Alas, thought those in Georgia, the girl has always been rather flighty and prone to independent streaks.

“She won’t write because she’s being defiant. Always so rebellious. Remember that incident with the Strickland boy?”

Just when Susan’s worrying had finally reached paramount proportions, a letter was finally received: Justine Sizemore had been killed, said the American Embassy, and would the family please
come to Berlin to retrieve her things?

You will forgive me if my words do not bleed with the morose departure of Miss Justine. “Her chalice is simply broken,” would say any Phantom Ghore, “she has been promoted from one class to another, lifted from the constraining pains of life to be exalted.” We do not strain ourselves with the tearful wallowing meant only for grievers, for we understand something much deeper about death than the living could ever conceive: that to be free of the societal restraints imposed by the living is a blessing only the dismissal of blood and breath can bring. So forgive me if I do not please you with a lengthy and eloquent diatribe on the matter of death at this time. The Phantom impression of death is one you will deal with in length throughout this narrative. But for now, we must burden ourselves with the over ambitious emotions of the living.

Susan, the most expressive of all grievers concerned, spent much of her days screaming and crying in fits that bordered on dramatic lunacy. That set of spinster aunts we’ve dealt with in prior pages were surprisingly melancholic, their minds already moving into notions of cover up, their thoughts thoroughly preoccupied with the unsurpassed conviction that foreigners do this sort of thing: foreigners kill people. But aside from whatever fate Justine may have made for herself by running away to Berlin, the remaining Sizemores had their family name to consider. The spinster aunts were in no hurry to hide the fact that the troublesome girl was now dead by the hand of a foreign man in a foreign land.

Clayton was exceptionally different. His heart, once solid in its affirmation that his adoring dear would soon make her way home to him was shattered and torn, broken into as many pieces as was thinkable. And yet before any grieving could set in, denial had to first court him with seducing notions that were nothing but tricks.

Justine’s death was some sort of cruel hoax that she would sooner or later play on her family, he assumed. Clayton knew well
enough how Justine felt about her sister and her aunts and often heard how she had deplorably ranked herself into the category of lower legions in order to “piss them off.” So, this must be some sort of acceleration in her need to irritate them, pain them, strike at them....Wasn’t it? Justine was coming home to marry him. There is no possible way that she could be dead. Could she?

Once the reality of her passing came flooding within, denial handed its torch over to anger, where he then cursed anyone who was not American and spat at foreign tourists as they scaled slowly the squares of Savannah looking at this old home and that. It was anger that did a better job of comforting him than denial ever did, and so it was anger that kept him company for a very long time.

Susan did the inquiries that are necessary for such events and discovered that she was the executor of Justine’s will. To Susan’s surprise the surplus of funds that had been left behind by dear old, dead dad were now long gone, and what little remained would barely cover the costs of her funeral....and that became the next question. How do they retrieve her corpse and bring it home? Ah, this too was covered in the will, to Susan’s astonishment. The girl was, as mentioned in previous letters, never to come back to Savannah. Justine had made proper arrangements for her corpse to be laid to some sort of rest in a cemetery in Berlin, making the notion in her will, “Not even in death do I dare go back there...” Georgia, that is.

All that was needed of Susan was the dreadful chore of retrieving Justine’s things, her items of life left behind, the things she had taken to Berlin and the things that she had acquired while there.

One small annotation was present at the bottom of Justine’s will that we should deal with here: the very cryptic message, “If you ever meet the Lady Pearl, bequeath to her my thanks.”

Now, this heavy worded message may seem a sense of

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foreboding to our story, as if Justine was aware of her impending murder, but let it be known to you now, reader, we Phantom Ghores do not allow the living to mention any one of us in their wills. We shun only that notoriety. Nor do we proceed with the murder of an Acquisition as if they were aware of their fate. It is only upon their Resurrection that they become aware of the primping and planning that had been done prior to their death. Therefore, I can only say Justine’s desire to change her will so suddenly could only have been the whimsical movement of Justine of her own accord. Again, such proud boasting and bombastic mention of a Phantom Ghore by name would have made her a terrible Acquisition and completely off limits to any Ghore willing to acquire her on the Phantom behalf.

The more phone calls that were made to the embassy in Germany the more Susan discovered what had actually happened to her sister and was horrified when told that Justine Sizemore had not just been simply murdered, but had been savagely mutilated. Susan heard recounted police reports offering conclusions of stabbings to the chest in the count of 40, strangulation, and the discarded body being stripped nude, tossed over a balcony and plummeting to the alley behind her apartment building where it was left to be found by passing pedestrians.

If you should ever speak about the death of a loved one with a government official you experience the same apathy you might receive from a Phantom Ghore. There is no pity, no ripping apart, nor cutting at the heart with any sort of sympathy. Absolutely not. You get a desensitized replay by a man who sounds capable of committing such felonies himself, a matter of fact tossing of terms like, “strangled, stabbed, degraded and dropped from the third story balcony.”

Poor Susan, unable to contain any sort of dignity that is afforded so many southern dears, dropped the phone when hearing
of the details of her sister’s murder and lost the final remains of what bitter mind she had left. She commenced to destroy any window, glass, or dish she could find in her home. Anything breakable was at the mercy of her tantrum, anything that could have been killed was lucky not to be in her proximity.

Did they have suspects? No, not one. Even her own government when questioned about the investigation seemed uninterested in finding anyone. More dishes were broken. When those were spent, the staircase banister was demolished. Susan’s knotted hands were wrapped around a blunt object as she went running about her home crashing, smashing, and destroying anything in the house that held semblance. She wanted repulsion; she wanted to let it out. The anger firing her with so much adrenaline she repeated over and over in screams that slipped with foaming drool past her cracking lips, “Just LOVELY!”

May God protect anyone from the raving’s of someone who has experienced the most obscene sense of death’s reality. In all the worries created by life, death is the most prominent; death is the catalyst for all other worries. And why? Perhaps for the holy hatred or adoration a man or woman faces throughout their existence; that this life will in some manner or another determine the outcome of your judgment in the eyes of a God who may or may not exist, a thought that many of the living fumble over in their moralities. The extent of society and culture is based on keeping the living man attuned to the fantasy of death. And yet the experience of death is the finite slice of reality that soberly awakens man from his induced euphoria. Death reminds the living of their own impermanence, of the living’s inability to be important for any length longer than it takes for their bodies to rot and finally vanish into the dust from which they evolve. Susan, who had been forever trapped in the misgivings of a dream life, a non-real world, was suddenly harkened to view with no defenses the reality of being a human. That you die!
And that you sometimes die *unkindly*....

Now, with all this discussion of God now placed before the reader, one may ask “Does a Phantom Ghore, he who has stepped within and beyond the grave, believe in God?” Without a doubt, we do...but, more on those arguments later.

Once Susan’s temperament was hushed for a moment, she was safely able to judge the plan of burial and retrieval. She had first mentioned to the aunts her desire to bring her sister’s body back, but the aunts would not support her. “The girl wants it, so be it. Don’t ever argue with the dead, girl, you’ll only invite trouble. Do you understand, honey?”

In their unusual way of thinking in terms of family as an entity and not based on individuality, the aunts were more concerned about tarnished reputations and surfacing rumors, and of course, the desire Justine had to make a mockery of anyone she was akin to. Justine had stretched and strained the relationship as far as it would go. As far as the aunts were concerned, the dead girl had severed all respectful affiliation with her kin. Miss Justine was *done for* in their eyes and they would not tolerate someone who did not want to be a Sizemore, not even in death. They would not consider, not even for the slightest amount of time one may invest in such a notion, her corpse, unwanted and detested, being laid in the grave next to people who had once adored her. The Sizemore family, ceremoniously empowered by the aunts, had decided from that moment forward that Justine would remain cleanly dissected from her family lineage. *Undone*, was Justine Sizemore.

And the coldness of such a fervid repulsion for the dead girl may cause the more serious in our midst to beg for reason. Such a thing cannot be done when it comes to those who show no emotion. Denial and anger work their seductions differently on everyone when death should come to pass. Denial suggested to the aunts that Justine had never wanted to be one of them in the first place; anger
frustrated them with the overpowering need to dismiss the girl, as the aunts sat mad in their parlor chairs, irritated that Justine had dismissed them first, had cleaned herself of their archaic judgments and hypocritical renunciations of who is acceptable and who is not first.

After Justine’s death, Clayton was no longer welcome around the Sizemore home even though he would repeatedly stop by to ask, “Have ya’ll heard anything new?”

“No, we know nothing.” Slam shut was the door. Growing greater was Clayton’s anger. The frail fragments left of the Sizemore family felt they did not have to tell Clayton anything about the murder or how it had happened, nor nothing at all about the situation involving Justine’s will. As far as the Sizemores could summarize in their foolish class pride, Clayton had no right to know just exactly the details of their own personal Sizemore tragedy. Outsiders were not obligated to know.

So, day after day it became a ritual. Clayton would arrive knocking eagerly, but tepidly at the door. “Was just wondering if ya’all had heard anything new...”

“No, we know nothing,” slam shut went the door.

Clayton would proceed to Pinkie Master’s where he would divulge in the sacred art of escape. Pinkie Master’s is an odd array of the those estranged from the normalcy of society, but who mingle quietly along side those who shed their high brow sincerity for a dip into seediness. It is a darkened half-room, a bar waking early in the day for the first onslaught of drunkards ready to pounce on a Pabst Blue Ribbon while denying some reality, and closing late in the evening to harbor the last of the ill equipped not quite ready to return to their fake lives. It is the famously quiet shell of a bar where no one can mistake the truth about societies fake smiles: that no one is ever safe from a stranger.

Staring at a counter filled with cracks and tears from other
saddened patrons, Clayton would revel in his own filth, the brow creasing, his temples exploding, the incredible desire to be left alone surmounting wildly.

“Is everything alright?” asked the very surly, overly honest, but hug heartable bartender.

“Maybe. I don’t know yet.”

“You want another beer?”

“Maybe. I don’t know yet.”

“Alright,” she says suspiciously, but with sincerity. “My name is Viva if you need anything.”

“Wait a minute. You told that guy,” pointing across the bar, “your name was Sara Lee. I’m sick of being fucking lied to.”

“Calm down, handsome. I have different names for different people.” She leaned in. “Viva means ‘live long.’”

“What does ‘Sara Lee’ mean?”

“Haven’t you seen the commercial? ‘Nobody does it like Sara Lee.’” She winked to Clayton and returned to someone else with another name and intention.

As Clayton sat maddened in that bar for as long as the multi-named bartender would pour, discussions with the dead Justine would continue in his mind, as though she could hear him.

Don’t touch me, Justine. Don’t come near me. Let me have a few minutes with my beer to get through this, baby. It’s hard to move on when I can’t stop thinking about you. There’s so much fucking noise around you.

The scent of her, the sight of this color or the sound of that music, or even some girl giggling with drunk pronunciation in the corner would bring her alive and would shatter in the mind the process of trying to amputate her totally from his thoughts. Alas, to no avail.

Savannah is a hot place, especially in August when rising temperature mixed with rising intoxication can force anyone into a
resentment towards anything God has set on the planet to breathe. All life is abominable, Clayton thought, including his own.

What pressed most on his mind was the thought that Justine had neglected him and that he had been clouded by the hints that were forever trapping him into the truly ripping thought that she just did not care for him. Lingering awhile was also the thought of no intention of Justine ever returning and fulfilling her obligation to marry him, even though every single country aunt and cousin he was aware of was applauding the idea that he was marrying a good girl from Savannah society, and were already planning all sorts of miraculous dishes and attending to Clayton’s every need. “If ya need help finding a suit, your Uncle Thurman has a nice, dark blue one that will look great on you. Matches your eyes.”

He experienced a mental shocking again and again, sending pulsating rhythms of adrenaline through him when he also thought on jealous terms. This would also happen coincidentally after the seventh or eight beer. Scenarios controlled him, those mental shocks of seeing her wrapped underneath a man, looking up at some other man, her legs wrapped around another man, her breath touching the chest of another man, the presence of another man inside her, making love to her, causing her to scream the name of another man when she climaxed. Some other man, some filthy foreign man who did not know how to respect her like he did.

These vivid scenarios gave him that mental shock that forever eluded his judgment. After the ninth beer the desire to die would fulfill its place along side Clayton and convince him to go home, get in his little red truck and head onwards home. If he was too drunk and managed to crash it, so be it, an intended accident, you see, not really suicide. Not really. If the cops were to snatch him and toss him in jail for endangering other’s lives, then very well. He would cause such a commotion the judge would have no choice but to throw away the key and allow him the privileges of rotting
along side other cowardly men.

Generally, he made it home quite safely with no police interruptions, passing out on his uncle’s couch unaware of the destiny that awaited him.

In all defenses, Susan had never answered the door when Clayton came calling. It had been one of the aunts, or another unfamiliar and scorning, pretentious relative who would answer; the kind of pretentious relative clenched to a cell phone while talking to you. Susan felt sympathy towards Clayton. She was certainly aware that Justine had no intention of marrying him, or of giving the poor boy any love whatsoever, and the reasons why were not always begging to be answered.

Clayton was strong, very handsome, very sexy, and very manageable. You could teach him, you could mold him, you could make him into a man, you could teach him finer things and better ways of living.... And Justine could have cared less. So, when Susan made arrangements for her departure to Berlin, she made arrangements for two, and when she discovered that Clayton had been badly received at the Sizemore home, she sat near the foyer door that opened into the living room so she could hear when he might come knocking again.

The very next time he did come knocking she abruptly rushed to get it, motioning for her aunts that she would settle this once and for all. Well beyond earshot she mentioned to Clayton, with no apparent emotional projection, but with a stoic and reserved notion, that she would like for him to accompany her to Berlin for Justine’s funeral and to retrieve her things. And knowing how Sizemores are, Clayton said simply. “Thank you ma’am. I’ll have to pay you back.”

“No, that won’t be necessary. You were her fiancé. Its only proper you should be there.” A forced smile made its way to her face.
“No, ma’am, I have to make sure I pay you back.”

She told him to have his things ready to leave for Berlin in two days time. They would be staying in a hotel in the center of the city. The two Americans would be in Berlin for only three days then would promptly return to Savannah.

“You should be there, Clayton. I think it would only be right for you to be there. Besides, I don’t think that I could go alone. I need a chaperone, an escort. To think what those filthy foreigners did to my sister...I fear being there alone. So you see, you’d be doing me the favor, Clayton. Now, you’d better be going. You’ve got some packing to do.”

As she watched him wander off a little stronger in his stride this time, she could not help but think she had no grievances with Clayton. She would kindly thank him for going to Berlin, would make sure he was supplied with room and board while there, and when they returned to Savannah they would part ways and never see each other again, and would close this hideous chapter on their lives forever.

The two grim demons sat motionless, barely breathing, in catatonic fit beneath the gloom of some timid fire’s glare. Susan’s stare had not left the realm of the fire in more than five hours, and Clayton’s had only just begun to fade. Gruesome conclusions wrapped through his thoughts. Every once in a while he would look at Susan and see her and would consider why none of the Sizemores had the decency to mourn Justine. Despite whatever history one may have, death is the moment of total forgiveness, that all is forgotten; judgment is now carried out by a different source, a
different matter.

And what was it that he saw while Susan stared carelessly into the fire, the eyes dying, and the tears unable to sweep her into realism? Clayton figured those good old-fashioned manners that keep a woman contained and emotionless were killing her. The desire was evident, you could see it in the way her breathing was shallow and nearly still, in the way her body seemed diseased and ill. The way her skin did not catch the light of the fire, nor did it even reflect it, but simply kept it at bay with a hint of crimson and a shade of gray that could have passed for corpse-like. She was trying to cry, but those good manners prevented it, told her to stay far away from emotion, especially in the presence of company, especially when that company is not even family.

Susan was thinking something between hatred for mankind and the desire to simply die herself. Locked in her thoughts so tightly, Susan’s bodily functions were on autopilot and the woman was left alone to brood in the solitary confines of a shell now half wrecked with grief and repulsion.

The two had been present at the funeral, but they were the only two, and it was a halfhearted affair complete with a slight drizzle and the two Georgians dressed alone in black by Justine’s open graveside. They were late, you see. The plane arriving some few moments after the funeral home had already placed her coffin six feet beneath whatever soil she had chosen for her resting place. When they arrived the men with shovels had already commenced to toss dirt upon the black lacquer box. Clayton ran towards them, pleading that they give them just a few moments. The men with shovels, unable to understand English, let alone the thick trail of southern dialect that escaped Clayton’s lips, simply dropped the shovels and went to have a beer. He then carted Susan by the arm, as was harmoniously gracious for a man like him, towards the side of the dead girl’s plot, the two of them peering far down the shallow
hole that held no mystery. This is where Susan’s catatonic fit had commenced. She just stood there staring. The drizzle of rain was next, nothing much, but enough to enhance a mood of horrific departure. After saying a few prayers under his breath about Justine’s soul resting in peace, Clayton suggested they leave. Susan only stood, did nothing, barely blinked.

A few moments after this the young country boy grabbed her with some force by the arm and led her back to the taxi cab, which had agreed to stay with no extra charge for the two mourners.

They made their way to the hotel where they were to stay for two more days. Clayton, unable to receive a response from Susan as to where the hotel was at, simply rummaged through her purse and found the brochure, and unable to pronounce the location, simply handed the papers to the taxi driver who took them to Ambassador am Wittenbergplatz immediately.

The Ambassador was a simple but impressive hotel with a rush full of posh people making their way here and there. Susan had made her way to a lounge chair off into the distance near a fireplace that was roaring with aggression. It seemed familiar to her, seemed equivocal of some feeling she had inside, so she did not resist it, but sat near it, embracing it.

Clayton stood firmly at the counter handling all necessary moneys and documents when a very uncanny darling next to him caught his eye. From beneath a veil attached to her hat, the dear leered at Clayton with the slanted sort of cheering interest. When she saw Clayton notice her she smiled, posed coyly and softly (but not overtly) with the right leg from beneath the slit in her already short skirt. Her didactic 1930’s clothing gave the impression that she matched wits with the most intellectual bitch, but in private, with her love, became a monstrous ruffian keen on exploring the more sinister moments in sexuality. And Clayton could not help but take notice.
She did not speak, but simply removed her gloves, tossed them into her purse and prodded on, brushing Clayton as she stepped with the smoothness of a jazzy bass line. He followed her with his stare, with his drool one should say, as she turned back to give one final hint of sexual promise.

He was handed the room keys and was told the bellhop had already taken their small luggage up. Clayton thanked him, looked around for Susan and found her sitting motionless and staring into the fire. He sat next to her and did the same...

The two stayed there for five hours never speaking once, not once releasing themselves of whatever gaze should have kept them comfortably quiet in the fire. The hypnotic presence of the blaze had caused some disturbing shrill within, something that echoed and reminded them that this was beyond their means, their comprehension, that they were doomed to death. Yes, that was it: a fear that reminded them that they were doomed to one day die. If God and the devil and all that are real, then where is Justine? Or is her body simply sitting in that black lacquered box so close beneath the spoiled soil, beneath the pelt of some soft rain, beneath the footsteps of strangers who wander through looking at tombstones, unaware she had died a painful way?

By midnight the hotel clerks had left them alone, however they had ceased placing new logs on the monumental inferno and had decided the best way to urge the Americans to their room was to remove whatever had them locked to the lobby. The fire.

As the conflagration grew dimmer and dimmer, and soon became all but cracks, crackles and the popping of hot coals, Clayton noticed Susan shaking after hours of uninterrupted movement. She crossed her legs and sighed. At last Clayton felt free to breathe, free to move if he wished.

“She wrote to me,” she said suddenly. “Did she ever write to you?”
“No, ma’am, she didn’t.” It was the admittance of an embarrassing rejection.

“No? I was hoping she had. I was hoping the letters to you were as viscous as the ones she sent me. So, I guess you’re lucky. She must have liked you enough not to write to you.”

“Why’s that, Miss Susan?”

“Because she was appalling in the letters. She treated me like trash in those letters, told me she was having a great time and that she was glad I wasn’t here to spoil it...said she was never coming home, because of the family and me. Hateful things, Clayton.”

Susan’s voice never followed the rhythm and cadence of normal people. It remained the chilling monotonous verbiage of a soul on the edge of mad restraint.

Clayton said politely, “She was upset.”

“She was upset all right. Do you know she blamed me for everything? Everything? Our childhood, our parents, their deaths, her scandals in Savannah. She said I drove her to all of it. Since we were little girls she blamed me. She said life was awful before she came here, awful was because of me. She said she was glad she was never going to see me again.”

Notice again, reader, the resilient lack of using someone’s proper name. To give Justine mention would have caused Susan to choke, to commence into admittance and consequent breakdown.... Susan simply could not allow it. Her emotions required the dead girl in question be referred to as a ‘she’ and a ‘her,’ and not her only sister.

“I know she didn’t mean that, Miss Susan.”

“Do you ever listen to yourself, Clayton?”

Now came that sudden shift in tone, that shrilling screech from behind grit teeth that brought her closer to the edge of human collapse; a dangerous, sudden snap that squirmed quietly near violent. Clayton, cautiously refraining, was thousands of miles from
any escape should she lash at him.

“Do you, Clayton? When will you understand the world isn’t like it is in your little town, honey? It isn’t all proms, football and pick up trucks.”

“That’s why I never wanted to leave. I was just fine thinking the whole world was nothing but my backyard.”

“Well, it isn’t.”

“It should be. I never thought I would be in a place like this, Miss Susan. Big city, nice hotel, all kinds of people I don’t understand coming and going. I never thought I’d be going to the funeral of my fiancé.”

And here came the loudest shout she had screamed since this whole mess began.

“*She did not want you!*”

The stillness of all air in the hotel lobby was more than noticeable. More pops and crackles from the nearly exhausted fire sputtered near their feet.

Clayton lowered his head and eyes, but did not close them.

“I know.”

“So, for God’s sake, why are you holding on?” Her timbre was softer, gentler.

“‘Just ‘cause someone doesn’t want you, doesn’t mean you should stop caring about them. I thought one day she’d come back to Savannah and would see that I’d waited for her and that I’d cared for her...and that she would want me back.”

“We should go up to our rooms, Clayton. There’s something I want you to see.”

Susan went into her room first, shuffled through her suitcase until she found what she required, then came back to the door that joined their rooms and handed a stack of papers to Clayton.

“These are her letters. Read them. You’ll understand what I mean when you’re finished.”
He took them with hesitation. The cold, distant voice of the dead, still shadowing through her penmanship and through her memory.

Susan said, “You’ll feel differently about Justine.”
She then slammed the door in his face.
Now, the letters that Susan handed Clayton were beyond despicable, they were by all means rude interjections of literature. Justine made noticeable attempts at consciously hurting the people around her, finding any conceivable way to express her deepest resentment and hatred for them. Clayton was no exception. “He was a great fuck, and an even greater fuck up.”

Clayton sat in his room well beyond sunrise peering at the letters and their hateful script. At one point he even lifted them to his nose, to see if her scent might still be lingering on them.... The post office had robbed him of it.
The first few letters and postcards were brief.
“I hate you.”
And that was all. Then they were progressively short-tempered, but slightly more eloquent.
“I hate you for the reasons I may tell you one day.”
The last of the letters were dismally forthright and without any good taste at all.
“I hate you for reasons I may tell you one day. If I should dare look upon you again it will be the most hated day of my life.”
Such ramblings made no sense and gave only the illusion of a madwoman bent on destroying the lives of those around her. Each of the letters commenced with what seemed like a regret for the letter before.
“Dear Susan, so sorry for the things I said in my last letter,” and would abruptly rush into, “...what I meant to say was that I hate you for the reasons mentioned before and if I should dare look upon you again it will be the most hated day of my life.”
None of them were coherent, none of them made sense.

All this did not hurt Clayton; these things about the princess he loved were common knowledge. She was not the kindest, most sensible creature. When she made mention of him in her letters it was to criticize.

Throughout these letters there were some interesting, fascinating revelations about her new life in Berlin. “I have met the liveliest bunch of people here. They are all so much better than you and your rotten friends. Now, if only I could find out where they find such incredible clothes. But, then again, I should not be surprised. I went looking for this group, you know. They are why I am here. They make me feel like I belong. They help me to forget the past and all the crap in it that you helped create. They are like the family I never had. I love them. More than I love you."

She would continue on in other letters. “We dine in the most wonderful cafés. Well, that’s a lie. I dine. They never seem to have an appetite. They don’t eat like you, a woman who could eat a horse. Mele is the most beautiful of them, has the best figure. Would kill for it. So, I can truly see why she does not eat. Gabby is the same. The two of them could be models. I don’t know what they do, really. They all have so much money I doubt they have to do anything except sit and watch me eat all day. And smoke. I know you don’t approve, but that’s why I’m telling you, cause you don’t approve. We sit and smoke most of the time. And sex! Yes, had the best sex of my life a few nights ago with a man whose name I can no longer remember, even though I screamed it three or four times. He barely spoke a word of English, but it was fine. Moaning can translate itself. My first foreign seduction. From Poland...I think. Does that piss you off, Susan? Are you shuddering at hearing about a one night stand? Be sure to tell the aunties I’m starting a collection of men from around the world. Did I mention it was my first orgasm? Never once with Clayton, although I would like to thank
the academy for all the performances I gave that boy.”

The last letter postmarked carried the last mention of her new group of friends. “Mele and I went shopping today and she agrees with me. I should never come back. Not even if I die. So, please be sure to see to it that if anything should happen to me I want to be buried in Berlin. I don’t want to ever see any of you again. Why do I keep writing these letters then? I won’t be anymore. This is my last.”

Exhaustion took the best of poor Clayton, and with such a heart full of commiseration, fell asleep nestled among the letters that lay sprawled across his rented bed, smearing her handwriting with his tears.

We Phantom Ghores despise it when you make mention of us in your journals and diaries. We deplore any mention whatsoever that you are fawning over us, let alone that you’ve met us. This was the first mistake made in the whole Justine Sizemore affair. The girl ought to have been persuaded, coaxed, and urged not to go rambling on about us in her letters to her sister. Any number of excuses could have been given.

“Oh, just forget about your family, Justine! Don’t bother writing! Who needs them? They rejected you, right? Well then, leave them in the dark! Let them think you’ve slipped off the face of the earth! That’s it! You hit a martini spill and slipped right off the face of the earth!” Any number of excuses could have been sufficient.

Perhaps the Phantom Ghores were unaware that Justine was writing letters home to Susan? Of course not. For, if a Phantom Ghore is a brilliant Phantom Ghore, a grand Phantom Ghore, they know everything that you do, know everywhere you are, and know all that you are thinking.
By three o’clock the next afternoon the two Georgians were dressed and hailing a cab to the address that had once been the former Miss Justine’s residence.

The building was quaint, not at all dingy as Susan imagined it was going to be. They rang for the landlord who introduced them to the apartment where Justine had lived three stories above.

Susan was the first to gasp upon entering the room. It was above reproach, tidy, pretentiously spotless. But what was so remarkable about the little flat Justine had come to rent was the transformation in time, setting and place.

Entering the room might have caused someone to feel dislodged in the modern world, for the extent of the layout was distinctly antique. Old photographs hung the walls; a dressing screen hid a trunk for which she had kept her linens and silks. The clothing itself was entirely authentic. Not a stitch of garment was made past the 1950’s. Old Tiffany style lamps, and old gas lamps shared corners of the rooms. Brackets adorned the walls, plaster brackets repainted a slight pinkish hue. An old oriental rug was splashed across the hardwood floors. Nothing in the room at all said anything contemporary, nothing screamed modernized. There was no television, no stereo, but in its place an old victrola with genuine records from that bygone era sitting quietly in sleeves across the side of the wall. Even the books on her shelf, the compacts on her vanity, the writing utensils and stationary were strangely, eerily 1930’s.

Clayton was worried they had stumble into the wrong apartment, but the landlord assured them it was hers. “She was a fine girl. I like her. Sad this happened to her.”

“It’s not like her, though. These aren’t her things. What am I
supposed to do with them? I don’t want this stuff. I want her things!” Susan grew panicky at the realization that she was coming to know less and less about her sister.

Clayton tried to calm her, but Susan had rushed within the apartment and furiously began shifting through doors and swinging open closets to find some semblance of Justine. “There’s nothing here! These aren’t her things. They killed the wrong girl, we buried the wrong girl, Clayton! This isn’t her stuff! I don’t see anything that belongs to her! *Where are Justine’s things?*

“These are her things,” announced the landlord sympathetically.

“No, this isn’t hers. It’s the wrong girl. She’s still alive. You’ve got the wrong girl!”

“She moved here with nothing. This all came one day. She leave one day, come back and all was delivered. She went to a shop here, near the Nollendorf. On the Saturday they have all the old antiques in the old rail station above the street. You see?” He pointed out a window nearby. “All antiques. She go there and she spend lots of money to have it decorated this way. She want to fit in with friends.”

“What friends?” asked Clayton, convinced of her infidelity, convinced she had gotten too close to a lose pack that had led her immorally astray and away from him.

“A few gentlemen, a few ladies. I don’t know these people. But, they’re all like this. They have the clothes, they have the style, they even have a car. She just want to fit in. It is normal, yes?”

Susan’s frustration was supreme. The entire trip had been something of a sham to her. She had missed the burial of her sister, a burial that she did not approve of in a location that she felt did not suit her, and had been asked to travel thousands of miles from the safety of her home to pick up her sister’s things. What things? “These are not her things. I don’t see anything here she brought
with her.”

“I cannot help you, miss. I leave you this key. You may lock the door when you leave. What you do not wish to take, perhaps you may leave to sell. Her apartment is paid for until the end of the month so you may come as you wish.”

The landlord left, leaving Clayton alone to make some sense of Susan’s hysterics. “Miss Susan, that man was just carryin’ to help, you know.”

“I don’t...,” she pushed him aside and went to the little bureau near the bed. “I don’t want this stuff, Clayton. I want my sister’s things. I want Justine’s things.” Susan fell to her knees. “I don’t understand how I’m supposed to mourn someone I didn’t know! Who was she, Clayton? I didn’t even know my own sister... Look at all of this! What was she doing? Who was she?” The tears spilled from behind a diatribe of remorse and regret. “I didn’t know my own sister!” She wailed, clawed herself into Clayton’s arms. “I didn’t know her!”

To this the living may all find enterprise, that the lavishness in which they admire or deject someone is based upon their own admission of what they wish their loved ones to be, rather than who they truly are. And when consolations come to poison them, the living are reminded of just how much they had lied to themselves about someone’s reality. They are unwilling to admit to someone’s authenticity, because it would remind them of their lack thereof.

Clayton and Susan spent some time rummaging through things Susan were convinced were not her sister’s. They took to looking for something they felt was justifiably reminiscent of the girl they had known, and not this girl whom they were unaware. There was not much to discover. They collected a few photographs that looked familiar to them, people they had known, photos of the deceased Mr. and Mrs. Sizemore and various photos of Savannah. There were some personal papers such as her passport, etc., that
they collected for legal reasons, but nothing in this terrain marked nor even boasted the girl they both cared for deeply. The rest belonged to a stranger, and somewhere inside they felt that had no right, no obligation to disturb them.

The entire time they moved through the apartment Clayton kept curiously thinking about the friends the landlord had mentioned. Now, keep in mind, there is no mystery to this tale, and no one, not a soul in this story shall attempt to decipher some cryptic death. There are no mysteries. And as is such in real life Clayton and Susan were simply not bold enough, and perhaps not smart enough to make any investigations of their own into the death of the young girl. They were convinced investigators knew best. “No clues and no suspects. The conclusions do not seem promising. Case Closed.”

However, the greatest mystery was who Justine had become. To Clayton, these were the things that troubled him, that urged explanation. This girl he had followed across the world just to bury had become someone else and he wished only to know who that someone else was.

Later at the hotel, Clayton was resting in some kind of thoughtful nap. Justine’s letters remained where they had been the night before, crushed beneath his body, sprawled on the sheets of his rented bed. Often his eyes took glances of curiosity at the big city outside. It was a mystery to him how people could happen to live such lives, cramped upon one another, bustling into one another constantly. There was something in this city, though. A peculiar energy in everything that danced with lively liberation. He wanted to see more of it, explore a new part of the world he knew he’d never be in again.

But fear, as rearing and as accomplished as it is, kept Clayton in bed and at bay.

Susan was in her room sobbing loud enough to hear through
the walls, the sound of it sending Clayton into retreat, the echoing drone of her moaning too much on the heart. He turned his back to her sobbing and shifted his focus back to Justine’s letters crumpling beneath his body. As he turned to them he caught a caption on a letter near his pillow that sent his heart excited.

The very scribbled, blue penmanship of the girl proclaimed, “Mele wears the most delightful diamond choker. Mele is also one of the only women I have ever seen who could pull off wearing a veil without looking as if she had just come from a funeral, covering only those beautiful, crystal, blue eyes...”

He suddenly remembered the young woman whose flirtatious eyes under a veil had caught his attention from the day before. Could that have been the same woman? In a city as large as this, the coincidence seems unlikely, but how often do women wear veils? He sat up from his bed and began pacing slowly, grabbing that one letter from near his pillow and holding it tightly in his hands. He moved towards the window, then back to the bed, then back to the window, before finally sighing and leaving the room altogether.

Swiftly down the stairs he went, passing maids and hotel guests, nearly knocking some over as he rushed through the lobby to the clerk at the hotel desk. He was going to find that woman. He was going to meet these friends of hers. The thought of being alone in that hotel room with the lament of an old spinster for two days petrified him, terrified him.

“May I help you, sir?” Asked the front desk.
“Do you remember me?”
“Pardon, sir?”
“Do you remember me checking in yesterday?”
“Yes, sir, I do. Although I can not recall your name at this very moment.”

“Do you remember a woman who was standing next to me when I was checking in?”

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“Not at the moment, sir, I do not.”
“She was wearing a veil.”
The clerk stopped for a moment and smiled. “Ah, yes, that I remember, sir.”
“Do you know who she was? What her name is?”
The clerk simply looked at Clayton with a slight bit of sexual suspicion.
“I need to find out who she was.” Was he referring to the mysterious woman he had encountered, or to the Justine that had treated him sourly?
The clerk fumbled through some papers and then revealed the identity of the veiled woman as, “Miss Tasha Knopf-Ghore. It is a hyphenated name. Knopf-Ghore. Perhaps you may find it in a directory.”
Clayton looked towards the floor with disappointment and began to walk away.
“Or...” said the clerk with a pull, “you can find her at the Café Einstein.”
“Excuse me?”
“The Café Einstein. Perhaps you will find her there. It’s just down the street you see. You go to Nollendorf Strasse and walk a few blocks on. You can’t miss it.”
“Does she work there?”
“Oh, I doubt it. But, she had mentioned at the desk yesterday that she could be found there last night if a certain gentleman were to come looking for her....”
Clayton blushed and smiled.
“No, sir, I do not think she referred to you. She was referring to another gentleman who did come inquiring for her some time later.”
Embarrassed, Clayton only asked, “How do I find this place?”
The hotel clerk drew Clayton a ridiculously simple map and handed it to him, to which Clayton responded that he should relay a message to Miss Sizemore that he had gone for a walk and would be back before dark.

The very first thing that you will notice about the Café Einstein, more than the décor, will be the smell of the place. Now, a Phantom Ghore does not have the sense of smell he was plagued with when alive and has no concept of how overpowering the olfactory response can be. The Phantom Ghore must hide the smell of the charnel house that continues to hover over them long after they have departed the grave. Therefore, since they have no idea how bad the smell can be on any given day, and much worse on hotter days, the Phantom Ghore is obligated to douse himself with very much cologne or perfume in order to hide the repulsive odor. However, this is another thing that can plague the Phantom Ghore’s judgment. Since the Phantom Ghore cannot smell, they have no idea how much fragrance they are applying. The smell of pungent perfume when Phantoms are gathered can be so monumental that the living will wander by and make notice, make comment, and hack on occasion with comments like, “Please shower!”

But, it is better that the living should notice too much perfume, rather than the reek of death’s slow decay. Suspicions would surface over the smell of many dead things congregated in one place.

Since the Phantom Ghores have been frequenting the Café Einstein for a very many number of years, the establishment has taken it upon themselves to open the very large parlor windows that border the backsides of the room. This free flow of breeze helps only slightly to deaden the scent of biting fragrances, but does help to diminish even more the paralyzing odor of death. The living, if unaccustomed to being at the Café Einstein, will notice first the thick smell of rot covered by roses, but will notice the clientele next.
Phantom Ghores like to meet in packs. We are more arrogant, more visible when we are among our counterparts. Phantoms in isolation are of no use to anyone, for there is no audience, no show to give, no expression of immodest personalities. We are brightly vulgar and loud things, obnoxious to many, and the more there are of us in one single sitting, the better the display.

To see many Ghores replete together can be a striking thing. The dress, the clothes, the style, the entire array will be seen in attire and attitude. There might be a girl with a veil, but you will also see a girl with the pageboy haircut. You might also see a girl with the Gibson look, or the starlet look, or the femme fatale look. You will see an “It” Girl and a Flapper. The men can be equally astonishing. Some with the thin Clark Gable mustache, others with the top hat, and even a few will wear formal spats. But, to see the group lounging about in a café, and especially a café as perfect as the Einstein does more than hint at decades gone, it brings it into full fruition, here and now for all the world to see. Not mimicry, but reality.

Let the reader understand that there is much more to being a Phantom Ghore than the clothing, of course. Much more of it has to do with the style and the presence of that decade, how men and woman behaved, the mood, the rolling of the laughter and times defined by Cabarets and immoral exploration. But, we shall explore the elaborateness of a Phantom Ghore’s personae later.

The Phantom Ghores are not the majority of the clientele that frequents the Café Einstein, heavens no. They are a small number. Anyone with a slight bit of pretentiousness and sense of intellectual elitism are apt to be found there; one may find university students giving a little attitude of their own, pouring themselves over heavy books of philosophical garbage by men who know no more about God and Life than any living man can truthfully claim to know. You will also find persons who are
attracted to the room for its views and décor. Old world charm is depicted in the place settings, in the solid wood furnishings, crisp white linens, in the perfection to detail, and most importantly the tuxedo clad waiters who can often be found modeling their gorgeous good looks in fashion magazines.

The Café Einstein is of utmost importance to the Phantom Ghores, for the setting allows them to lounge, to sit for long periods and laugh, to mock smoking cigarettes, to mock drinking a coffee. (We cannot engage in such things). For hours and hours, for there is not much more for a Phantom Ghore to do, they will sit and discuss and wait for their victims to approach them. Yes, like spiders. Phantom’s spin webs, whorly webs of sexual promise never fulfilled (we can no longer engage in that, either) and wait for you to wander too close, get stuck, hurry your best to get free, only to realize its too late.

Every once in a grand while, some wide-eyed child will wander in for some reason or another. That would have been Clayton looking for the girl with the veil. But, what he found instead was a pack of devils, and yes, some wore veils, three or more wore veils, surely. He had not counted on confrontation, or even being out of place. The sudden sense of inferiority grasped him tightly, whispered slanders and libels into his ear as he saw the darling Ghores off in the corner well dressed, well groomed, then catching by accident a glimpse of himself in the mirror sporting ratted jeans, a soiled white t-shirt and a faded, flannel shirt untucked. That is another reason the Phantom Ghores love the Café Einstein. It has many mirrors and Phantom Ghores never bore with looking at themselves.

Every once in a while throughout Clayton’s life he would make a move that would surprise many. Clayton understood the pulse of the human animal, and what drives it. He was convinced of what motivated people into action. Appearance is everything, and
he had always been blessed with a distinct handsomeness, and a physique that was nearly perfect. He did not dare step into the café looking as he did. But he needed to talk to these strangers should they be the ones that befriended Justine before her death; he needed to know who his fiancé had become when she died, what she had done with her days while living in Berlin, and what had influenced her away from him.

So, with an astounding sense of courage Clayton rushed out of the café, removed the faded flannel shirt and tossed it in the closest trash can. He then tucked in his soiled white t-shirt as it tightened against his body revealing the shadows and curves of a form that many women in Georgia had swooned over, including Justine at first: the abs, the pectorals, and the biceps of a man whom many women had desired and whose image they had kept close at hand when making love to their husbands, pretending it was Clayton, feeling in their painful orgasms his heavy muscular body over them. Clayton was not stupid, I cannot stress this enough. He was simply naïve to the world at large. But, all creatures, no matter where they are, nor who they are, hold one common low denominator: they are driven by sexual impulses to which they have no control.

He stood for a moment and only breathed, a heavy sigh that allowed all fear to depart, and once he was confident he could handle anything, he walked back up the steps into the Café Einstein. His ball cap covered his eyes, but he could see them in the corner, he could sense them sort of squinting at him to get a better look. He walked broad shoulder and back-straight for a table near the window.

Clayton patiently waited, watching their reflection in the café window, watching them look at him, then talk to each other, look at him, then laugh a little at each other. This was no use, he thought. “They just think I’m some fucked up redneck lost in the
big city.”

The waiter approached in German.

Clayton responded with an over drawn and slow, “Do you speak English?”

“Would you care for a menu, sir?” The slight, bewildered sound of the waiter’s voice was just enough to cover his real question: “Are you sure you belong here?”

“Can I just have a coke?”

“Nothing to ...eat?”

“No, thank you.”

As the waiter left, Clayton took notice of a young woman spying at him from the group. They were all dressed in the 1930’s clothing that Justine had written about in her letters. To be quite frank, they all looked more apt to be in her apartment than she did the last time he saw her.

And although there were some women wearing simple veils attached to their hats, the woman from the hotel was nowhere to be found.

One woman amongst them seemed unable to take her eyes off Clayton. She smiled quite boldly in his direction when Clayton caught sight of her and he smiled back, genuinely enough. She behaved with the perfect flirtations befitting a young woman eager for a strong man to lend her a helping hand. She moved her hands through her hair and licked her lips, batted coyly the lashes and gave a demure stance that can be terribly sickening. Clayton flashed a golden smile, an American smile that screamed of farmlands and freedom. And she subjected, left her peers with a toss of the hand and a look of conquest, and moved towards Clayton.

“Are you American?” She asked with pitches that went higher and higher as the sentence went on.

“Yes, ma’am, I am. I’m Clayton.” He stood, outstretched his hand for her to shake, but she refused it with a queer look and a
“May I sit with you?”
“Yes, ma’am.” Those gracious southern manners reared forth as Clayton took to the chair opposite his and pulled it out for the young girl.
“Your English is really good,” he said to her as she sat.
“Oh, yes, well I learn it in school,” as if to say that Europeans were not as singular in their tongue as the Americans were. “My name is Rebecca Polzfusion-Ghore. It is nice to meet you, Clayton.”
“Ghore? I’m looking for a woman with that last name! She must be your kin.”
“My kin? What is kin?”
“A kin is someone in your family.”

There was a look of surprise on Rebecca’s face. As if trapped. Her eyes went wide with a certain Bette Davis approach when she said, “Oh....? Really....?”
“Her name is Tasha Knopf-Ghore. Is she your sister?”
“Bah-ha ha ha!!!” A roll of laughter came forth from the girl.
“No, she’s not my real sister, but she is like a sister to me....Goodness, how you know Tasha! You must have been a bad American to want to find Tasha!”
“But, you have the same last name.”
“Oh, we do! But, it’s not a real family, yes? It’s a...oh,...” she pounded the table slightly, “...what is the word you say...like pretend? It’s a pretend family!”

Clayton looked confused.
She explained, “We all have this, it is our pretend last name. Ghore. With the,” she drew a hyphen in the air with her index finger. “It makes us together, like we are a family. But, we are not a real family. Tasha is just one of my friends....and the one who gets all the very handsome Americans. Ha ha!”
“Well, I also thought since the two of ya’ll were so beautiful that maybe you were related.” Very good, Clayton. Very well played.

“Thank you! That is very sweet of you! Why do you look for her? Is there something for which I can help you with since she cannot be found?” She leaned in with a sexually devious smile.

“I was just hoping to meet some people who knew my fiancé.”

“Ahh, I see,” she said sighing, “so sad. Its always this way. The nice looking men are already taken.....or they like the other nice looking men.”

“She died a few days back.”

“So then you are free!”

The comment of death can do nothing for the dead. It is a very matter of fact point, an episode in the timeline of things that happen.

“And I was hoping,” he continued, “to meet some friends of hers.”

“I see. Was she American, too?”

“Yeah. She had come here to visit but I guess she decided to just stay and live here.” He lowered his head and said quietly, “But she died here instead.”

“I am sorry to hear this. But, I am also sad to say that I do not know any American girls.”

Foolishness made Clayton feel welcome. All this for nothing.

“But, I know that Uwe made friends with an American girl a few weeks back.”

The country boy’s eyes were suddenly alive again. “What was his name?”

“Uwe. You say istringstream.” Rebecca made some rather sexual movements with her lips as she did so, as if to suggest what
her capabilities could be in the arenas of foreplay.

“Is he here with you?”

“Oh, Clayton, you must be patient. Uwe never comes to the Café Einstein until after dark. He has much to do!”

“Will he be here tonight?”

“If you want him to! I can go tell him for you. I will tell him to meet you here tonight. That is, if you say that you are going to come.”

“Yes, I will. I promise,” he said while thinking such horrid things about Uwe. Was this her lover? Her foreign lover that gave her that first orgasm? “What time?”

“Say after happy hour?”

“Why then?”

“It is respectable!”

A confused Clayton only thanked her, left a few Deutsch Marks on the table for his coke, and left for the hotel.

Now, Rebecca rushed back to the rest of the Ghores who were sitting ever so patiently, waiting to know what was happening.

“Oh, God!” She screamed, “You will not guess who that was! The American girl! Justine! It was her fiancé! Came all the way from America to find us! Can you believe it? Us! Oh, Uwe is going to have fun with this! I cannot wait to tell him! He is going to have such fun! I told the boy to come back tonight when Uwe is here. Oh, my goodness! You know how much Uwe dislikes Americans!”

With that the Ghores went back to their roars of laughter and displays of brazenness.
By the time Clayton had returned to the hotel Susan was in a fit of drunkenness, sitting on the bed facing the window with one bottle grappled tightly, meandering in and out of pain and morbidity.

“You ever get those moments where the only thing that really helps is this?” She lifted the bottle to show Clayton what she had done. The fifth was nearly three fourths gone.

“Are you going to be ok?”

“I didn’t know where you were. I didn’t have anybody to talk to. So, I talked to Jack. Yes, my new friend, Mr. Daniels.”

The sight was gruesome, really. To see the upright, forthright, southern noblewoman falter in such a mad way was such a sad display. Her red eyes were unable to keep themselves focused on Clayton, red eyes that screamed a pain the likes of which no human should ever experience. It is a pain one slight degree short of a cut to the throat, or a stab to the heart.

As Susan struggled to sit at the edge of the bed, Clayton tried to help her firmly on it, or perhaps to ease her slowly off it, but she would have no part of his assistance, his chivalry, his good nature, and simply waved her hand, motioning not only for him to let her be, a gesture that suggested his kindness was disgusting.

“You’re a good guy, Clayton. I don’t care if my whole family thinks you’re a fucking loser. You’re a good guy.... But, get your goddamn hands off me. Let me sit here drunk. Let me just sit here and do this.”

“I don’t think getting drunk is a good idea right now.” It was impossible for him to respond to her comments. They were shrill, unkind. But, that deplorable good nature of his kept him from listening to anything she said with total concern. She was drunk.
And as a man who’d experienced that same damage done by Mr. Daniels, knew that nothing of what you said was truth. What you said was simply emotions poisoned by pain and jealousy.

“You know I’m 33 years old and I have never been drunk? Not once in all my life. This is the first time. I need it. I’m a spinster girl with no family. I’ll be sitting at home from now on with my aunts. I’ll join them in their row of walkers and respirators. I’ll just step right up aside them and take my place next to their stink.”

And if one may mention stink, the smell of alcohol fell off of Susan in waves crested with the tinge of vomit. It was apparent she had regurgitated at least once already, though no sign of the mess was to be seen anywhere. Susan’s dress was nearly undone, half falling from her shoulders, her hair tasseled and tossed to the side, her stockings beheld a run in the left side that traveled the inner portion of her thigh. She misstepped when she spoke, and stammered when she moved; slow, unresponsive, with sudden gestures of anger. It were those quick shouts on her end, when seemingly speaking to no one but herself, those abrupt dips into anger that caused hesitance when Clayton said, “I’m going back out in a little while.”

“Oh?” That was the soft end of how she sounded. “Find a nice German girl to fuck?” That was the abrupt end, complete with angered, fisted hand to her side. The comment was unwarranted, but not surprising coming from someone so twisted by death and alcohol.

“No, I’m meeting someone who knew Justine.”

Susan laughed darkly, looking at him with shredded eyes. “Justine....Oh, God, Clayton, you’re such a fool. Such an idiot. Why can’t you just forget about her? I brought you here so you could bury her, not chase down her memory. Is that what you’re doing? Do you think that if you get to meet her friends, that you’ll
bring her back? That she’ll be the Justine you wanted and not the Justine she was? Get rid of her memory and move on, Clayton!”

“Move on to what?”

“To someone else.” That glance that erupted from her then was too telling, too confessing. It made Clayton uncomfortable.

“And that’s not the only reason I brought you here, Clayton.”

His voice would be cold now. He didn’t appreciate the impending flirtation. He didn’t care for it at all. It was beneath her, it was beneath a code of morality that she was supposed to represent and uphold. Honor. Family. Respect. “You’ve said enough.”

“She didn’t want you, Clayton. She didn’t want any of us!”

“I know that! Why do you have to remind me of it! WHY! I was in LOVE WITH HER! And then I come here, read her fucking letters and find out she didn’t give a shit about me! I feel like I was LIED TO! LIED TO! Don’t you fucking get it? I want to know WHY....” Clayton was now on the verge of some much needed tears, a relinquishing finally of his own depth of pain, but he would have no part of it. Not now. Not in front of the drunken sister too eager to bed him.

“So, why do you have to,” she fell completely off the bed then, “why do you have to go hunting down her past? Why is that so fucking important to you? She didn’t want us to know. And I....I am only too thankful,” waving the bottle like a baton that correlated with the misery of her slurring dialogue, “I am only toooooo happy not knowing a thing about what was going on. Drugs? I don’t care. I don’t wanna know. Sex? Please, I really don’t wanna know about that. I don’t wanna know a thing, I just wanna forget about it. I just want to forget I had a sister who didn’t care about any of us. So, just go, ok????? Leave me alone. I need to get used to being alone.”

“I need to get dressed.” He begin to leave, Susan catching
him with her croaking, choked voice.

“I’ve always wanted you, Clayton. I always defended you to my family. Even if you had married Justine, it would mean you’d be near enough for me to see,” she started moving towards him, attempting a seduction that came across as nothing but drunken slobber, “to see and fantasize about. I could make you happy, Clayton. You’re so strong and so good. So handsome.”

Clayton gave no response.

“She was stupid to give you up. She was just toying with you, when I could love you, Clayton.”

“Susan, stop it.”

“No, Miss Susan?” She started laughing. “That’s more like it. Be real with me, Clayton. You’re on my level.” She did her best to imitate the qualities of sensuality she had only ever seen in movies, not emotions she had ever experienced nor cultivated first hand. “Be real with me.” She took one step more and rested her free hand (the other hand still tight around the bottle) on Clayton’s shoulder. He softly brushed it off.

“You’re drunk.”

“I want you.”

He only sighed and shook his head. “I’m leaving.”

“How dare you,” she screamed hitting his chest. “How dare you refuse me, when I could give you anything. Anything!”

Sad Susan had now fallen to her knees, dropping the bottle and clinging to his legs as he embarrassingly shoved her to the side and to the floor.

He was forceful, aggressive, treating her as he would any drunk insolent that had overstepped their bounds. “Stop it.” His teeth were grit, his brow pierced into the crease of anger.

Susan’s crying, the sobbing, the drunken wailing all fully fit for a moment such as this. “Fuck you, Clayton! I hope you go away forever! I hope you fucking never come back! Just leave me
alone! *LEAVE ME ALONE!* I don’t want to ever fucking look at you again!”

“If that’s what you want.” He swiftly turned and left, a slam of the door reminding Susan of her wish.

She screamed while pounding one fist into the floor, the other outstretched to him, “*No! Don’t go! Please! I didn’t mean it!*”

——

Uwe is a very special Phantom Ghore and many chapters in the future shall be written exclusively for him. He has monstrous histories that need to be revealed. He is a cunning chap, clad in black, befitting the Ghore that he is....

Know only for now that when Uwe was told the young American girl’s “fiancé” (and they all seemed to laugh loudly when hearing that word, “fiancé”) would be meeting him at the Café Einstein, he made certain that Clayton would not get away from the meeting without being affected.

That evening was smitten with heavy air, for fall had not yet arrived. Trails of summer still left vaporous mists of humidity as you walked the streets. Clayton, having only brought the clothes for the funeral and the ratted jeans and white t-shirt, was back at the Café now in his funeral garb, sweating horribly under the moist air. The suit that had been loaned to him was to have been the same suit he married Justine in, the one that had been leant to him by an aunt because it matched his eyes. The moment he put it on he felt suddenly terrible. The suit said a lot about where he was from, who his people were. They were so poor they had one suit to pass between them, from uncles to nephews, to sons, to cousins. One blue suit held captive by a widow aunt ready to pass it along to whomever should need it, because it matched their family eyes.
Clayton had slicked his hair, wanting to look more appropriate for the clientele at the Einstein, or I should say, wanted to look more like the Ghores sitting boldly in the corners when he was there last time, wanted to fit in.

Many gulps to relinquish the lumps in the throat were pushed aside as he made his way back to that dreadful place, nerves were pounding, the heart filled not with blood, but the acidity of adrenaline as he walked with some gothic slowness, afraid. Who was this Uwe?

All Ghores in the room stopped what conversation they had to watch Clayton enter. They had all heard of his impending meeting with Uwe. They all wanted to see first hand the American chasing Justine. The lighting is dimmer at night, the faces of people shine with a slight glow, and those in the corner, the Ghores, their faces seem to only illuminate with an eerie muted dullness. Their eyes didn’t shine, their lips didn’t reflect the light, the moisture in their bodies gone.... They seemed as paintings when they rested perfectly at ease and still, no motion of the chest to suggest breathing.

Rebecca, the one person he did know, was absent. So there was no familiar face to meet with. The number of men and women dressed in the stylish 1930’s clothing had seemed to double since his last visit. Quite stressed, he was now feeling more than out of place, but uncomfortable.

As he made way for the table every man’s face that he saw was catalogued with a certain priority and complexity. *That one looks to young to be someone she would date. That guy is a little too heavy. That guy has blonde hair. She hated guys with blonde hair. Liked brown haired guys. Shit, which one is it? Which of these assholes made my woman cum?*

Even though there was music provided by a piano player, and a dreadful one at that, Clayton felt that all had gone silent. And
the students mentioned before? The rebellious university darlings reading rough politics and philosophy also watched him enter slowly and move towards the table he had occupied earlier in the day. They, too, were curious of this strangers timidity.

What was Clayton afraid of? The man he was to meet? Or the truth that the man might reveal? Did that scare him? This Uwe... Was it he, personally, that Clayton feared? Or was it what Uwe could tell Clayton about Justine? What she had done while in Berlin... What she done that would cause someone to.... no, don’t say it-

Stab her forty times and toss her out the window....

Clayton took the same seat in the same spot from before. It was now after happy hour. No server came to tend to him.

He nervously played with his tie, nervously patted down his hair. Tapped his feet, bit his nails, wiped sweat from his forehead.

*It’s not this hot in Savannah.*

It wasn’t that hot to anyone else though, either.

The Ghores were watching him yes, but also whispering to each other, which is very hard for a Phantom Ghore to do considering our hearing is very bad. We must shout constantly in order to hear each other, and play off the volume as just simply more rowdy behavior.

Then all dead eyes turned towards the entry way and smiled as some bustling through the foyer of the café was heard. You could hear voices upon voices all clambering over one another, you could hear footsteps, steady and confident marking the movement of the softer ones in its trail, you could hear authority in those steps, and you could hear the total yielding to that authority in the ones that followed.

The entourage entered first and all Ghores abruptly took notice. A cloud of men and women dressed in that derelict decade
swarmed around a tall man as he entered the Einstein. He had one hand comfortable in his pocket, the other hand swinging in perfect time with his confident, rhythmic cadence as he walked not quickly, but assuredly into the café. He spoke softly, but dominantly to those around him. A turn to the left and he gave advice, a quicker turn to the right and he made a demand, a soft yielding to the voice behind him and he delegated an action. He had an air of celebrity, complete with antique cameras flashing their burning bulbs in his direction. All Ghores smiled as the entourage parted, allowing him passage as his completeness was revealed....All went quiet as he spotted Clayton and began gazing at him.

This was not a stare, mind you, for it was not demeaning. It was a gaze, one that lends itself to the seductive ways of the eyes as they attempt to pass into you and read you. There, tilted upon a narrow face rested some eyes beset behind high, cheekbones. A thin brown mustache accentuated his thin lips and angular jaw line; the entire face lifted to reveal totality and superiority.

“Oh shit,” whispered Clayton under his breath.

Uwe was striking. His handsome distinction was not in some physical beauty, but rather in a prominence and an immediate aura that revealed sophistication and class; assuredness lured over him, something indefinable and confident held you transfixed by him.

This master at the doorway possessed a refinement that exceeded common intellect, something Justine would have rushed towards. And here marks one Phantom Ghore that realizes the epitome of our own art form: presence. It is what we do best.

Even the dreadful piano player seemed to stop and take notice of what seemed a showdown. The alleged lover meeting the alleged fiancé? His already crap piano skills were more noticeable the less focused on the keys and the more focused on the event he seemed. Notes cracked and waned, went off scales and into ravines.
Terrible, really. An awful player.

Uwe first acknowledged the presence of the other Ghores with a familiar smile, something that hinted at inside jokes and running dialogues, glances that need not speak what was already understood. Then Uwe walked towards Clayton with a beautiful woman of complete 1930’s regality at one side, and a shaved headed man doused in massive amounts of make up and pencil thin goatee on the other.

At second glance Clayton was awestruck at how astonishing the woman looked. She moved along side Uwe with a flow that resounded of music all her own. She had dark hair and wide eyes, brilliant eyes, but kept them heavy lidded; complete with a smirk, she looked deeply at Clayton, expressing her own interest in meeting the American fiancé.

Uwe Krieg-Ghore approached Clayton and outstretched a leather gloved hand. “I assume you are Clayton?”


“Call me Uwe.” And an enormous grin befell the foreign fellow. “May I sit down?”

“Yes, sir, please do.”

And the crowd of students and Ghores and terrible piano players went back to what they had been doing prior, although, the Ghores kept an especially careful watch over the rendezvous between Clayton and Uwe.

*What do you think they’re talking about?*

*I can’t imagine!*

*Do you think Uwe will hurt him or hug him?*

*Probably both!*

*Do you think the American is sexy?*

*Very sexy.*

*One of the better Americans I have seen coming through*
here in along while.

Including Justine.

Uwe was the first to speak. “May I first say that I am very sorry about the passing of your fiancé.”

The English was thoroughly perfect, but beyond perfect it was devoid of any German slurring and heavy accent. And yet, it was not quite an English accent either. But even more so, there was a deepness to Uwe’s voice that shuffled on the hint of a rumble. This voice one might hear was the sort that could strike and command, yet for now was being sympathetic and clear.

Clayton took note. “You’re not a German?”

“No. Well, to be frank, I wasn’t before, but now I am.”

“Where are you from?”

“I have been so many places for so long that it’s hard to say. But, I was born in the States like yourself, but have not been there in ever so long. You’re obviously from the south, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am. From Savannah, or round about Savannah.”

“Oh, really! And I bet you have a pick up truck, too, don’t you?”

The woman snickered a little while the other gentlemen, the androgynous one, out right laughed at him.

Clayton, offended said, “Yes, sir, I do.”

“I meant no offense, Clayton. We’re not picking on you. I was actually just hoping to make you feel comfortable. You have to understand that people from the south don’t really come to places like The Café Einstein very often. They rarely make it to Europe. So, its just interesting to see you here.”

“Well, sir, I came to bury Justine.”

“Sir? God, you don’t have to call me, sir.... We’re about the same age, right? I’m 32, you?”

“Well, I’m 28, but it looks to me like you’re a pretty important guy, and where I come from important men are called...
sir.”

“Well, I insist you refrain. Enjoy yourself casually while in our company and call me by my name.”

Clayton lit a cigarette, very nervous whilst he did so, the hand shaking, the flame only brushing the tip of the tobacco every now and then before it was finally lit.

Uwe leaned in. “Clayton, I wish to say it again. I am sorry for the loss. I met Justine a number of times while she was here in Berlin,” and then he paused to stare Clayton directly in the eyes, and the stare said something about connection, “but I want to assure you with total honesty, that there was nothing at all but acquaintance between your girl and myself. Do you understand? I can gather by your actions and your devotions that you find me a little suspicious, but I assure you as a gentleman, I in no way ever even touched the girl, nor wanted to for that matter.”

Clayton looked to the two comrades on either side of Uwe, who were both still standing like chaperons, like figures to compliment him. They too, held equally serious expressions.

“Justine and I were no more than two friends with the same group of friends.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“But, of course.”

“Was she seeing anyone here?”

“She had friends, many friends. She spent most of her free time with us here at the café, or at the Billy Club, or the Linientreu. I do think she had sexual encounters with various men, but I am not aware of who they are. They are not men from our little group.”

Uwe stopped suddenly to look back at the woman, “Sounds like Edgar is in perfect form tonight,” then back to Clayton to explain. “Edgar is the piano player. We call him ‘Drunken Edgar’ and for obvious reasons.”

“He’s a bad piano player.”
“But, isn’t he great?” He lunged towards Clayton with a
laugh, “he’s the perfect bad piano player.”
Clayton gave a little laugh that helped soften all moods.
“Just look at him, Clayton! Look at that grin! That face!
That old man’s drunk, smiling, smashing away at the keys,
oblivious to the sadness of life around him...It’s wonderful!”
“As happy as a pig in shit.”
“Ahh! Your southern vernacular shows itself!”
Drunken Edgar sat at the piano shifting through a dream
haze of drunkenness, eyes heavy with alcohol and an enormous grin
that would have given any Cheshire a run for his money. He would
play badly with two hands, then continue playing even worse with
only one hand while the other made way for a glass of wine sitting
at his side. He would even light a cigarette and try to see the keys
through not only the fog of smoke, but also the double vision the
Merlot sent him in. Dreadful.
“But, such a show! Madness! I love it! And where are my
manners? They’re always at my side, so I do my damnedest to
forget they’re even here. But, you would think I was raised
improperly if I did not introduce them. This is Gabby,” he pointed
to the woman, “...and Freddy,” pointing to the man in make-up.
“Hello, Clayton,” said Freddy who was obviously so
smitten with Clayton that it came out, “Helleeewww Clay-TON,” all
done with the lasciviousness of a flashing bright eye. Clayton sort
of frowned and the thankful salutation from the beautiful woman
excused him from having to even speak to Freddy.
“Hello. Its very nice to meet you, Clayton.” Her voice was
raw and smoky, sexually explicit in its growling undercurrent. “It’s
a pity Justine never mentioned you.”
The soreness of truth was back in full form. Clayton looked
down to the table.
“Really, Gabby,” said Uwe. “And we were having such a
swell time.”

“I am so sorry,” she said with hand covering her mouth. “I guess that was rude of me.”

Uwe stood. “Why don’t you two leave us be for a short while. We need to talk like men. I think I can appreciate what Clayton is going through. I’ll meet up with you later at the Billy Club. Perhaps our new friend will be persuaded to come with me.” Uwe winked at Clayton. “You’d like the Billy Club.”

Gabby said simply, understanding the brush-off, “Very well. Again, Clayton, my condolences. I meant no harm.”

“Its alright ma’am. Its not something I haven’t heard already.”

In a moment the two were gone, leaving Clayton and Uwe alone. The waiter was summoned. What Uwe said to the server in German equated to something like this: “How dare you have left this man unattended for so long. He is our guest, and you ought to respect our guests should you wish myself and my friends to ever venture back into this café again. There is an awful lot of money to be made when we’re around....We have no problem shifting that loyalty elsewhere.”

Then back to Clayton in English he said, “We should have a drink, Clayton. I want to buy you a drink.”

“Ja, Mein Herr?” The server was addressing Clayton, but Uwe interjected.

“We speak English to Americans, not German.”

“Yes sir. My English is a bit bad, but I shall do my best for you.”

“You attended school. I imagine your English is flawless.” The waiter would give glances of superiority to Clayton, but looks of obedience towards Uwe, and very rarely would he look longer at Clayton than he had to, only long enough to witness something appallingly wrong about the boy, intolerably out of place.
“What shall I get for you?” Asked the waiter of Clayton. Again Uwe interjected. “Please address my American friend correctly before proceeding.”

The waiter sighed and tried again, “What shall I get for you...sir?”

“Coke is fine.”

Uwe paused, batted his lashes in disbelief and looked to Clayton with astonishment, the big dark eyes doubling size at some disbelief. “You can’t be serious. Or, maybe I just heard you wrong. I encourage you not to do the hard stuff in public, my friend.”

“No! Not that! I mean a Coca-Cola.”

Again, Uwe shook his head in disbelief, drawing back ever so slightly from the table as if the sound “Coca-Cola” would cause a reaction of tragic proportions.

The waiter cleared his throat and played his part. “Perhaps your American companion would prefer a nice German beer?”

“Have you had a German beer since you’ve been here, Clayton?”

“No, I haven’t. Well, I’ve had a Beck’s before.”

“No, no, no. It may have a German name, but it’s not a German beer. You need something with history and craftsmanship in it, something that real people savor, not something some marketing department in America decided to sell you as imported. I can just imagine these meat market bars with gruesome blonde people in it; fake people ordering Beck’s because they think it makes them sound important or something. Don’t look at me like I’m odd, Clayton. I lived in America for long time, I know what I’m talking about.” Uwe slammed his hand on the counter. “It’s settled. Bring two Schultheisse.”

The waiter looked troubled. “Are you sure, sir?”

“I know its shit beer, but its echt Deutsch, as they say. Real German. Working class. Be sure to bring it in the can. No glasses.”
For two hours the gentlemen sat pouring into each other’s past history. That is, only what they wanted the other to know about themselves. For instance, when two men meet, presumably under even the best circumstances, it is likely they will do more than attempt to impress the other, they will try their best to make the other seem less important, inferior. Good events about the life they lead are cataloged and left for display, other events shameful events, those that make him balanced and real are left out of such stories and forgotten. Uwe made no examination of his own life for Clayton; he did not dare go into slight details about where he was from, what he did with his time, nor from what origin that unusually enunciated accent hailed from. Uwe was the perfect Phantom Ghore in every possible way: give no truth, only lies, and make sure the lies are deliciously coated with a rich flavor for easy swallowing. He even bound some moments of the conversation with flirtation. Yes, that’s right, some flirtation was used, and Uwe would not have been the master Phantom that he is had he not done so, or at least tried.

Clayton assured the man on many occasions that he was a simple country boy from Georgia, although he never divulged his lack of an education, his lack of intellect, and even made it seem as though he owned his own business. “I own an automotive shop,” was his answer. The truth was he regularly, sometimes not, fixed the cars and trucks of friends and family for a small fee. He had no shop to speak of, but an area behind an old oak tree, behind his uncle’s trailer where he did most of the greasy work.

Within the course of two hours the men had fallen into a deep conversation about this and that, and Clayton, who assumed that Uwe also had been drinking as well, drank many beers. But of course, Uwe had only been mimicking the act of drinking. The Phantom Ghore cannot ingest anything into his body, for it is highly dangerous. The Phantom Ghore body does not operate as it did when it was alive. As a matter of fact, the Phantom Ghore body no
longer operates at all. To ingest something would mean it would sit in the body for all time possible and never ever leave the corpse cavity for any reason whatsoever. It sits there, becoming a disgusting rot collecting in the dead belly. So, it is vital that a Phantom Ghore not drink. However the very act alone of sipping a cocktail is too great to leave out of the arrogant show that a Phantom Ghore can put on for his admirers, so he has developed an incredibly ingenious way of mocking the act of sipping to give the illusion that he is drinking.

Uwe and Clayton talked about a number of things, and the more they talked the more comfortable Clayton seemed. They even talked about Justine.

“I miss her, too,” said Uwe. “I enjoyed meeting her. We were all under the impression that she had been running from something. We befriended her not long after she got here, you see.”

“I don’t know if I can talk about her right now.”

“Why, Clayton?”

Clayton said nothing, hoping his silence would give truth to the notion that too many questions had erupted since she died, and none of them had been answered yet, not even after having met the people Justine had known just slightly before she died. The questions of infidelity could hardly limit themselves to passages here, but the questions Clayton needed answering bordered on Justine’s personage....For instance, why had she lied to him, used him, and made a fool of him? Who had she become? What had turned her hateful towards everyone that attempted to love her? These were the questions Clayton needed answering. And his meeting with Uwe had proved pointless thus far.

Noticing Clayton’s silence, Uwe simply said, “Very well.” And left the matter of Justine alone.

They even discussed, only as much as the living is allowed to know, who the Ghores were. “We’re just a bunch of misfits,
really. That’s all. It is my feeling that Justine felt like an outcast, too, and that is why she felt so comfortable with us, dressed like us, and talked like us. We give people with no family a Family. And we all dress alike and talk alike and go to the same places because it makes us feel like one complete family unit.”

“That’s why ya’ll have the last name ‘Ghore?’”

“Yes. My name is Uwe Krieg-Ghore. The two you met earlier were Gabby Kreitzler-Ghore and Freddy Pramschufer-Ghore. If you were to be one of us,” Uwe actually stopped and mulled the thought with a little laugh, “you would be Clayton....Clayton....Oh, I forgot your last name. “

“Strickland.”

“Like a man with a pick up truck would be aptly named. Your name would be Clayton Strickland-Ghore.”

“How does someone get to be in your group?”

“There is no prerequisite,” which is an outstanding lie, because you must be dead, “but I suppose the greatest thing would be the clothing and the style. You could not be a Ghore dressed like...that.” Uwe made some sort of spider like shifting with his hands towards Clayton. “You wouldn’t be a Ghore with that lack of self confidence.” He said with nonchalance, hoping to note a knot in Clayton’s psychology.

“Why not?”

“Because you wouldn’t fit in.”

“Wait. You were just telling me that misfits usually end up being in your group, so how come you all have to dress the same?”

“Because even nonconformity is a system of conforming, Clayton.”

“That’s kinda crazy, isn’t it? I mean you all dress alike and talk alike and wear the same clothes and do the same things and go to the same places. Doesn’t sound like a bunch of individuals to me.”
“And you think any other group is different? Oh, for God’s sake Clayton, look at this little world you live in. Everyone back home where you live dresses one way, don’t they?”

“No.”

“That’s a lie, Clayton, and you know it. Don’t act like you don’t know what I’m talking about. They all wear jeans and a ball cap. In other places in order for you to feel that you are special, you have to wear khaki’s from the Gap and drive a little sport utility vehicle and even have this ridiculous commitment to holistic-all-natural-herbal-feel-good-living that none of you really believe anyway.”

“Dude, I don’t follow you, this is all way over my head.”

“We’re just little more vocal about realizing that this is our group, our style, our way of dress....and not yours, not theirs, not anyone else’s. It belongs to us...and if you wish to belong, you’ll conform.”

Suddenly, Clayton understands what Uwe was getting at. What matters is the leader that you follow, the ideas that you harbor in the mind, and considering the boy was already quite drunk (he had taken 6 trips to the toilet this far), he found himself totally agreeing with Uwe about everything.

Yes, the corporate world had demolished man’s individuality, because individuality does not pay. You can’t get money from someone who refuses to follow your ideas. The only way you can make people follow you is by declaring to them that they will feel safe and secure knowing that they are not alone, other people are buying “the product” and its the best kind of people. So if you want people to realize and recognize that you’re the best kind of people then you’ll buy “the product.” If you should feel the need to belong, certain requirements are necessary, and none of them deal with the intangible, they all deal readily and easily with things everyone else can call material (and I’m not referring to the Ghores
at this juncture, I’m referring to you quickly looking about your life at the moment anxious to catalogue what you have and what you bought that made you recognizable as the best kind of people).

“Its like that at home, too. I know what you mean. Its like all these people that go to church on Sunday can’t tell you shit about the bible,” as narrator I couldn’t resist the lower case spelling, “but they know they have to go, because the right people go to church and they want people to think they’re the right people. And what pisses me off is that God doesn’t give a shit about what clothes you wear and crap like that, but those people in church do. And it aint got nothing to do with whether you look nice, but how expensive your clothes are. Its bullshit.”

Yes, he was quite drunk now.

“Justine was thoroughly intrigued by us, because she felt we embodied something that she needed: the confidence to resist the rest of the world. She told us very little about home life in Savannah, only that everyone around her wanted her to be something that she was uncomfortable being. Did you see that very often?”

“Sometimes. Maybe it’s my fault. I wanted her to be my wife and I know she didn’t want it, but I just...I dunno.”

“Go ahead.”

“I just saw a lot of pain in that girl and I was so in love with her and I was trying to do everything I could to make her feel loved, you know? I wanted her to know that if she was my wife I would do everything I could to help her and take care of her. I couldn’t give her a lot of money or stuff, but I could love her enough that she wouldn’t even notice she didn’t have nice things.”

“But, you know Clayton, no one can give you that confidence. You have to claim it for yourself. And you, you poor man, you can’t give that to someone, they have to realize it for themselves. You can inspire it in someone, but once you inspire it,
they have to claim it for themselves. What use is someone who relies on you constantly for their own confidence? That’s co-dependence, not confidence. Marrying Justine would not have cured her thoughts of not belonging.”

Clayton’s head lowered closer to the beer, staring into the can. Uwe would have no part of depression.

“You need to see the Berlin she saw.”
“Yeah,” he said first slowly, then excitedly, “that’s what I want! I want to know what kind of life she had here.”
“We’ll start with whores. You need to see the Billy Club.”
“With what?” Clayton couldn’t resist laughing.
“I’m kidding. Whores do it for free, the girls at The Billy Club require a fee. The Billy Club is a cabaret downstairs, brothel upstairs.” And then he smiled greatly with a mischievous look. “I’m assuming this doesn’t embarrass you?”
“Hell no!”
“There are many things and many people to do at The Billy Club.”
“Is it a strip club?”
“No, like I said, it’s a cabaret downstairs and a brothel upstairs. It’s more of a theatre, but the girls don’t wear costumes. And if they do, they’re see through! If you like one of the girls performing you can rent her.”
“I had no idea theatre was like that....”

The Billy Club is probably not the best representation to give the young American of theater. It is hardly theatre. It could be called “art,” though. The Billy Club as Uwe mentioned is a sordid cabaret where nearly anything happens. Music, laughter, skits, practically anything to entertain the little mass that huddles
beneath their own drug or alcohol induced needs. It is a qualification that all performers take the stage wearing as little as possible, so that the bigger business of the brothel upstairs can flourish.

The Billy club is a frightfully busy establishment born from years of patrons coming from near and far to see what would be called the “old Berlin,” where sex is artful pastime, not copulatory procreation. Sex was something you did when you were bored, something you made into a theatrical extension of yourself. At the Billy Club you were apt to find fantastical sketches based on the most perverse arrangements possible when it came to sexual partners. Homosexuality is not a perversion so it was rarely a sketch, however the thought of a priest and a choir boy was a fetish that some came to adore, and the abhorred art of an older pious man with his young lad at his side cranking his “organ” would be witnessed on stage with some definite sense of humor.

Daddy daughter role-play was also another that for some reason many people came to laugh at and cheer. Like sexual gladiators taking the stage against moral jaws, the actors and performers would ensue the crowd into a frenzy of lust and need, real need, human need, the kind that lends itself to thievery and bribes; dirty sex where man and woman alone are no longer interesting; dirty sex where fantasies are more apt to bring the erection of the male or the wetness of the female.

The Phantom Ghores love The Billy Club for reasons of its descriptiveness. No hold barred approaches to explaining, describing, or even showing such perversions were willfully displayed for all to see. Considering the Phantom Ghore cannot engage in the act of copulation they adore the description, they adore the near experience of it, and some claim, although it is impossible, to actually feel the tingling sensation in the genitals when they witness such performances on the stage.

When Clayton and Uwe arrived at The Billy Club the
“actors” were performing on stage “the cheerleader and baseball coach” scenario, as the cheerleader was questioning her virginity.

“Does a finger count,” the cheerleader asks with an exaggerated short skirt.

“No, baby, no!” claims the coach with an exaggerated erection through a pair of very tight sweatpants.

She was dressed in a baby t-shirt, white and so thin in its material that you could see the nipples, the heat of the light causing her to sweat, the accumulation of the wetness gathered in her deep cleavage. She was a small blonde thing, perhaps no more than five feet high and bouncy thin with the curvaceous gestures of a bosomy tart.

The coach was a bald, massive man nearly two hundred pounds or so, with hair that covered his body like a carpet, wearing sweatpants two sizes too small and a football jersey that read “FUKKINGRUVIN” across the back.

The cheerleader begins to ask, “Does a cucumber count?”

The coach moved closer to the cheerleader.

“No, baby, no!”

“Does a sausage count?” The audience begins laughing as the coach moves his hands into his pants and begins to leisure himself.

“No, baby, no!....Wait. What kind of sausage?”

“Eine bratwurst?”

“No, baby, no!”

“Then I guess I’m still a virgin,” sites the cheerleader.

The electronic trances of some heavy music moved in and out to give the aura of modern acceptance. Electronic rhythms, synthesizers and such, gave peace and marriage to the old meeting the new.

Clayton stood in the doorway mesmerized already in the height of drunkenness. He simply stood and smiled, watching the pornographic actions onstage. Only in magazines, under the
darkness of nightfall, in the quietness of his secrecy, in his bedroom, had he even envisioned such things. Here it was on stage and everyone applauded and laughed and had fun with it.

Uwe had taken a seat near Gabby and the two were motioning Clayton to a chair that was in front of Uwe. “Come over, quickly!”

“I can’t believe ya’ll don’t get arrested for this kind of stuff!”

“Why would we get arrested? Its only sex.”
“You do it, too, don’t you Clayton?” Asked Gabby.
“Yeah, but not for everybody to see!”
“What a pity. You see, that’s the difference between us and you Americans. For some reason all of you are so ashamed of your bodies. You feel guilty about your desires.”

Uwe had ordered Clayton another drink, but this time there was no beer. It was whiskey, straight, neat in a glass with no ice, at room temperature.

“Here, Clayton, drink this.”
Clayton, having forgotten all terribles and troubles from the last few days, was now sitting enjoying the escapades and drank his little whiskey in one gulp.

“Oh, Clayton!” Screamed Gabby before laughing with howl. “You ought not do that! That isn’t how a gentleman drinks a whiskey!” Again she laughs roarously.

“No, ma’am, that’s how a redneck drinks a whiskey!”
“Does a carrot count?” The cheerleader screamed.

Clayton was laughing to tears, slapping his knee. The girl would bend over provocatively on stage and Clayton would go, “Whew!” and brush the sweat from his forehead. Uwe noticed this, then noticed the girl on stage...then had an idea.

“You will excuse me, won’t you, Clayton? I have a friend I must say hello to.”
Clayton could have cared less, was barely paying attention, was watching the nearly naked girl in a tight skirt show her very thin white panties, to which he could see certain shadows that lent immediate fantasies and urges to Clayton’s groin area. The grin from ear to ear explained all.

How long had it been since he was with a woman? Justine would have been the last. He would have felt a sense of infidelity had he messed around with a girl once or twice while she was gone. But there was that one time the girl in the bar wanted him so bad, soooo bad that in his truck while he told her “no” she still unzipped his pants, and even though he was holding onto the steering wheel for dear life trying to drive her back to his best friend’s house, she unzipped his pants, pulled it out and began to service it. Did that count? Not in his eyes. Yes, he did pull over and wait for her to finish, waited to experience his orgasm so they would not careen off the highway and into a ditch. Did that count? Not in his eyes. And as far as Justine was concerned, well, the last time they had sex was nearly a month before she left for Berlin. The alcohol was playing tricks with him; the images on stage seduced him. He was ready and Uwe could sense it.

“No, baby no!” The coach had the cheerleader on the ground now, on her back as he was spreading her legs wide.

“Does a baseball count?”

“No, baby no!”

“Does a baseball bat count?”

The worried coach looks up in disbelief, sighs and says, “Yes, baby, yes it does!” The coach then falls onto the cheerleader as the sounds of moans and giggles usher a fade to black, the audience howling for more.

Some few moments later Uwe returned with a very proud look on his face. “I went to talk with Freddy. Freddy is the Master of Ceremonies here on some nights. I wanted him to do a special
performance for you, Clayton.”

“Oh, damn. What are you up to?”

“Would you like another drink? You just might need it after seeing the bit he’s putting together for you!”

About that time the lights went into a dreadful blueness, then darkness. Hushes and whispers began to envelope the room and a piercing rumble of music began. A single spot light exposed Freddy Pramschufer-Ghore complete with his pinkish make-up, lipstick, and fake eyelashes, but still sporting the ever-present pencil thin goatee. The light exposed only the face, the single face as he took a long toke from a cigarette, one eye clenched tight as if in deep maniacal thought. Little beats from a drum, then a pause. Freddy speaks with baritone growl, a thickly sweetened accented English.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I give to you Bettina and Roland. Ah, but here is the question! Which is Bettina and which is Roland?” The silhouette of what appears to be a man in a suit appears behind Freddy as the music begins its nearly erotic pulsations. Clayton is at the edge of his seat. The entire audience is motionless, thoroughly silent and still.

“Both have their eyes on a young American from Georgia in the audience tonight. We shall see which of the two of them will persuade him to go home with them.” Another spotlight immediately shines on Clayton, who sits blushing, yet smiling, wildly devouring the extent and extremity of the evening on a whole. “Ja Ja Ja Ja... So, the microphone first to you.”

The silhouetted man takes place where Freddy had been, except it isn’t a man, but a woman dressed in a suit. However, her shirt is missing, revealing soft and firm breasts from beneath the double breasted jacket, and when she walks or turns, they simply fall out with no shame, nor disgrace. She grabs the microphone promptly, with no feminine quality about her. She has make up,
yes, but the hair is slicked back tightly, and the eyes and stance and gestures are all very masculine. Her zipper is even undone to expose a bright pair of red, silk, lace panties. She squats to reveal the undone zipper, the panties, all in Clayton’s direction, he still quite alight with a spotlight all his own.

“Shit! I forgot he wants me to speak the English for the American. Oh yes, I mean you! He wants me to seduce you! Do you like German girls? Or do you only like American girls? Or do you even like girls at all? I see the way you look at the man behind you.” Clayton kept turning around to give Uwe a smile while whispering, ‘you sonofabitch.’ “No? Ok. Just checking. I will not waste my time trying to seduce you if the only thing you are looking at on this stage is not my tits but my dress. Ah shit, my English! I mean my suit. Do you like my tits? They are small, yes, but perfect. This man, he say to me once, ‘more than a mouthful is too much!’ Do you like to look at my legs? Ah you like the legs don’t you? Like Dietrich these legs! But uhhhh, I don’t like the fish like she does. You better be careful. If I open them up you get the smell, yes, the smell no man can resist, the smell of a woman who is hungry-”

An interruption suddenly from another form. This time it is Freddy who has donned a terrible, blond, curly wig and a red spaghetti strapped silk lace dress, matching perfectly the underwear worn by Bettina. He grabs the microphone quickly and pushes her to the side, as she clambers to regain her power and control. “Please, please give me the microphone, please,” he says with lispy pretentiousness. “Thank you... Now you sit down. My turn...” The audience begins to laugh hysterically at the sight of monstrous looking Freddy, the Trans whatever, while Bettina takes a seat on Clayton’s lap.

“Look here little American boy,” Freddy says in nearly perfect rhythm to the music. “Ah shit, the English, I hate to speak
the English, so vulgar a language, you know? Like the little knives coming off my tongue every time I try to speak it, but you, you little American boy, what is your name? Clayton? Yes, that’s it, Clayton. You learn to speak German and you can have any woman you want. Even the woman who likes the fish....are you blushing young thing? My, my, my you country American boys are so sly. You like to dine on the woman? I see that look in your eye. Maybe you and I could be together? You know what I mean by together? I must warn you. I am no treat, no, no, no, I am the whole feast! You come up my ‘backstairs’ later tonight and I show you a good time, Clayton. You make love like John Wayne? You come from where? From Georgia? Oh, I don’t know the men there, but where the men are like you I go anywhere. You hate my English? Does it sound too cute for you? You think my German is sexy? Echt Deutsch, Ja Ja Ja! Some other time then? I hope to see you again. You know, you should be careful while you are in Berlin. Some of these girls are not what they seem. Some of these girls are men, but then again, I have doubts about you, Clayton. Then I will see you again, ok? Ich bin der schonste. Ja? Ok?”

The two then swarmed over Clayton, both nearly toppling him for recognition on his lap, then commenced to elaborate a highly staged, but terribly funny cat fight that looked authentic. Clayton was both shocked and entertained, laughing as Bettina ripped off first Freddy’s wig, as he messes up her hair, then she rips off one of his eye lashes, then he smudges her lipstick, then she rips his dress, then the two tumble to the floor rolling about the chairs knocking tables over screaming, “He’s my American!”

“No, he’s my American!”

“Get your own fucking American!”

“He doesn’t want you, you’re not a girl!”

“That’s fucking right!” Freddy screams standing over the now apparently crippled and beaten Bettina. “I’m no girl!.....I am
“all woman,” lifting the dress to reveal that he is a transexual...No penis at all.

And the crowd goes wild. The audience stands cheering the trans-victor as Bettina crawls off into the backstage area.

“That....” says Clayton confused, but entertained, “...was fucked.....UP!”

“Welcome to the Billy Club. Welcome to Berlin.”

“Justine came here?”

“Yes, quiet often. She sat there much like you, laughing and loving it.”

The intermission had begun, which consisted primarily of a screen scrolled across the stage area, a light shining from behind exposing only the silhouettes of women who seemed to be performing wild actions with wild things such as snakes, dogs, and even the shadow of a well gifted horse.

The noticeable effects of alcohol had begun working their way into Clayton’s speech. He had begun to slur. Uwe also noticed that Clayton had difficulty keeping his eyes open, noticed that Clayton was leering at women across the room. Now was the moment the fiendish Ghore had waited for.

“I have a present for you, Clayton Strickland. A welcome gift.”

“Oh, really? I hope it’s nothing like that little skit they just did.” The boy was beaming from ear to ear, drunk as he could ever remember in his life. The thought of Justine was contained to happier times and happier themes. He even subsided some mystery in his mind about the people, places, and things Justine had encountered while living in Berlin. He saw no harm in the Ghores and was content to accept what Uwe offered as a gesture of good will.

Uwe snapped his fingers as dramatically as one might notice in films. The smokey air around him shriveling into small cyclones
as the air whipped around the snapping of his demand. The cheerleader who had been on the stage some time ago arrived instantly and took to kneeling beside Clayton. He began to ogle the pigtailed, young girl immediately.

“What’s going on?” He asked with delight.

“I was backstage some while ago and was talking about you with Katrina here. She has a thing for Americans. Especially football players. I assume you did play football in high school, didn’t you? I mean judging from that physique of yours.”

“Yes, I did. I was a quarterback.” The smile was even brighter, his eyes moving up and down the luscious looking tart that had been laid before him.

Uwe’s eyes were the slanted pitch of a snakes. His grin, half cocked, reveling in its own dismal shine. “I figured that you and Katrina should get to know each other intimately, talk for a while...Possibly in the privacy of a room upstairs...?”

“I’d love to get to know her better.” Clayton was gazing into Katrina’s eyes, the sound of his sentence half slurred, half dreamy.

“Excellent. Its settled. I’ve sent a bottle of that whiskey you seem to like to her room upstairs. Why don’t the two of you go up there and...talk.”

Clayton was smiling into Katrina’s blue eyes, the heavy sighing of sexual need coming out in labored, anxious breath. Katrina moved her hand through Clayton’s hair, mussing it, then blew into his hear. But, Clayton suddenly shifted his attention back to Uwe with some seriousness.

“Wait...this isn’t illegal, is it?”

“Only if you want it to be, Clayton. Only if you want it to be.”

Katrina placed her hand on Clayton’s thigh. “You haff very schtrong sighs!” The accent was sensual, erotic. Clayton was unaware that the bulge in his pants was grower thicker, longer, more
active, searching for a place to reside a while. Katrina did asked, “Would you like to come choin me in my rhoom?”

Clayton stood with his intentions firmly visible, outstretched and eager to be delighted. His erection was noticeable, was impressive, thought Uwe....and oh, what a Ghore wouldn’t give to experience the sexual pleasure Clayton was about to have! Uwe stared at Clayton’s protrusion, fantasized about it, memorized it with intent eyes. The weakness of a man can surely be seen in the ability of another.

Katrina took Clayton by the hand and the two disappeared behind the backstage area.

“That should keep him busy for a while. We need him distracted for a while,” said Uwe.

Gabby looked with disappointment towards Uwe.

“Then why didn’t you just dismiss him and send him home?”

“We can’t be rude to him. He’s confiding in us.” He then quickly changed his attitude to something more flippantly foul. “And because I felt like playing. I loved watching him get firm when she came over. Didn’t you? I may not be able to touch him, you may not be able to touch him, but we can both get some tremendous satisfaction in watching her touch him.”

“Maybe a little,” said Gabby knowing all too well that distinct sense of loss when it came to the Ghore sexuality. “I miss kissing a man.”

“I don’t want him thinking about Justine forever. The best way to help him move on is to get him fucked, and not just fucked, but fucked beautifully by a pro, a master, someone who would have him begging for more and more, and poof! Gone would be the thought of his Justine from memory. Apparently, he’s leaving tomorrow. I want him leaving as soon as possible, having very little thought for Justine’s memory to keep him company. I want him
thinking about Katrina on the flight home. Never has someone done this. Never has someone come looking for us. That girl was writing letters home? What was Mele thinking, allowing her to do that. She was writing letters about us.... Now, here he comes looking for her ‘friends’....That American girl had better be worth the trouble.”

“I hope so, too,” said Gabby softly.

“We should leave for the cemetery now. We don’t want to be late. The Digger is waiting for us.”

Katrina did her best to play the part she had been paid. Katrina was a simple honest hooker who had been given an enormous amount of money by Uwe to service the boy. Whatever Clayton wished, Katrina should oblige.

She led Clayton back to her dressing room. There was nothing but a simple bed and vanity for which to apply her make up. The two, of course, did more than talk. They had the kind of angry sex that Clayton had always refused the ever-willing Justine. This simple hooker was worth damaging, though, he thought.

“Do you vant me to take off zuh clothes?” She asked him as he laid her on the bed, on her back.

“No, I like it like this.” He stood above her unbuckling his belt, unbuttoning his pants, unzipping his fly. He then dropped the pants to the floor, but did not take them off, his enormous member bouncing with delight as Katrina smiled. He shifted her legs open.

“Do you vant me to take off zuh panties?”

He did not answer, but climbed on top of her and felt the head of his penis against the soft cotton of panties. Then he pushed as Katrina howled happily, then he pushed harder, then harder more until he ripped the panties and shoved himself entirely inside her as
she screamed with some pain. The softness of her was a craving he had forgotten, the warmth around his penis something he had forgotten, and he pushed in harder.

Katrina smiled behind a scowled face beset with pain and said, “I am for vat you vant. You do to me vat you vant.”

“Wrap your legs around me.”
She did as she was told, causing him to go deeper inside her, stretching her to an unbearable degree of discomfort.

“Wrap your arms around me.”
She did as she was told, pulling the heavy young American on top of her.

“I wanna hear you scream. I don’t wanna hear you do anything but scream.”

Profanities came from the boy’s mouth, absolute horrifying profanity. Things he had never dreamed he would say to anyone ever in his life, never beyond the fantasies he had masturbating in soiled bed sheets came roughly from his tongue. The bed on which they rode hit the wall a number of times as he angrily, with teeth grit, pounded himself into her, screaming, “Why? Why? Why are you fucking me? Why did you fuck me? Is that what you want? You want that? Is that what you want? You want me to hurt you? See how it feels? See how it feels to be hurt, Justine?”

And Katrina, not out of performance but out of absolute, torturous pain was indeed screaming.

“Fuck! I wanna hear you scream god dammit! Scream! I know it fucking hurts! I KNOW IT DOES! I’m not making love to you! I’m fucking hurting you!”

Her nails dug into his back as she bit her lip, thinking of her price, of what she had been paid, of what her role was to be, despite the injury he was inflicting.

“Why? Why did you fucking hurt me? You wanna know what its like to be hurt?”
In and out of her he went aggressively, pushing himself so deep into her she squealed, losing her breath, his arms under her back, his hands grabbing her shoulders with white knuckles, pushing himself into her faster and faster as poor Katrina could in no way have an orgasm, the warmth of her vagina tainted slightly by blood and cream.

“Why? Why did you hurt me?”

Katrina, confused, screaming, begged him, “Please! PLEASE!” How he hurt the young girl, thrashing inside her, his hands now grabbing her hair tightly, the other wrapped around her buttocks, pulsing inside her with such ferocity and such anger that the girl could hardly breathe. “Why? Why did you fucking hurt me?” He kept shouting, his hot breath and saliva on Katrina’s neck as he fucked her.

The length and girth of his member was too strong, too bold for her and she screamed out, “It hurts! It hurts!” and his teeth only grit tighter, his fist curled tighter, his presence inside her tighter, the memory of Justine tighter, the rhythm in his movement in and out tighter....Suddenly, his semen was released as Clayton screamed her name finally, “Fuck you, Justine!” He rested there for a moment as Katrina began crying. Clayton said nothing to her, laid on top of her breathing heavily, feeling the burn of scratches on his back.

With the seed of his fury released, the sweaty head of the country boy fell beside the girl as slowly the thick hips of the muscular man swayed around from left to right between her legs. Katrina heard him crying now, sobbing with the passion of a broken man, “Why did you hurt me? Why?” Katrina, not knowing what to do, simply threw her arms around him and held him tight.

Although he had nearly mutilated her, had damaged her so badly, she suddenly felt the aggressive man above her become tender and could not refuse him the moments he had just moved through. Some girl named Justine had hurt him so badly that he needed some
kind of revenge...and now that it was done, he was breaking down, breaking into truth with the aspect of himself that required no senses. The moments we introduce to everyone as “love” had been the wounded part of him. His soul was hurting, his heart was shredding.

“Why did you hurt me Justine?” Clayton asked of the body beneath him.

Katrina could say nothing, but held him until finally pulling his wet, crying, red-eyed face to hers and kissed him softly on the lips, kissed him with the reserved emotion we save for those we wish to give shelter. The kiss marked a moment that had no sexual overtones, no sensual eruption, but instead rested on the hearth of human understanding, to which all beautiful fires hopefully one day ignite.

Clayton rested his head on her breast, his penis now softening still inside her, and continued to cry.

The rest, he would confess much later, was a blur.

He remembers being very drunk and leaving the Billy Club in search of a cab. Freddy had told him Gabby and Uwe had left already and they would send word to his hotel in the morning, probably to say good-bye to him. He fetched a cab, that much he remembers, and ordered the driver to take him to the Waldfriedhof Dahlem. Guilt and anger were consuming him. Sadness, alcohol, depression, the nature of confusion all made him want to go the cemetery were Justine was buried.

The cab driver was suspicious of taking any body to a cemetery that late in the evening. So he asked for the money upfront. Clayton pulled from his pocket some wad of German
money he did not understand and threw it at the driver, the
equivalent of about 50 dollars.

When they reached the Waldfriedhof Dahlem, the sorely
drunk American was unable to visit the grave of his darling as he had
hoped. Instead, he opened the taxi door and vomited. The cabbie,
quite upset, opened the driver’s side door, shouting muffled dark
German profanities, picking up Clayton’s twisted and pained body
and tossing it into the backseat. The drunk American grumbled and
moved in and out of consciousness. The driver asked where the
hotel was.

Clayton couldn’t speak, didn’t dare move any muscle in his
body, and feeling the vomit rising with a fierce burn up his throat
opened the car door again to throw up....And this time, through
strained, drunken eyes, he saw a car pulling away quickly from the
cemetery. An older model, something that looked antique. Swiftly it
turned a corner with a squeal of the tires and was out of sight.
Before Clayton could throw up again he asked the driver, “Did you
see that car?”

The driver could not understand him.

“Fuck it,” said the boy as he threw up again, slobbering
under his breath. “Hotel Ambassador, Hotel Ambassador. Take me
there.” His guts were being pulled up from the intestines, his throat
was turning inside out, burning from the inside out. But even in the
shril of all this, he had it planted firmly in his head, Why are they
here? That was their car.

He woke the next morning in a panic of sweat and
dehydration.

Susan was pounding on the door. “Clayton, if you want to
eat some breakfast you had better do it now, because we have to
leave soon! Clayton?”

With one eye he was able to register the clock at 7 am. He
had been in bed no more than 4 hours. His sheets were soaked and
somehow he had managed to disrobe himself completely before crawling into bed. The sickness of a hangover can be an unpleasant situation for anyone; however, the amount that Clayton had consumed was at a dangerously high level, something that might have triggered death in the less experienced drinker. So he lay there for sometime, not sure what to do with his body.

“Clayton, I said to wake up.”

“Stop....,” was the only syllable he could summon. Oh, the sound of Susan’s voice was a chilling, dreaded thing and he wanted it to cease. Those good manners he had been reared with could not compete with an angry, aching head that wanted to be left alone.

The shrillness of his own voice, muffled by the phlegm of too many cigarettes caused an ache so desperate in the chest and stomach that he rolled over and threw up again. Clayton rose to urinate and noticed the bruises on his member. “Jesus Christ...from tearing up her panties,” he thought picking up a towel and tossing it on the puke. He then went for the door and reluctantly opened it.

Susan was stressed with a hangover of her own, as she hid behind some dark sunglasses and a pale face pinched with so much sickness.

The sight of her instantly brought to mind her own alcoholic escape the night before, the things she had said, the things he wished she had never confessed. But it was all on the table now, the two of them had damaged their own memories of Justine in one form or another. They had stabbed at her memory in bitter retaliation, had slighted the dead girl that had protested them until the end.

“If you’re going to eat you’d better do it now, we need to leave for the airport in about 2 hours.” She avoided looking at his nude body, her eyes peering past him and into his room. “Clayton you haven’t even packed!” She spun around, turning her back to him, doing everything in her power to avoid spying upon his nakedness. “When did you get in last night? What have you been
doing? Is there someone in there with you? Well, I can’t believe this! I bring you here for a funeral, do you hear me? A FUNERAL and you-“

He slammed the door quickly in her face and crawled back onto his bed, curling into the fetal position and grabbing hold of the pillow as though it were his new lover. Had she been so drunk she forgot about the things she had said? Even better, thought Clayton, had she gotten so drunk she had forgotten that she had gotten drunk?

After about 20 minutes or so he reached for the phone and called the front desk, asking for some hot coffee and a Bloody Mary.

“How much will it cost me to call the States?” He asked.

“Ok. How about a telegram? Ok....Can you send it for me?”

Within time he was able to rise and wander with sway to the rest room and wash himself. The cold of the shower did wonders for his energy and headache. By then the coffee and Bloody Mary had arrived. Coffee to wake him, the Bloody Mary for the hangover. He then went next door to Susan’s room.

“Well, I am glad to see that your manners have returned.” Her tone was so dominant, so pristine it made Clayton sick to hear it. And if she were as hung over as Clayton, then she would be just as moody, just as irritable. “I need to talk to you,” she said.

“You need to apologize.” Clayton was in no mood for that Sizemore superiority, that high and mighty nobility that did no one any good. “You were no lady last night.”

Susan said nothing for a lengthy amount of time. So Clayton decided to speak. “You said some-”

“I’m sorry.” She was disinterested in reliving moments of her downfall before a man she had lusted after. “I don’t wish to discuss it.”

“Fine. But, I need to talk.”
She sighed, “Very well, come in.”

She was folding a dress, gathering her curling iron, making the bed, and doing all sorts of things. “If I keep moving, it doesn’t hurt. If I keep moving I won’t remember how drunk I was last night,” she said. “If I keep moving I’ll be distracted and it will go away. I’ll be home soon. I’ll be fine. Fine in my little bed and breakfast....keeping my aunts company.”

Clayton sat on the edge of her bed and said quite simply, “I’m not going back.” Chills ran up his arm as he said it, surprised he had actually confessed it.

At first she continued about her busy work through the hotel room, then stopped for a moment when the crack of what he had said finally hit her. The dress she had labored through folding over and over was now tossed into the suitcase a wadded mess.

“What did you say?”

“I’m not leaving...At least not yet. I’m gonna stay for a little while. Just another week.”

“You’re still drunk. That’s it, still drunk. You don’t know what your saying. Now, go get your things, we have to leave soon. There will be no time for breakfast now.”

“I know what I’m saying, Susan.”

“Oh, good God in heaven!” She went back to her busy work. “That’s just.....just....foolish! You can’t stay here!” With a sneer so pompous she said as if to hurt him, “You can’t afford it!”

“I sent a message home. I had some money set aside at home...money I set aside for when I married Justine. I guess I don’t need it for that anymore so I sent a telegram asking my uncle to wire it. I’ll have enough.”

“Well, I doubt you can afford to stay here.”

“Yes, ma’am, I can.”

“But, you’ll be broke when you get home.”

“I been just about broke all my life, it won’t be no
different.”

She was growing panicky, frustrated, annoyed with the country boy.

“Why? I don’t understand why?”

He stood and went to the window, the sun catching his eyes from beneath his ball cap. “I met Justine’s friends. I spent all last night with them. I like them alot...And I wanna know more about them.”

“You don’t have my approval.”

“Miss Susan, I wanna thank you so much for paying for me to come here and for being so good to me, and I’m gonna make some arrangements to have you paid back for everything the minute I get back to Savannah....but I don’t need your permission. And I don’t need your blessing either.” Then he chuckled, “Funny how ya’ll think that’s what everybody needs: The Sizemore Approval. You can catch the cab to the airport by yourself.”

Her face was red, frightened, nearly crying. “Oh, I see...”

“See what?”

“You can’t let go of her. And you’re gonna follow her ghost around until it kills you. Well, fine!” Slammed down went the curling iron into the suitcase. “Well, that’s not my problem, it’s yours.”

“I can’t let go of her yet. I don’t know why.”

Clayton, simple Clayton, left that room with Susan inside, unable to finish packing her things, unable to think straight. She just wanted to go home and begin putting this whole mess to rest. She wanted nothing more than the presence of peace in her home, her family, and her life. She stopped her busy work just long enough to sit and begin shedding tears; tears of fear that Clayton would not be all right. She did not trust the foreigners, did not trust Clayton’s decision to stay in Berlin, did not trust the tears that were shed on his account.
Within an hour, two things had happened. The first was Susan’s departure. She stopped by his room and gave him a hug and said she wished him luck, then was off on her way, looking back over her shoulder and shaking her head.

The second was the phone call from the front desk to say that he had received two messages. The first was from his uncle; the money he needed was at a wire waiting for him to retrieve. It was enough for him to continue staying in Berlin for another seven days, but not a moment longer. The second message was from Uwe.

“Sorry we left so soon, but you were busy ‘talking’...Hope you enjoyed our company. We shall miss you, and shall hold our meeting with you at the highest point of our best memories. Again, our condolences on your fiancée’s passing. We shall miss her even more, now that we had the opportunity to meet you.

Uwe Krieg-Ghore.”

Clayton was quite productive throughout the day. First, he retrieved the money that had been wired to him, courtesy of the hotel, and paid for seven days in advance, the difference he converted to cash.

Then he went back to Justine’s apartment, walking this time. The landlord was happy to let him return. “You’re a nice boy. Not like the woman. She a little...,” he did a wishy-washy movement with his hands.

“Yeah, she gets to be a little bit much sometimes.”

Clayton was left to himself throughout the day, studying her apartment, the detail that had been made to every little thing being so cleverly 1930’s. Nothing had escaped her imagination. Since she had the money she could afford to go out and find the antique, the real, and not the duplicated replica. She found cigarette cases, shoes,
stockings, jewelry, hair brushes, hair barrettes, setting lotion, make up, photographs of people she had never known, people who had been dead for decades, the Victrola, the records to go with it, books, fragrances, furnishings, undergarments. Everything seemed more an obsessive compulsion.

She even had a number of photographs taped to her vanity for reference on how to do her make-up, how to set her hair, how this dress or that dress should be worn.

She left no letter behind, as hard as he tried to find anything she had written to herself, a diary, perhaps, but there was nothing. And then, with much hesitation, he moved to the balcony and peered over, down the three flights she had fallen, or been thrown rather...At the bottom was the imprint, the stain of blood where her body had been laying for some time before being found, nude, and stabbed repeatedly.

He stood staring at that tragic spot as people walked over it, as it seemed a hopeless part of some history that is forever overlooked, unimportant.

Well after happy hour Uwe sat with the rest of the Ghore clan chatting about how he had persuaded the American to bed the hooker, and how he was certain Clayton had enjoyed it.

All the Ghores fawned over Uwe as they took to sitting around him, crouching near him, standing beside him, hearing him recount the events of the evening prior. “He’d never seen a cabaret....nor a brothel. Can you just imagine? How sad and incomplete such a life must be....”

The Ghores listened intently to Uwe’s description of the drunken American’s erection, the American’s willingness to bed
Katrina, the American’s wide eyed surprise to discover he was going to have the opportunity to mount the German girl. All Ghores listening intently as Drunken Edgar sat playing the piano wildly. “He was a beautiful specimen, wasn’t he? Such a handsome man.”

As Uwe recounted in near detail the events of the evening, he noticed the cross brows and frantic looks of the Ghores to which he was speaking. They were peering over Uwe’s shoulder, carefully watching the entry way to the café behind him.

He batted the lash slowly. “I’m sorry, but is there something more important than my story you people are looking at?” He asked with feline tones.

Rebecca nodded.

Uwe tilted his head, a sensation and a feeling of disappointment and dread flowing through him. “It would be very ironic if I were to turn around and see that American standing behind me. So ironic I shall probably scream.”

Rebecca covered her ears. Uwe first rolled his eyes and then smirked a ridiculous stale grin that permeated with disgust, slowly turning around to see Clayton in blue jeans and ball cap standing in the door way, complete with a wide, genuine smile as he waved at Uwe. With a forced greeting that did not resonate with legitimate happiness, Uwe stood and went to Clayton, dawning faux gestures of welcoming embrace.

“Hello, my American friend! How are you? What on earth are you doing here?” It was too noticeable, as though he were straining to smile, as if the act physically hurt him.

“I decided to stay for a while.”

“Oh, you did!” Uwe clapped his hands slowly. “Did you hear that everyone? Clayton is going to stay for a while! Oh, what am I saying? They barely speak their own language let alone yours. You’re staying! Well...Isn’t that...lovely. Yes, indeed....” A slow, heartless laugh followed. “What possessed you to make such a
dramatic decision?”

“I had a little money set aside so I decided to stay until it ran out.”

“That’s long enough for....what? Probably a few more days?”

“About a week, I guess.”

“A week! A week, you say....” Another slow, emotionless laugh. “My, my, my. Gabby! Gabby, would you come here for a moment? Look who it is! Clayton has decided to stay with us in Berlin for another week. A whole week more. Isn’t that...fantastic?”

Uwe was behaving as someone who was too giddy to contain themselves, acting, portraying excited, but definitely showing signs of agitation.

“Well, I’ll be staying at the hotel.”

“Yes, of course, at the hotel. But, we can’t hardly let you wander around the city alone now can we? You could end up getting hurt. Or even worse, killed....” Both Gabby and Clayton looked at Uwe severely. “Oh, that was a bad choice of words, wasn’t it?”

But, he knew the choice he had made.

Gabby interjected sharply. “Clayton, I was off to Linientreu in a few moments would you like to go?”

He smiled. “I don’t think I’m quite ready for another place like last night. I’m still trying to recuperate.”

“The Linientreu is a discotheque. If you find any ladies for hire there, you’re on your own. I was just going to go To Parade.”

“Well, then,” said Uwe clasping his dead hands together, “I think that’s a marvelous idea. Clayton, Gabby is an astonishing dancer. You will love the Linientreu.”

“Sounds good to me. A beautiful woman escorting me to a club? I’m all for it.”

As the two were about to depart, Clayton quickly asked, “Hey, Uwe, can I ask you a question?”
“Of course.”
“Where you...oh, this sounds weird.”
“Try me.”
“Were you at Justine’s cemetery last night?”
A clank, a very bad note off the hands of Drunken Edgar punctuated the moment. Uwe seemed suddenly pensive and looked to Gabby, who also, with so many secrets held captive behind the tongue, was unsure of what to say.

“What do you ask?”
“I went there last night. I don’t know why but I decided to go see Justine. I was drunk, it was probably not you, but I saw an old car a lot like yours take off when I got there.”
“Did you go inside the cemetery?”
“Nah, I didn’t make it. I threw up all over the back seat of the cab and the driver was so pissed he just took me back to the hotel.” Clayton laughed like a fratboy might at his regurgitating accomplishment.

Gabby interrupted again to save all concerned. “We stopped by on the way home last night to say good bye to her...We didn’t go to the funeral and the cemetery was on the way to the House, so we just stopped by to pay our respects.”

“Well, I think she would have liked that.”
“Yes, I think she would have, too. It was closure for us, as well. I think that is the word, yes? Closure?”
“Yes, ma’am.”

Shift, Gabby. Save everyone with flirtation, as only a master Phantom can.

“It’s delightful, that little accent you have, and the way you always call me, ‘ma’am.’ You know you can call me Gabby. Its not as sexy, but I will forgive you. Shall we?”

“Are you coming later, Uwe?” Asked Clayton.
“Perhaps. I have to see how the rest of my evening comes
out. I have some company that I have to attend to. But don’t worry, Gabby will take good care of you.”

And Clayton was dismissed quickly from Uwe’s little realm.

“Why did you stay behind?” They walked their way to the Linientreu, enjoying the streets of Berlin.

“I don’t know. Maybe for some adventure.”

“You don’t come across as very adventurous. You seem....”

“What?”

“A little lacking in self confidence. I hope you didn’t find that rude.”

“Nah, its not rude. Maybe I’ve never had too much to feel confident about. No family...I don’t have any real money....and now everything I’ve found out about Justine.”

“You miss her, don’t you? Maybe too much?”

“Yeah. Maybe that’s why I stayed, I just feel like the longer I’m here the more everything will make sense.”

“What are you trying to make sense of? Her death? Or her having not wanted you?”

He stopped immediately.

“How did you know that? Then she did mention me to you?”

“No, she didn’t, not once....and that’s why I know she didn’t want you. You probably spoke about her often, though, didn’t you? So happy with someone you can’t wait to tell everyone about your special treasure.” Gabby did not seem proud at all to be the one to offer the revelation to him. “So, is that what you want to know? Is this really about her dying? Or about wanting to know
what it is that made her want to leave you?”
“I’ve never been good with words. I’ve never been good at
telling people how I feel. But, I guess this whole trip has been more
about me wanting to know what’s so bad about me she’d leave me....” And say awful things about you in her letters home.
“What is meant to be is meant to be and no one can foresee
or control destiny. It’s just how things happen. And everything
happens for a reason. You coming to Berlin...and you staying in
Berlin longer than you should.”
“You think I should have gone home?”
She smiled at him as they turned a corner, “Yes.”
“I take it then that you don’t really like me very much.”
“Oh, I like you very much, very much! That’s why I think
that you should leave. You don’t belong here, Clayton, you belong
at home, and not here trying to find out who your girlfriend had
become, or why she left you, or if she left you for someone-”
“Did she? You’ve been real honest with me so far, did she
leave me for someone?”
“There was someone that she was very fond of.”
“I knew it. Its Uwe.”
“Oh, no no no. Not Uwe.” She paused for a moment if
wondering maybe she had found an ally that she needed, and
wondering if maybe she was revealing too much for the time being.
“It was a woman.”
“Wait a minute....What do you mean?”
“One does not need sexual relationships to love someone,
Clayton. Not at all. Justine was attracted to Mele in a different
way, not sexually. Something more like a sister, or a confidant. She
would have done anything for her. Women are different from men,
Clayton. We are not afraid of emotions like you are; we don’t
conceal the slightest sense of love for another woman if we should
feel it. Any sort of love between men is considered deadly, tragic.
Not with women. Justine loved Mele for being another woman who understood her.”

“I remember reading about Mele in her letters And about you, too.”

“Justine wrote you letters, too? She had told us of the letters she wrote to her sister. I had no idea she had written to you, too.”

“She didn’t write to me. I’ve just been reading the letters she wrote to her sister.”

Gabby continued walking, saying nothing at first. There were incidentals she needed to know, little matters that would help and hurt all involved.

“She mentioned me, also?”

“Yes, she did.”

Gabby smiled with flirtation. “And what did she say?”

“That you were beautiful.”

“Oh, stop that!”

“No, its true. She said that you and Mele were beautiful enough to be models.”

“That’s crazy. Maybe Mele could have been a model, but not me.”

“Where is Mele now?”

“Long gone.” Sad shades in the voice. “Never to come back.”

“Why?”

“Because Justine’s death affected everyone in different ways. Since she and Mele were very close, Mele had to leave, not like you; she did not run into the middle of Justine’s death like you did. No, she moved on. We did not know Justine the way that Mele did, and so we are not as apt to brood for her like you do....nor like Mele did.”

“Where did Mele go?”

“She left Berlin soon after she found out that Justine was
dead. No one has seen her since.”

They were coming closer to the Linientreu.

“Now, you see that building? That is the Linientreu. I think you will love it. I think we should spend the rest of the evening having some fun, don’t you? No sad talk, no discussion about lost loves and friendships. If I should wander off, do not worry. I will be back for you. I often times must do an awful lot of entertaining while I am here. So many people to say hello to. But don’t worry. I won’t leave you unattended for long.”

There was comforting warmth about Gabby that seemed to exude a natural tendency towards motherly affections. She did seem older, but did not look older, and possessed the sort of quality that resides side by side with mothers, nurses, and other caregivers. Softness, gentleness, but a firm devotion to truth that reminds you of what is real in the world: everything you cannot touch or hold.

Within a few moments they were at the doorway of the Linientreu, a small building set a little beyond the main boulevard with steps that went into the club in downward rebellion, as though the place were beneath the city streets, as all good discotheques in Berlin are.

A young man, also with the Ghore style of the 1930’s came rushing up, screeching, “Gabby! Gabby!”

She stopped with a foreshadowing lunge into English. “Hello, Klaus! How are you?”

“Oh? Wie bitte?”

“Auf English...”

“We are to speak English? Ach, so! You have an American friend? Hello, my name is Klaus Frischmann-Ghore and my English is....not so good.”

Clayton said hello and exchanged smiles. But they did not shake hands. No one shook hands with Clayton and he didn’t understand why. Perhaps it was a custom, perhaps it was
something they did. All the Ghores behaved as though they hated being touched.

“Yes, Klaus, we speak English in front of the American.”
“I see...so, you go inside tonight To Parade, Gabby?”
Clayton looked puzzled. “Parade?”
Both of the Ghores laughed. Klaus popped in to explain. “To Parade is to be like....to be like uhhhh... dancing! Yes, you stroll on the dance floor and show all the others that you are the best Ghore, that you are dressed the best and you walk and your manners and poses are all very much real for the 1930’s and that you have the best look.”
“It’s like dancing?”
“Oh yes, its very much like dancing. The music is always very fast and has a rhythm. And while on the dance floor you pose, and you stroll, and you pose more and you do it very fast. And you pose more and you show all the others that you are the best there is. You make the others look bad. You want to see? Its like a competition.”
“It sounds pretty wild.”
“Ok, you come inside the Linientreu and we show how To Parade. Ah so, but you cannot say ‘parading,’ you have to say, ‘To Parade.’ Gabby is the very best, ja? It is like she made it herself! She’s not the first To Parade, just the best. Ok, you come inside now and we show you!”
Clayton was mystified with the Linientreu. He had been to clubs in Savannah, but he had never seen anything like this before.

The Linientreu was perhaps the most illustrious of underground discotheques in the world, a variety of artistically social misfits streamed in and out on nightly searches for adoration: the Ghores, with their intense devotion to the 1930’s; the Gothics, with their fancifully dark dress and worship of the Victorian nightmare; Das Avants, devoted to extremist artworks and political
annihilation, dressed in skin tight black turtlenecks and trousers, doing nothing but smoking French cigarettes in corners; Rockabillies, their dress and attitude in homage to the fifties, the great rock and roll greats, the men concerned with only good German beer, the women, frocked in poodle skirts, concerned with only good German men; the Techno Industrialists, electronic rhythms calling them from keyboards and samplers, EBM, swooning in mechanical love to synthesized distortions of the world. 

David Bowie would attend some evenings, barely incognito, and Annie Lennox would shy her way in also, barely famous, yet. Despite its reputation as respectable and at times catering to the infamous, it was in no way elitist and was easily entered by just about anyone who did not look or behave normal. 

The disco was very dark around the perimeters of the dance floor, a dance floor that was styled as a round circle in the very center set up like an arena. Benches curved in a spiraling ascension around the edge.

There were few people on the dance floor, but they resembled more Clayton than they did the Ghores. They were normal, terribly normal and not worth looking at. The Ghores seemed to control the room totally, as if they owned the place. Opposite the entry way was a long wall complete with mirrors. It was there that the Ghores sat, stood, posed, or laughed. Mirrors were everywhere, even on the dance floor, and although on the dance floor they resembled columns they were still mirrors. Phantom Ghores just love mirrors.

Of the Ghores sitting along the far mirrored wall it appeared, not at first but with careful investigation, that only half of them were real Ghores, the others imposters. You could not tell at first, but somehow the imposters didn’t seem as confident as the Ghores, and perhaps that was the key to the deceiving. The imposters did try their best to have clothes as authentic, and actions nearly as
authentic, but the confidence, that swarthy arrogance, that svelte manner of a real Ghore was not there.

Gabby and Clayton wandered towards the pack of Ghores as many stood in respectful homage to greet the woman. Gabby seemed to command a particular esteem amongst her fellow comrades. She said to everyone in English, over the loud glaring blare of the music, that she was with “the American” who would be staying in Berlin for a week more, and then would look back at Clayton and say with a smile, “only a week more....”

Many came up with proud smiles, looking Clayton over and over, up and down with hungry smiles, ravenous looking smiles, men and women alike, trying to fantasize quickly in the mind what it would be like to have one like him, to be involved with him, to have the senses back for a moment so that they could touch him, smell him, taste him. Oh what magic! Oh, what titillating imaginations a Phantom Ghore can have!

As Gabby began a conversation with one of her Ghore colleagues, Clayton excused himself to the bar to get a beer.

Suddenly, there it was, some shift in the music, something indefinable, but present, noticeable, eerily welcoming the Ghores as you could hear them all gasp with excitement. They placed drinks down, stomped out cigarettes, and quickly moved to the dance floor. Since the dance floor is a round pit in the center, the Ghores would wander round the perimeter, peering out into the audience and smiling slyly. Smirks were paramount. And once in a while one would stop, and simply pose, hand on hip peering into the audience with almost mannequin precision, barely breathing, while the other Ghores would carry on strolling right on past, hips moving delicately, elegantly from side to side, stomping, arrogant strutting that matched the percussion of the music flawlessly. Clayton was unfamiliar with the song, but the rest of us know it as Love’s Secret Domain by Coil.
The Ghores on the floor would hold their poses in photographic stillness until they felt it necessary to continue strutting again, spinning on one heel on occasion, kneeling down, lighting cigarettes, their arms a vigorous movement of ballet and death defying sinewy pomposity. Some of them would move towards the mirrored columns to fix the face, fix the hair, straighten the tie, center the veil and would then move on again. To Parade can be a cavalier affair.

When a Phantom Ghore feels they are ready to steal the audience’s attention, they will move to the center of the dance floor and place the left foot before the right to catch the weight of the body, the balance, then with both arms stretched before the face they will make rhythmic movements that suggest “adore me, adore this face, adore this presence for which you can never belong....,” all in perfect time with the music. The hands are cupped with bent wrist, the palm open towards the chin, the chin proudly lunged forward, the face solemn in serious depiction of severity. This self proclaiming exaltation will continue on throughout the song until another Phantom Ghore wishing to prove his own brilliance will step up behind his comrade To Parade, the two back to back will square off for dominance, and the looser, will take his place back in line with the other Phantoms who are milling about the dance floor, fixing their ties in runway fashion, stopping to pose for the audience, to pose for the living, to allow them for but a moment to study their clothing and perfection.

Clayton was mesmerized. As hot in the discotheque as it was, the beer refreshed him. Cigarette smoke was everywhere, the stench of sweat, rot, vomit and old beer rode right along side.....but it was brilliant.

When Gabby took to the dance floor, she neglected to stretch the perimeter with her strut. She went directly to the center and began her brisk expression of self-applause, of self-adulation;
those movements of the arms that move so quickly in self praise that it appears to be some method of masturbatory reflection. And yet, what was so compelling about watching Gabby was her intensity, her pace with the rhythm, her poses with certain catches of the drum, or her hip’s divulgence ever so lightly into certain moods of the bass, as though her body orchestrated the sound being played from the DJ booth, as though her whole body were an artistic representation of the skill in music, the meter, the notes. What’s more, the woman never once moved those heels more than a quarter turn to the left or right. Those perfectly antique heels stood planted in diva tone to the tile. Only her arms moved energetically, only her hands suggested praise, only her eyes, her expression of dominance remained solid whilst all other areas of her form were simple hints, quiet shifts languid in the rhythm. The spot she chose in the center of the dance floor couldn’t have been more exact, more precise, for the disco lights from above caught the highest point of her cheekbones, shadowing her face into a sensual sharpness.

No one challenged her, none of the other Ghores came close to stealing her center. They remained in their own trances about the dance floor, some dancing like her, near her, but never bucking for her position in the center. The other Ghores faced her in a circle while she danced, as centurions, as guards protecting the epitome of what it meant To Parade.

The rest of the club goers when noticing such spectacles are often amazed and left in wonder about the vanity of it, and the comparison is often made to “voguing.” It is not. And to be perfectly frank the difference, if not only in dance style, has much to do with emulation. When a Ghore steps to parade he emulates no one. He emits, emotes, but he never emulates.

You see, that is the essence of being a Phantom Ghore: the realization of self-superiority over the living, over every one else. That is why the Phantom Ghore is sometimes considered a monster,
for his snobbery and his inability to recognize you as his equal will forever remain unchallenged. He does not think he is better than you, he is *aware* of how much better he is than you. There is no purpose in arguing with a Phantom Ghore. They’d just as soon kill you than be forced to listen to your complaints.

Clayton could have cared less about the presence of the mighty. He was rather fascinated by it, and once in a while he would picture in his head what Justine must have looked like dancing like that. Or what *he* would look like dancing like that...and then would quickly admit foolery in such a notion as Clayton Strickland going To Parade.

He stayed mostly within the shadows throughout the evening, watching everyone dance and laugh from a perspective voyeurism, dreaming mightily all night long of the possibilities of his own life, of what grandeur he might experience if he, too, were able to live as open and free as these people around him, these mysterious Ghores who answered to no one, who had their own rules and their own methods of behavior, who could care less about what others thought. They had found a style, a speech, a place to haunt, a family and were happy.

He did dance throughout the evening, though. When he was a little bit drunk and when he heard a song or two that sounded vaguely familiar, he would dance, and it was usually when he was certain that other normal people were dancing as well. But, when he saw the first Ghore approach the dance floor he would take a seat at once, for when one Ghore stepped to the dance floor you could be sure 14 or more would soon follow. When an apparently normal person would remain on the dance floor while the Ghores were dancing they would realize that they simply could not compete, for the Ghores swarmed when they danced, glided, shifted in and out and around you so fast that you were unable to breathe, or even think. Within minutes the most devout dancer would find
themselves leaving the dance floor as soon as a break could be seen and would rest to watch the Ghores.

When the evening did come to a close, much sooner for Clayton than for everyone else, he felt refreshed again, alive again, and very few thoughts about Justine would plague him.

“Don’t take a cab,” Gabby shouted. “They’ll just rob you. Walk. It’s only a few blocks to the Wittenbergplatz. Good night, my new friend. I hope you had fun! Perhaps I shall see you tomorrow or so?”

Slurring a blurred smile and lop-eyed good-bye, Clayton took leave and did as Gabby recommended. He walked back to the hotel.

Oh, for someone new to its beauty, Berlin was filled with a different texture than Clayton was accustomed to. There was an atmosphere in the air that made him want to be there for longer than a week if only so he could find its source, from where this massive energy comes. Bit by bit he would forgive Justine for having run here to be part of it. He understood it, little by little. Openness is thoroughly encouraged in Berlin. Whimsical frivolity and fantasy are all delivered with such ease. Those things of such harsh natures are considered taboo. The serious, the conservative, are abhorred greatly.

Yes, even though he knew it was not possible, even though everything in his nature told him it could not be so, he felt happy and as though he belonged. A shifting of concepts was beginning to make itself known to Clayton. The ideas of stereotype that one finds themselves clinging to become faint, transparent, and unreal. They were leaving him, dissipating into nothingness. In its place was a new set of ideologies slowly transforming, ideologies of mysteries, of personal uniqueness, and of openness to the world’s wonders.
“I wish you would reconsider, Uwe.” Gabby was insistent, even jittery, though the nerve pulses in the dead are unable to cause such nervous reactions based on emotions, these jittery impulses were brought on by mere thought.

“My mind is made up.”

The two were sitting in the parlor of the House of Berlin, he sitting in a high back chair, his legs crossed, the eyes on Gabby with a studying ease. The sun came in from behind him as he sported a cigarette for show, the eddies moving through the air and licking everything they touched with an entrancing dance. Dust floated about them, the rays of light streaming in through the window pain casting a darkness onto Uwe’s face.

*What are you hiding from me, woman?* He was trying to ask with his mind. He could not read hers, but it was often rumored that those who had passed through the Period of Remembrance well past their initial living birth had unique mental abilities that ranged from psychic to psychotic. It was doubtful that he would be able to hear her, but Gabby made no response, nothing at all that suggested she heard him.

She stepped closer towards him, clutching her handbag tightly, frightened of Uwe lately. His temper had grown to extreme levels in the past weeks, his suspicions of everyone around him burning the thoughts with jealousy.

“Uwe, how can you do such a thing? You can’t invite him here to the House! It is forbidden! It’s against the House Rules! I don’t care what your position is, the House Rules are higher! They say specifically-”

“I know what they say! I’m the one who wrote them for Marinus!” He stood suddenly, the famous dark eyes so slanted
beneath a creased envy that he seemed to be looking at her through the brow. His tone was quiet, chilling, the cigarette extinguished in a nearby tray to which he never looked at. Movements that were all simple, too simple for the complexity of a Ghore. “I want to see his face,” he said staring Gabby down. “I want to watch him when it happens.... Do you understand that? I want to watch him lose his mind....”

Gabby’s eyes were wide, tighter went the clutch on the handbag. She was fearful, said it anyway.

“I won’t allow you to invite Clayton here.”

Never once did he raise the level of his voice. It remained guttural and dark. “You’d better be careful with that tone, Gabby. I am in no mood to have my authority challenged.” He moved closer to her, that beaming of sunlight behind him casting him as a shadow in his prowling step. Alas, the eyes, the big burning whites of the eyes, still quite bright as they grew bigger, peering deeper into Gabby. What are you hiding, woman? “You know my history, darling.... You know what I am capable of. You know what happens when people undermine me.”

Gabby could only stare at the floor as he continued a slow, steady stroll towards her. Though the Phantom Ghore hearing is near deaf, she could hear that soft thud, that slow pulsing thud of his step across the wooden floor.

“I could care less if you don’t understand my intentions. They aren’t for you to understand. Besides, your opinion is suspect. We’ve been watching you lately....”

She snapped back at him. “Who is this ‘we’ that you speak of? Uwe! Who? Have you had people spying on me? Who?”

Uwe smiled, watching her eyes reveal panic, unable to move, afraid to move. “You may be the very first Marinus Resurrected, and you may have been a Ghore longer than anyone in the House of Berlin at the present time, but you are on thin ice, dear. Your
actions lately have been shady. What are you hiding from me?"
   “This is rubbish, Uwe!” She said laugh, “I’m hiding nothing!
What would there be to hide?”
Ah, but she was. Certainly, she was hiding secrets that
would help or hurt all involved.
   “You’re taking a very strong liking to him aren’t you? Now,
how’s that for breaking the House Rules? We don’t feel for them,
Gabby. They are gutter trash.”
   “This is different!”
   “How is it different?”
   “Because.... its just...I have a feeling about him.”
   “Have a feeling, or simply have feelings?” His voice was
shrill and sounded sinister, high pitched and conniving.
   “I feel for him, yes.”
   “Did I hear you right? Feel for him? And the nerve of you to
express it like that....You’re appalling, Gabby.”

To be a Phantom Ghore can be difficult. Daily you
remember what it was to be alive, and daily you remember frail little
things like God. As you experience more and more the Period of
Remembrance you are likely to remember love, how necessary it
was. Love muddles everything as far as the Ghore is concerned; it
destroys the motives, causes ill advice and a shaping of the mood
that is intolerable. To feel love is forbidden. Heavens know, the
senses cannot be utilized for feeling.....so, why should the
emotions?

Uwe walked back to his chair, “You should be careful,
Gabby. Don’t think I don’t see how your loyalty has waned. Don’t
think I don’t know what’s going to happen next in our history.” He
looked back at her. “This is the beginning of the end, Gabby. I know
that. I hope to encourage it. Venice, London, Paris. They all want
me out. I won’t allow that to happen.... War is on the way. Not all
of you will survive. Many will be dissected. And I will be the one
who determines what direction the Phantom Ghores will take next, because I’ll be the only Father left standing....” Such true Phantom Ghore arrogance. “The House of Vienna is already gone....And I’m sure Mirko survived. Which irritates me.”

As much as she had hoped to avoid any such venomous fighting within the Houses, what Uwe said was true. A war was coming. The House of Berlin had been but one of five Houses in the Phantom Ghore structure. The others Uwe mentioned before. The House of Venice, The House of Vienna (now dismantled, but more on that at the correct time), the House of London, and The House of Paris were all desperate to have him out. In the last troubling year many, many disagreeable things have happened to the Phantom Ghore unit as a whole, causing it to break, causing friction, causing allegiances and enemies. These things we shall discuss in time, but know for the moment that it is Uwe Krieg-Ghore who instigated these terrible things.

“Since you have taken such a liking to the boy, since you feel for him,” he mocked the word, “maybe you should take him the invitation personally. This past week you have spent an awful lot of time together. What have you been doing?”

“Talking.”

“About? I can’t imagine he has much to say, being so uncultured.”

“I have been trying to get information.”

“Is that so?”

“If the Lady Pearl is in Savannah, if she’s easily recognizable, then he might have seen her.”

“And what have you been able to gather?”

“I have learned no more than we did from Justine. Just that the Lady Pearl is there.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that you have been doing your best to get some information about the Lady Pearl. But, for whose benefit?
Yours? Or mine?”

“Oh, Uwe! You’re being ridiculous. My only allegiance is to the House of Berlin! No one else. I’m becoming annoyed with this!”

“Good! Because I would hate to think what might happen if your allegiance swayed. I would hate to think that you would end up like Mele.”

The sunbeam behind Uwe faded behind a cloud passing, and all in the room went dark. All that remained were the faint shades of an evil man’s eyes staring at Gabby without waver....and the memory of Mele, reminding Gabby of Uwe’s ruthlessness.

“Give me the damned invitation, Uwe. I’ll see he gets it today.”

Clayton was to leave on Saturday. It was now Thursday when he received the invitation from Gabby to attend the Birth Party on the following evening, which was to be his last night in Berlin.

“Whose birthday party is it?”

“No, dear,” she explained, “it’s called a Birth Party. Not a birthday party. We have one when someone decides to be part of our little group, a little like your coming out parties in America. Its just something for us to do. We always seem to need something to do.”

Clayton was more than happy to attend he said, and couldn’t wait. For the rest of the afternoon Gabby gave suggestion on how he ought to spend his day. “Go to the Egyptian Museum and see the Lady Nefertiti’s bust. I assure you, there was never a more beautiful woman.” After handing him direction and pointing out on a little U-Bahn map how to get there, she left him with a fond “Biss spater!” and went to find a pay phone.
But of course, the nearest phone would not do. Trekking down some darker parts of Berlin’s alleyways she went hunting a phone that was out of the way, off the busier streets, somewhere she could not be seen.

She fumbled with the phone, glancing around often to see if anyone spotted her, those terrible Phantom Ghore eyes impeding her speed when trying to dial the number. “God! What is that? An 8 or a 3??!!!”

The receiving end only rang.

“Please answer!”

Again, more rings. She hung up and tried again, thinking that with the vision so impaired she might have dialed the wrong number. “It must have been an 8!”

Finally, a click on the other end. “Halo?”

“Mirko?”

“Yes! Gabby? Gabby, is that you?”

“Yes, its me! I’m sorry it’s taken so long to ring you, but things aren’t going very well. I need you to help me!”

“What’s happened? What’s wrong?”

“It’s about the American boy. Uwe has invited him to the Birth Party.”

“You must be joking.”

“I just gave him the invitation. Just now!”

“You haven’t told the American anything, have you?”

“No. I wasn’t sure you wanted me to.”

“What is Uwe planning to do?”

“I don’t know. He just kept rattling on about how he wanted to see the American’s face when he found out.”

There was a sigh on Mirko’s side. “We can’t let anything happen to the American, Gabby. He’s a God send. You have to be there to protect him.”

“But, what do I do? I can’t risk being exiled. I am of better
use to everyone in the House.”
   “Have you found out anything new?”
Gabby constantly looked around, looking for any Ghore that might see her on the phone. It would be suspicious. They would ask questions like, *why did you not use the phone at the House?* And *whom were you calling?*
   “Uwe plans to instigate a war among the Houses. But, how and when I don’t know. I’ve seen maps of Venice on his desk...I assume he’ll go after Lydia first.”
   “It would make sense. She’s the farthest.”
   “And the strongest.”
   “I’ll worry about what Uwe plans with this war of his. You concentrate on protecting the American. We can’t let anything happen to him. Until next time, Gabby.”
   “Be safe, Mirko.”
Gabby hung up the receiver, stepped out of the phone booth, paused for a moment to reflect, then lifted the chin and began strutting forcefully back to the House with that fantastic Phantom Ghore stroll

The night of the Birth party was a deeply momentous occasion for Clayton. It meant something on a personal level. You see, in the week that he had been in Berlin he had moved so quickly through a number of emotions and experiences that he now felt qualified as a man of the world. He would be able to say in the years to come, to the future wife he would one day marry, to the grandchildren he would one day have, “I went to Berlin when I was a young man. And it was an adventure that changed my life.”

He would also be able to tell that new wife of his how he had forgotten totally about Justine. Yes, in the time he had spent in
Berlin he had spent a number of days and nights in her apartment, sitting there, looking around and realizing how he had to let go or it would kill him, how he needed to release the memory of her.

Gabby had been an incredible help. She would say, “There is a black cloud over you that this girl has caused. Now let it go and move on. I know it hurts and it will hurt for a while, but I promise it will go away. Don’t hate her. Death is for forgiveness. Forgive her, and move on.”

That is exactly what he had done. He had forgiven Justine. The night he received the invitation from Gabby he was adamant about going to Justine’s apartment one final time and saying good bye to her, by saying farewell with a few final sobs, by smelling her scent in the air one last time, by laying on her bed and clutching her pillows one final time before he left and handed the key to the landlord. “You be careful while you are in Berlin, young man!”

Thoughts of the Billy Club came to mind.

“Thank you, sir,” said Clayton with a smile.

The fresh young country boy harbored an earnest smile on his face the day of the Birth Party, for it meant something total for him. He had been chided severely by Justine for having not the adventure, nor the courage, nor even the desire to see foreign lands and meet foreign people. And here he was! Being invited to a party of theirs! Justine would have been proud.

The Ghores had been so good to him, so friendly and so kind.

Now, the house where the party was being held was not that far from the cemetery. A few stops short of Justine’s grave on the subway. He had taken to learning the very simple U-Bahn plan throughout that week, realizing it was much cheaper than the taxies that simply took him two or three blocks anyway.

It was at Thielplatz, near Thielallee. A very comfortable big homed neighborhood that reeked of illustrious wealth and
prominence. But was he intimidated? A week before perhaps he would have been. But, not now. He thought, if they were really snobs they wouldn’t have even bothered talking to me. And here they are inviting me to their house.

Yet, he was not sure whose house it was. They were always talking about “the House.” He assumed it was Uwe’s, but all the Ghores were forever commenting on how they belonged to “the House.”

As he strolled along Thielallee he could get a sense of what that statement meant, judging by some of these houses. The houses indeed acted as masters to the tenants, and the tenants were the slaves who bequeathed themselves to the marvel of such grand structures.

Again, he assumed the House belonged to Uwe, for all of the Ghores swarmed around Uwe with doting fidelity, their existence seeming to rotate around what Uwe thought, what Uwe did. Clayton had seen Uwe only once more in the week he had been in Berlin, only once since he was dismissed at the Einstein and sent to the Linientreu with Gabby.

Finally, he was at the house. It was a gargantuan structure; the mansion seemed to continue on with room after room. Out front was the old Rolls Royce he had seen at the cemetery. Up the steps he bounced so happy and full of desperate energy in his borrowed blue suit. Beyond the large wooden front door he could hear the laughter of the Ghores. They always laughed so loud.

They like me for who I am.

When the front door was opened he was met with the most peculiar sight.

Up to that point, the Ghores had always worn the 1930’s clothing, true. But, it had always been black, or various shades of gray. The men wore white shirts of course, crisp white shirts and some with upturned collars. When the large wooden door swung
wide to reveal the revelers inside Clayton found them wearing the 1930’s clothing, yes, but in such awful colors! Women wore green with purple and yellow! Polka dotted dresses that were orange and blue. Yellow mixed with brown! Men wore suits with light blue shirts, or even dark green ones, everyone dressed in plaid, uncontrolled shades of the imagination, mix matched on purpose in such wild extremes!

And how the Ghores were laughing and carrying on! When he walked further into the room they noticed him, and only looked at him with some serious suspicion. The door closed behind him and a wave of people made way to the side so he could pass into the center of the party, everyone taking a hushed look at him. They whispered to one another and Clayton turned red, hurt, afraid, out of place terribly.

Uwe was standing on the landing at the top of the staircase, a landing that behaved as a balcony, an eloquent place for giving speeches.

“Clayton! You came! I am so glad, you did! Everyone, don’t be rude, don’t gawk. Don’t forget you look more horrid than he looks now. So get back to your business and stop staring.”

As if they were mechanical creatures who did what they were told, they turned on their toes and went back to laughing and discussing, acting as if Clayton had never even entered the room.

Uwe descended the staircase and went for Clayton, who was obviously upset. “I didn’t know it was a costume party. I look like an idiot.”

“No, you don’t! Didn’t the invitation say what the attire would be?”

“No, it didn’t.”

“My apologies. That is my fault. What does it matter anyway? That’s nearly all you brought to wear while you were in Berlin, right? Oh, come on! Laugh! Look at these people. Look at
that woman over there. Look at her and tell me that doesn’t make you want to scream laughing.”

Clayton resisted for as long as he could, but it was not long before he started laughing. “Why the hell are all of you dressed like this?”

“Oh, its something to do. So we don’t take ourselves too seriously, you know. I told you we were misfits!”

“I haven’t seen you this week. I’m glad I’m getting a chance to say good bye to you before I leave tomorrow.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. You’re a really cool guy. I think you’d probably get your ass kicked back home, but I think you’re all right. Since I haven’t seen you all week I figured I wouldn’t get a chance to say thank you.”

“For?”

“For helping me forget about Justine, for welcoming me. For introducing me to your friends.”

“It has been my pleasure meeting you, Clayton. Speaking of introductions, the party in question this evening is in honor of a new friend of ours I can’t wait for you to meet.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yes, they’ll be down later. In the meantime, why don’t you mingle around, find yourself a drink, and get comfortable. Don’t be shy around these people, Clayton. They’re more intimidated by you than you think.”

Clayton smiled.

As Uwe swiftly moved on Clayton turned himself round and slowly maneuvered through the Ghores. In the meantime, Freddy took to passing out drinks quickly to the Ghores, telling them in German that they were being interrupted by the living, “...but don’t make a fuss, for Uwe invited him. Here, have a prop so the boy won’t suspect anything! Drink! SMOKE! Pay attention to
what you’re doing! We’re not in private anymore!”

Clayton could hear Freddy’s lisping, German prissiness as he made his way quietly through the select crowd to the other side of the room.

Some of the Ghores glanced at Clayton and gave only a simple smile, or a nod, but most of the Ghores ignored him, finding it unusual that they kept bumping into him without so much as an “Excuse me” being uttered.

Within the comfort of a meager corner Clayton watched the Ghores as they laughed with one another, snickered with each other, and strutted on occasion in some kind of mockery. Gabby was nowhere to be seen, and surely the sight of her would have made Clayton more at ease.

However, a young woman near a solid set of double doors caught his attention. She was leering at him in a very provocative fashion. Even more so, the stem of the glass in her hand was fondled deliciously, the fingers delicately stroking the stem up and down, softly, gently, her fingers just slightly brushing the glass as she lifted the drink to her mouth, took a sip, and licked her lips with an eager tongue.

Clayton lifted his whiskey with a smile as if toasting the girl. She responded with a batted-lash invitation. Clayton looked around for a moment, and who can truly say why? His inclination had been that this was something of a respected affair, and to be flirtatious with one of Uwe’s guests would be rude....But, this was one final night in Berlin, one last moment to be held by the beguiling capture of Berlin and its Ghores. He chucked the whiskey quickly, just as Freddy was passing to hand him a fresh one.

“Thank you.”

“Really....Think nothing of it.” And off Freddy pranced with a pensive leer.

Back to the girl went Clayton’s gaze. She motioned with a
simple turn of her head to the room behind her, looked back at Clayton (but this time not at the eyes, but at a vicinity much lower, while still stroking the stem of the glass). She then coyly turned her whole body with a smile and disappeared into the dark room behind her.

Another quick gulp of the whiskey and Clayton briskly made his way across the room and through the double doors. Here was a study, with only the moonlight from outside offering light to this sensuous affair. Stepping inside he found the girl on a settee, sitting legs crossed, one heel of her shoe slightly off the foot and dangling from her toes. Her stockings glistened with a sheen as they played off the moonbeams, her skirt hiked up to reveal the precious outer side of her thigh, a garter belt already unclasped, waiting for him, yearning for him.

She said something in German as she lit a cigarette. Her voice was tender, but Clayton could not understand.

She giggled and made a motion with her palms that the sliding pocket doors should be closed behind him. Clayton obliged with a smile, all in the grand room outside going quiet. All one might hear was the toke the German girl stole from her cigarette and Clayton unbuttoning his jacket.

“What’s your name,” he said sitting beside her.

Now it was her turn to whisper the very primitive and broken, “No understand English.”

She squirmed in her seat, rubbed her crossed legs together as Clayton unbuttoned his pants. His eagerness was revealed as the girl smiled, doused the cigarette and proceeded to hold his member with a very soft, velvet gloved hand. Clayton closed his eyes and rested his head on the back of the settee as the girl proceeded to utilize the same artful massaging she had applied to the glassware’s stem. But her hand was cold, he could feel it through the glove, like ice. An unnatural coldness, but the stroking offered so much pleasure that
he only motioned the thought through his mind before dismissing it again.

He could hear applause outside as something was happening in the grand room. When all went quiet he could hear Uwe’s voice speaking to the crowd in German. Clayton sat back and enjoyed the fondling of his penis, enjoyed the pristine way she played with his head and commenced to take long strokes, fully engulfing the extent of his girth with her palm. Clayton wanted more. The trappings of two quick drinks and a busy crowd outside offered him the option of bedding this beautiful German girl here on the settee and no one would see, no one would know, but hear only the stories later as he emerged with tasseled hair and red smile.

He quickly moved onto her, grabbing the side of her head and pulling him to her to kiss her. In that instant there was something more to that coldness he had noticed before that could not be hidden behind a velvet glove. The touch to the side of her face was like grabbing chilled concrete. It was more than icy, it was solid, without pliancy, like cupping the hand to a statue; when he quickly thrust his warm pink tongue into her mouth he was met with the taste of rotting garbage, smelling something akin to a dead animal, her own tongue as rigid and as chilling as a bloated and frozen dead maggot thrashing inside his mouth.

Clayton pulled back quickly, his eyes gleaming with fright as the German girl thrust her hand over her mouth and whispered, “Es tut mir leit!” Clayton pulled his pants over his now falling member and began to zip up his pants, brushing the girl’s hand away as she reached for him. She was relentless, quickly speaking in German with what sounded like a plea, but Clayton would have no part of it. He quickly stood to his feet, the girl attempting to do the same, but that one heel of hers dangling off the toe caught her off her dead equilibrium and she fell, her face hitting an end table, breaking her jaw, it dangling well off to the side, as though the bottom half of her
face had been split in half. One part of her head turning one way, the other half turning another. Now, keep in mind, reader, the girl was unaware of her deformity! She had no clue at all that she was repelling the now petrified and shocked Clayton as she walked towards him with arms outstretched! He walked backwards, unable to remove his eyes from the woman’s broken jaw, her disrupted face, her unnatural movement. It was only at the moment she attempted to speak did even she realize just how bad the situation was. She seemed confused that her own words were guttural, incomprehensible. Wide eyed, she attempted to touch her face (obviously a very new Phantom Ghore, forgetting no such thing is possible) and when that revealed no explanation she ran to a mirror on the opposite wall. Darkness. Damn the moon and those Phantom eyes! Still she was unable to see a thing. But, Clayton had seen it, was backing out of the room, opening only slightly the pocket doors to let himself out. He did not care for the rest of the party goers to witness this scene, not yet, not now, not until all cognitive functions had returned.

Breathing heavy he made his way back into the grand room where Uwe was giving a speech on the top of the staircase, using it as a platform for which to incite the Ghores with a revering degree of adulation. The moment he spotted Clayton he lunged quickly into English, still honoring the Ghores.

“...and we’ve waited an awful long time for such a Birth Party as this, for an Acquisition like this rarely comes along.”

The Ghores looked confused, asked one another, “Was ist das? Auf English??”

Uwe continued: “We are at a crossroads in our history. We are likely to find that the answers that we seek about our uniqueness will only be discovered in a search for the truth. The ultimate truth, truth regarding life and death. So, upon meeting this newest Acquisition we found that destiny was offering us a starting
point for which to find that truth....It is with her that we will find the answers that we seek. For she will be the guide that leads us to the Lady Pearl....”

That name. As Clayton fumbled his hand around his sweating collar and wet brow he recognized that name. He had heard it once before from.... “No,” he whispered to himself.

“My noble family, it is my honor tonight to present you with the latest addition to our Family. I give to you with my blessing the newest addition to the House of Berlin....”

She entered from out of the wings, moving to a position of celebrity and honor aside Uwe, a blonde darling, beautiful, perfectly dressed in the Phantom Ghore style, arrogant chin positioned forth, hand on the hip, and the delightful dead smile across her lips....

“....Miss Justine Sizemore.....Ghore.”

And the moment Uwe said it he positioned his eyes, his slanted, stoic eyes on Clayton, pitching slightly the edge of his thin mouth to reveal an upper handed grin. All eloquence, all Phantom mastery, all Ghore technique in the art of beauty and brilliance were shunned, as the look on Uwe’s face said simply, *Fuck you, you low class living thing.*

It was her face, her body, her stance, and everything that screamed of Justine. Clayton felt faint, his heavy breath now robbing him of air. He lunged back into a few Ghores who simply slid aside as Clayton fell onto his back, staring with wide eyes first at this thing that Uwe had said was Justine, then back to Uwe whose punishing sneer had now become a distinct phrase, “Get out of my House.”

Clayton’s mouth fell open to say “no, no no” but nothing escaped. Everything that seemed real about the universe was executed, murdered, dead. He looked up once more not believing it was Justine. But she stood there, looking at him, as though she did not even recognize him, standing there at the top of the stairs and
asking Uwe why the boy down there was dressed like that, pointing with contempt. And why was he behaving like that? “How insulting!” She screamed.

At this point the pocket doors to the study were thrown forcefully open and the girl emerged with the broken jaw, now noticeably visible in the bright light of the grand room. Many of her teeth were now missing, revealed when she screamed, screamed some shrieking that many Ghores worried may bring back unwarranted Resurrections. The girl moved to Clayton with a look of panic, her fists held high above her head, angry at him for destroying her beauty, ready to shred the man for ruining her. Again, screaming and screaming and more screaming.

Clayton clenched his throat. The room was growing dark; he stood fast, jumped with what energy from adrenaline was mounting within him and as fast as fear and shock could enable him, he headed out. He needed to be home, and he wanted to be home, home! Home!

Out the door he went accompanied by accelerating insanity with the intention of turning and running until he reached the highway, then I-16, then home to Brunswick, to the trailer, to his uncle’s, to the old oak tree where he did his greasy car work. Run home! Run!

He turned the corner of some unknown street, headed down the boulevard, hearing the squealing of tires behind him, the old motor’s distinct sound coming closer. Run home! Run! It was the old Rolls Royce driven by a man with a thick mustache and an old tweed cap, a blunt cigar stuck from out his rotting teeth.

The man swerved the Rolls Royce round and cut Clayton off. Clayton stopped, frozen, unable to move, as the man opened the door and came round to the front side of the car.

Clayton turned and ran back the direction he had come, his feet not moving as fast as his brain. Run home! Run!
But everything softened suddenly. His legs became heavy, his eyes growing heavy, his running giving way to stumbling and finally falling as Clayton was stilled in his tracks by a fatal bullet to the back.

The sound of the gunfire continued on for some time, the echo of the noise bouncing off trees over and over, shredding the evening’s nocturne comfort.

Clayton’s mouth opened to release a scream that simply would not come. His heart hurt. All air in the body evacuating through three gun shot wounds to the back.

His face fell into the asphalt. He watched his own blood move past his eyes, clouding them, reddening them, the vision slipping, all going quiet and dark, and he didn’t understand. His last moments of life were left in questions.

*What did I do?*

*Why doesn’t anybody love me?*

*Why does everyone want to hurt me?*

It came out in slight gurgles as the blood filled his lungs and his larynx.

“*Why?...,*” coughs acknowledge by death’s rasping, “*Why doesn’t anybody love me? What did I do? Please God, what did I do?*”

*Justine!*

*Justine! Why don’t you love me? Why do you want to hurt me? Why do you want to kill me?*

On a Friday in August, Clayton Strickland of Brunswick, Georgia, died from gunshot wounds to the back; gunshot wounds that shattered his already battered and broken heart.

Let that be the first thing he remembers....
The Digger stood over the body, fumbling with the blunt stubble of a cigar in his mouth, shifting the gun from one hand to the other, even nudging Clayton with his foot to see if the dead boy would react, but the action yielded nothing. The Digger then chuckled and knelt next to Clayton’s deceased frame.

“I don’t know why everyone is making such a fuss over you, guy. You look kinda stupid to me. Too stupid to outrun me! I’m a good shot, I am! Can’t outrun a marksman like me! Ha! Kinda funny, that look in your eye when you went down.” He tapped the dead boy’s body again.

“Being dead aint what they say it is, huh? It aint so bad…. What the hell were you thinking about anyway? My gunshot? Kinda like music, eh? That wee little bullet ripping apart your itty bitty insides. Ha! I’m a good shot, I am!!! What were you thinking, tiger? Thinking about that girl? That pretty young American thing with the legs? Oh, well. Fuck it. Makes do difference now, huh?”

In the distance the sounds of the Birth Party were somewhat audible. As a matter of fact, if this tale could be reported with some accuracy, the moment the bullet hit Clayton’s chest one could hear some kind of cheer in the distance as the Gholes made egocentric roars of accomplishment. Hands clapped and laughter took octaves two and three stretches higher; the effects of crackle and cackle took off in the distance as blood caked the body of the dead Clayton.

Then it all hushed. Night took over. Crickets began their own choir, and off in the distance the hushed hoo of an owl pronounced to the rest of nature another unnatural death.

The Digger (and who can truly explain why) waited for a moment to retrieve the man from the asphalt. He circled Clayton’s body a number of times, smiling, and laughing a bit when the
occasion struck him. From out of his rotted mouth he pulled that old cigar stubble and toyed with it, giving him a self inflicted air of prestige as he circled his carnal trophy.

There is something to be said for this supernatural ego that all Phantom Ghores hold close. Clayton’s death held certain maniacal accomplishments to many concerned, and the Digger was no exception. The Digger’s role in the House is a messy one, a disrespected one, and there are few occasions for which he can stand back and claim accomplishment. This was one of those moments. The Digger allowed himself (with considerable time passing, I might add) a few proud struts and glances at his sprawled medal on the asphalt, watching the corpse with great self-admiration. “I shot you, fucker. Yes, I did.”

As the Digger tossed the pistol back and forth from hand to hand and finally into the ratted pocket of his tattered jacket, he saw the approaching glow of a car slowly making its way from around the bend in the road. The Digger stomped his foot then cursed the oncoming car.

“Goddamn living spoil everything!!”

The onset of some driver, some fowl living thing, was approaching closer and closer, leaving the Digger no time to pick up the body, conceal the blood on the road, and then drive on. No time at all.

With a speed that is unusual for the dead, the Digger grabbed the collar of Clayton’s soiled suit jacket and pulled the body into some bushes that lined the curb of the road.

At that moment the complete body of the car made its way entirely around the bend, slowly approaching the scene. The Digger raced for the Rolls Royce, jumped inside and drove a short distance down the road, parking alongside the curb in front of some boring modern vehicle whose foreign name disgusted him.

The Digger opted to wait for a moment. Once the car passed
him he would turn back and fetch the dead body and hand it with pride to Uwe. Then he chuckled a slight bit more, fumbling with the stump of that blunt cigar in his putrid teeth, chuckling at his own alleged genius. “Just wait, tiger. Yeah, I’ll be back for you. You’re too good to fuck up. You’re my ticket outta this digging shit.”

And he waited….and waited more for the sore sight of a living car to come pass him by….  

“Damned dead eyes,” he said after failing to see anything clear enough in the rear view mirror. So, he peeked out the window back towards the murder scene, pulling the dirty tweed cap down over his brow to conceal his face should the driver of the oncoming car see him as they passed along.

But, the car never came passing along. The mysterious car’s headlights never came drudging by, leaving the Digger sitting with suspicion and some sense of fear. His foot began to tap the floorboard of the old Rolls Royce nervously.

The Digger quickly pulled the car into reverse and headed back to get Clayton’s body. There was no mystery car at all, no headlights, no oncoming nothing. But what’s even worse, just there in the bushes where the Digger had tossed the dead Clayton was nothing more than crumpled, broken foliage. There was no body. Only a drying pool of blood remained, soaking into the cracks off the curb, coagulating quickly as time passed. No body. Clayton was gone.

“Shit!!!!! What the fuck is this????????!!!”

The stunning revelation was only punctuated by the sounds of The Birth Party just beyond some trees, just down the road and around the bend. Wild laughter that is familiar in the darker terrain of autumn’s eves. The Digger was quite certain that if he returned to the Birth Party without Clayton those screeches of laughter would turn to venomous sneers. There were no positions in the House less demeaning than the Digger’s. The Digger was certain they would
find something less demoralizing if he returned to the House of Berlin with the confession that the man he had been sent to kill had been snatched from him, robbed from him, and that he had failed. That is, if they did not dissect him.

Perhaps he was wrong? Perhaps the body was misplaced?

Yes! Perhaps Clayton was not completely dead and had crawled along some bushes to safety? Yes, that’s it! Perhaps he was just a few feet down the road, scouring through the shrubbery like some half stepped insect retreating for dear life!

The Digger stepped the perimeter of the street in both directions looking for any sign of a blood caked, dying man and found nothing that would save his already feeble position in the House of Berlin. Oh, and the horrid scenarios did begin to form in the Digger’s mind when he realized the importance of this, the tragedy of having the body taken from right under his nose! What Uwe would do! What the others might do! What dark voyage lay before him.....in pieces!

The Digger pulled the tweed cap from his head, ran his blunt hands through thick black hair, and bit down hard on the stump of that old cigar.

“Shit!”

Back to the Rolls Royce he went, kicking pebbles and rocks with a certain frustration.

And yet, destiny pulls itself into our story again with quiet simplicity. One particular pebble caught his attention as it rolled across the asphalt. And why? Because the little pebble head straight for a gutter, but missed and bounced off the curb. Missed, you see. The little pebble missed the gutter entirely.

“That’s it!....I missed!” He whispered while stopping suddenly to ponder for a moment, “The boy couldn’t have been robbed from me if I had missed him....Shit, yeah!”

The Digger could not be held above trickery, of course not.
He would lie to Uwe and say that Clayton had got away, had fled from the murderer, and had dodged the bullet sent to shatter him. That’s right. The Digger had fired the gun...and missed.

A smile cracked his face, revealing some rotted teeth from beyond his thick black mustache. Happy in his own deceits, the Digger returned to the House to confront Uwe with the terrible news that the American was simply too fast and had managed to escape.

He had been a quarterback, you know....

“Who is that girl? That one there with the cracked face,” asked Uwe of Freddy as he motioned with one somber hand at the girl that had attempted to seduce Clayton. “Never mind. I don’t need to know her name. See to its she’s dissected. Take her out back and do it now.”

“Try not to be angry, Uwe. You got your wish. The American is dead. I would think you’d be celebrating. It’s a wonderful evening!”

The Birth Party for the newly Acquisitioned Justin was in full swing as the arrogant dead swooned throughout the ballroom in dance, the wild colors they wore swirling in hues and shades that only they could appreciate with their dead eyes, as madly colored tuxedos and ball gowns twirled in unison with mad violins.

A Phantom Ghore is in many ways akin to being a geisha. With so much time on their hands, they are apt to learn the fine arts, acquaint themselves into being aficionados of culture. All of this helps to add so much shine to the illusion of the Phantom Ghore presence of refinement and perfection, of intellect and prominence.
The Phantom Ghores are experts in the field of conversation, social graces, manners, customs, and highbrow regality. Therefore, to say that they were all ballroom dancing would be insufficient. They were much better than that, for they were reinventing the steps, moving in such graceful currents that any member of your living society would have dropped in agape amazement. And the violins being played? They were terribly unnatural sounds, because they were too good. The Phantom musician does not simply play the violin, they master the violin, putting any living composer to shame, unburdened by fatigue of the spirit, nor of the hand. And though they were dressed frightfully tacky to living eyes, it was perfection in theirs. Even though the colors were askew, the attention to detail in accessory was not, all things a man should have at his side were in place. His cummerbund, his lapel, spats, his brilcremed hair. And the women? All trimmings that made her more than a woman, but a lady instead, were equally present. Though the eyes of the living would see mayhem in the stark bright colors that blinded many, the damned eyes of the dead saw only the shades, saw only the hues and tints of separate forms of sepia.

Then in walks the Digger. You can’t help but notice him, for he is always covered in dirt. He digs the graves; he is inclined to get messy. Furthermore, he is the only one not smiling, not pleased with the events of the evening. He had tried to enter the room through a small side door. However, it did nothing but bring him into the center of the party, into the ballroom’s dance floor where Uwe noticed him immediately.

At first Uwe smiled and all the other Ghores followed suit. They always followed his reaction. If he was pleased, then they were all pleased. If he was angry, they all ran for cover. Uwe’s reactions in the House would send a wake that would set the mood for everything else to follow. This particular smile was different, though. It set the others to grinning as usual and all eyes turned to
the Digger, filling the room with tombstone colored grins the color of a concrete moon. The American was dead.

There were many reasons the Phantom Ghores wanted Clayton dead, collectively speaking that is. Uwe had his reasons, which shall be explained later. As for the rest of the House of Berlin, Clayton had to be killed because he was getting nosey. You see, Uwe told his beloved House that Clayton had begun to cling to the Ghores with such a tight latch that it was smothering, and it was only a matter of time before he would run into his deceased darling and then what? Would he tell people? Would he run to the first living derelict he saw and tell them everything he knew about the Ghores? Would Clayton confess, pray tell, that he has seen his deceased fiancé dancing?

They had no choice in the matter, Uwe told them. Clayton had to be killed.

Uwe descended the staircase and went to the Digger saying as he got closer, “You can put the body upstairs. But, be sure to walk though the center of the room. I want everyone to see him.”

The Digger looked away.

“Is there a problem, Victor?”

“Uwe-”

“You address me as ‘sir’ until you’ve reclaimed a status in the House.”

“Sir, if it pleases you, I wish to discuss this outside.” The Digger has such a beautifully growling voice, reader, from too many of those blunted cigars from when he was alive. Furthermore, he dared not looked Uwe in the eyes. He kept his head bowed, the expressions hidden beneath the tweed cap.

“It does not please me. What’s the matter?”

“Something’s happened.”

“Out with it!”

“There is no body.”
Uwe closed his eyes and inhaled deeply (only for dramatic effect, of course) and lashed into a smile. The music reached one of those moments where voices were inaudible. No one else heard the ugly confession, but Uwe heard and kept on smiling boldly for his fellow Ghores that followed his movements and moods.

“No body, you say?”
“Yes, sir. No body.”

Uwe leaned in close, frightfully close, the stare dead fast, cold, and murderous. “Tell me why there is no body, Victor. Make this good, think hard about your excuse...Your excuse will be the difference between dissection and simple dismissal.”

“He got away, sir.” If only you could hear the rumbling roughness of his voice, sweetened with an accent from the lower class tribes of Europe having all mingled one on top of another. Perhaps he was of Italian descent, perhaps cockney, perhaps even Jewish? You would never know, his living lineage so merged by blue collar breeding that he was now nothing more than a stereotype.

A small laugh on Uwe’s part. “What? Did he out run you? You were in a car!” Uwe tried not to shout, the grit teeth lending to emphasis.

“Americans are fast, sir. You told me he was a football player. A quarterback!”
“You sonofabitch. Are you mocking me?”
“I swear to you, he got away on foot, ran through some lawns and took off towards the U-Bahn!”
“We all heard the gunshots, digger.”
“Right you would! I fired....I missed.”

There was still no change in the wild smile of a man who has allegedly accomplished his proud mission. The Digger smiled at himself, albeit a twisted contortion of what should resemble a smile.

What’s this? Was Uwe shaking, trembling, so fuming with
anger that he just might explode? Another deep breathe (for only dramatic effect again, of course) and assumed a steadfast and calm resolve.

“I want you out of my face. Don’t mention a word of this to anyone. I don’t want your ineptness to embarrass me. Now go. Out, I said!”

The Digger turned to leave, but Uwe stopped him for one more declaration of his authority, “If you should happen to speak of this, I promise you will be beheaded. Not a full dissection, mind you, just the head removed....you’ll be forced to walk around with it like a purse for the rest of all time possible.”

Uwe confidently made his way back through the party to the other side of the room.

Freddy was near about, leering casually as usual in the corner. With pierced lips and arched brow, the make-up heavily over done, he asked Uwe simply, “Where is your precious American?”

“Victor claims he got away, says he fired and missed. Clayton is probably on his way to his hotel room, filled with all sorts of horror stories to tell anyone who will listen.”

“But, is that what you believe?”

Simply astonished, Uwe had to ask. “Do you think I could trust someone as filthy as that? Oh, for God’s sake, look at him….he’s a disgrace to us.”

“You should probably make an announcement to the House before the rumors surface, don’t you agree? Everything the American saw tonight could put us in jeapordy.....Then again, there will be those so inclined to say the American was only privy to what happened tonight because you invited him.” Freddy sounded like a snake, quite the type that would eventually seduce you, then squeeze you to death.

Then Uwe had a revelation. “Where is Gabby?”
“I haven’t a clue. That woman can’t stand me. Hates to be anywhere near me. Tells me nothing. Who cares? She can be so dreadfully boring. So uninteresting. I could not imagine anyone of the living actually wanting to spend time with her.”

“I want you to work on something for me. Privately. Use only Bettina if you need, but don’t allow anyone else to know.”

“But, of course. What do you want done?”

“I want you to follow Gabby, keep your eyes glued to her. Utter subterfuge, do you understand? Spy on the woman, let me know her every word, her every conversation, to whom she speaks and where she goes. I have a suspicion Gabby may know something about my missing American. Dead or alive, she knows where he is.”

“And why do you have reason to think this?”

“Because she feels for him, Freddy.”

Uwe made way for the center of the room, and with a commanding roar asked the dead revelers to cease for a moment.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, may I have your attention, please? Would all of you please quiet down? I know we have much to celebrate tonight, but I have an announcement to make. After much deliberation, after thinking an awful lot about the compassion that we sometimes inadvertently feel for the living,” here came the spin on the truth, that those in power tend to weave so well, “…I decided to allow our American friend to flee.”

A soft moan bubbled from the audience.

“I urge you to quiet down, please. Now, I am well aware that many of you were quite anxious for some madness and mayhem, but did you not see that insanity erupt on his face when he witnessed his dead fiancé on the staircase? Was that not entertainment enough? And if not that, then what about the maniacal way he scrambled out of here when he saw all of you laughing at him? Brothers and sisters, we received more than we bargained for with those wild expressions that tripped across his
face, did we not? Think of it. How much more entertaining it will be to hear that our American has rushed back to the United States, find whatever bar he can, and become a laughing stock with his stories of the dead that waltz.”

The Phantom Ghores laughed softly.

“So let us allow this entertaining strain of his sanity linger a bit longer….let us hope to one day hear how the rest of the world will never believe his drunken stories of a fiancé he swears smiled back at him from beyond the grave. That, my lovely Ghores, will be much more fun than sending a bullet into his heart…”

With that he shot a glance at the dirty Digger applauding irrefutably in the corner.

In a dim corner of the area in Berlin call Kreuzberg, Gabby sat in the shell of what should be called a living room. But, the dead need no space named such as this. It is now simply a room with a body in the center, sprawled and spreading into rigamortic poses and positions, the skin hardening fast, the gruesome twist of the torso beginning to petrify.

Indeed, the mystery can go on no longer. It was Gabby who snatched the body from under the nose of the Digger.

Gabby had been outside in a taxicab when the murder occurred, was being driven up to the House to join the Birth Party when she saw the young American flee from the front door in panic. Close behind was the Digger already in the Rolls, starting the ignition and beginning to follow.

“Looks like someone is in trouble,” said the taxi driver to Gabby.

“Quiet!” She paused to think of what to do.
Before any conscious thought could make its way into her reasoning, she and the driver both heard the gunshot that fatally wounded Clayton.

“Miss!” The Taxi driver screamed, “We must do something! We must call the police! I believe that man that man has been shot!”

The driver never knew what happened just after that. Death came quite softly. While the driver was shifting the gears of the taxi Gabby grabbed him by the temples and twisted his neck with a sudden snap. He fell face first onto the steering wheel and died quietly. No sounds, no fuss, just died with the thought of trying to rescue someone pressed firmly on his mind.

Gabby then went to his side of the car, pushing his body into the passenger side of the front seat. The thought of killing this innocent man was a condition she wished never to have been a part of, but the sound of that gunshot meant the declaration of war. To Gabby it meant hope lost. She needed Clayton, needed him to get to Savannah to find the Lady Pearl. That crack in the air of the bullet reaching its target shredded hope of ever finding her before Uwe did with his Justine.

With instinct guiding her innocence into submission, Gabby put the car in gear and followed the tragic events. Her intention was to take hold of the Digger, maim him if she needed, dissect him and slice him bit by bit. She needed Clayton’s body and nothing was going to stop her. She was even willing to leave the House of Berlin forever if it meant claiming the dead boy’s body.

When she turned the corner though, she saw the Rolls driving on and turning another bend up in the road. The glisten, ever so subtle to be seen in a state without panic, caught her attention, and she immediately saw the young American’s body laying crumpled beneath some shrubbery. The Digger had failed, had left the corpse in the bushes along the road, had fled, making her chores much easier than she had hoped.
THE PHANTOM GHORES

It is difficult for Gabby to leave the House of Berlin. As much as she would like to turn treasonous on the place she once called home, it was not easy. Her presence was paramount there. Gabby was not involved in its daily operations, but she was close enough to hear things, hear what Uwe did, what he said, and what all the Ghores were intending.

A war amongst the different Houses was imminent, Uwe had said. Those who oppose Uwe needed Gabby close to him. She could not assist in the destruction of Uwe from afar. But all concerned with the end of Uwe’s reign needed Gabby inside the House, at his side whenever she could be, and on the best terms possible.

So when she saw the body limp, dead and crudely hidden in the bushes, there sprang an opportunity for Gabby to seize that treason she desired without being implicated. She simply picked up Clayton’s corpse and threw it in the tragic taxi, dashing away into Berlin’s crowded pain and laughter.

And now, in a small apartment in an area known as Kreuzberg, Gabby stood staring at Clayton’s dead body on the floor. Mirko was at her side.

The gruesome mood in the air was only better set with the words she uttered: “We have to Resurrect him.”

Mirko only nodded with dismal agreement.

If you have read the House Rules and understand them, then you understand what is about to happen: Gabby and Mirko intend to steal Clayton’s soul from the astral plane, from the ether. There are certain requirements that are necessary for this process. The body must be in range of the vocalist’s voice whilst they sing. Now, not all Phantom Ghores can sing well, but the good ones can Resurrect a body. Secondly, you must be certain that nothing else dead can hear the singing either, for all dead things within range of the singing will be Resurrected. It is furthermore advised that the
body in question be given ample space during the Resurrection process, for a certain amount of activity and mess are produced when the soul is stolen from the Universe and returned to the body, when mother nature is robbed of one of her designs.

Phantom Ghores are accustomed to watching Resurrections on a regular basis; Resurrections are beautiful displays of the only supernatural ability they possess. However, I give warning: it is also frightful and demonic. It is not a ceremony you should witness with faint heart.

Clayton’s body was placed in the center of the living room. Gabby and Mirko both took abundant steps back allowing the body what space it needed for its convulsions, clearing themselves of any bodily fluid that might be jettisoned from Clayton upon his soul’s reentry.

Mirko asked. “Are you ready?”

“I haven’t done this in so long. I’ve only done it once before....and I hated it...I hate what happened because of it.”

“You can do it. We need him.”

One could hear the night outside. The frightful, keen screeches of cricket legs quickly sharpening themselves upon another, sewage oozing safely beneath the streets as madmen with murderous intentions clambered through this darker neighborhood of Berlin.

Gabby stared at Clayton’s body, his left arm twisted behind his back, his eyes half closed, his legs bent into a backwards embryonic fold. His sad face was frozen into the realization, into that beautiful pain a dead face contains when it sees the Light, the Universe, the Beginning and the End; a twisted expression of fear and exhaltation as the last breath carries the soul away. It is a face mixed with the sadness of letting the body go, but of the ecstasy of seeing the Heavens open as the physical body quietly dies.

Gabby began the ceremonious drone, the humming of a dirge,
a painful lament, the eyes closed.

The feeling begins. It is essential when the vocalist sings to the body to bring forth whatever painful soulful memory they hide inside, whatever brings their bloodless heart to the point of cracking, breaking. Unrequited love, the death of a love, anything that stirs the unbeatable heart to emotional fluttering shall be called upon for emotional emphasis. For these are the tunes, these are the songs of the dead that bring the body back to its reanimated state, these powerful hymns of grieving.

The Universe is total love. In order to fetch back that soul that has moved on into total, encompassing love, the singer must call to the departed soul and remind it of love’s repulsion, love’s madness, its heartbreaking foolery, its suicidal pain and ripping of the skin. The voice of pain calls to the departed one, and reminds them of all of the tumultuous moments in life where love was the operative, the one pivotal shocking blister, that caused everything in life to go wrong....Don’t trust love, reminds the vocalist to the departed soul....This love you’re about to enter, don’t trust it. It’s a lie. There is no love. No one loves you....but, I.....Come back to me. Come back....Come here, my love.

Gabby clutches at the chest, the lips quivering in operatic tones, the hum of her vocals causing the air to vibrate just slightly. She conjurers whatever feeling of pain and sorrow that may have accompanied her from her own grave, her own experiences, her own troubles and tragedies, her own mistakes, her own loves, and love lost. The lips open to reveal the shadow of a note that begins to ascend quickly into a shining aria that resembles the bel canto, the mourning of the dead, the scream of the dead.

She pauses....

From the lowest note possible to the highest octave she can manage, she proceeds again, then holds that high one, that highest possible screech from out her soprano chords, as though someone
had sliced at her own soundless heart.

She involuntarily clutches onto Mirko, holding him, clasping into him, feeling her own pain of emotions more real than she had ever experienced. The aria shakes and rattles from low to high note, from this octave to another, then into wild displays of pain and morbidity.

Out of the corner of her eye she sees it start to happen, the initial tremor of the body, the first twitch in the muscles. A sudden jolt of Clayton’s form. Then another. Dead rats near the sound begin to squeak again. Dead insects in the building begin to buzz again. Flies at the window pane begin to take flight again, battering their dead heads against the glass and continuing to do so for all time possible....

The sudden slam of Clayton’s arm against the wood floor caused Gabby to step back. Here begins the mad journey all Phantom Ghores take, that all those Resurrected take. Clayton’s body violently shakes, twisting and contorting, moving into fetal-like, chaotic positions unseen by any living man. The defiance of the body as it writhes, as it quietly, silently shrieks in its morbid death dance, please don’t take me from Heaven, leave me here in the arms of God, please don’t take me from here. I FEEL LOVED!

It’s a lie, reminds the vocalist wit her painful tone. It’s a lie.... No one loves you like I....Come here, my love.

The body challenges the demand, flops onto the stomach shaking wildly. As it convulses the fluids from the body are suddenly expelled. Whatever reminds the body of life is shot abruptly from whatever orifice it can find. The eyes, the ears, the anus, the penis, the mouth, the nose all become escape passages for human fluids, living things, reminders of abhorrence. Clayton screams, that primal death scream, the kind a human cannot make, the kind only made from the lips of the damned, a scream that is octave upon octave, overlapping, echoing, for it is not only his
scream, it is the scream of all angels protesting his return to life, angels crying hellishly in unison, as Clayton’s body writhes in a seizure state, caked with blood, sweat, urine, feces, and vomit.

Now he screams in his own voice as his body begins to flip over and over, rotating in the muck that has just been cast from his own bowels and belly, screaming a shrill of pain and torture.

“Noooo!!!!!”

Gabby turns, unable to watch the incident, unable to accept responsibility for stealing his soul, trying hard to justify the return she forced upon Clayton...

*Remember, we need him.*

Slowly his body begins to subside and she can hear him in his own voice, not the challenging voice of angry angels cursing her, but his own soft southern drawl crying, “Please don’t do this to me....Please....” as he tries to cry, but no tears are afforded the dead, “....please leave me alone....Just leave me alone.” Sorrow resounds around the hollow apartment.

Mirko without any hesitation ran towards the bathroom, flipping on all valves and allowing a rush of water to begin filling the tub. He then told Gabby to stand back, for he did not want her soiled in the slightest. With care, Mirko picked up the newly Resurrected Clayton and placed him in the tub, removing the boy’s bloody family suit, the gunshot wound so visible, so horrid to look at, the entire cavity of his torso, that muscular torso shattered into disarray. The garbled heart and lung were visible. The socks were then pulled off. The wet clothes were tossed into a nearby receptacle. And although Clayton could physically feel no harm in his nerve endings, the soul was in pain, it had been ripped from heaven, torn from the Blessed Maker.

It is a painful thing to rob someone of what we shall simply call Heaven, for that is the state that so many readers are apt to call upon with their perceptions of life in the beyond. Perhaps this is
why in the 50 or 60 years that Gabby had been a Phantom Ghore she had Acquisitioned only one person into the House of Berlin. That was years ago. The guilt of having stolen a possession of Heaven, and the guilt of having defied Mother Nature’s design had riddled her conscience for the years to come. The repercussions of that Acquisition still haunting her.

This is precisely what Gabby pondered while watching Mirko wash Clayton’s torn, wrecked form. But then gain, she was trying to justify bringing the dead man back. The countless thoughts that hindered real judgment echoed throughout her cranium. But, the one that sounded loudest throughout was this: Remember we need him. We need him to get to Savannah. We need him to find the Lady Pearl.

When Clayton tried to open his eyes fully, they darted rapidly back and forth, would not set to rest upon one image. Light was horrid to him. It was too bright. Gabby could see this, and whispered, “Clayton, rest your eyes. Let them open and see when they decide it is time. Don’t force it.”

It’s quite true, even terribly metaphorical. Don’t force yourself to see things until you are ready. Stay blind for as long as you require. In time, truth will reveal itself, and the horror that it confesses will make you wide eyed.

“Relax, Clayton. Let go. Let go of life. Don’t try to fight it.” She had to utter this, for Clayton when submerged under the water would instinctually try to fight, his soul and his own conditioning telling him he would suffocate, although this was not true. He no longer breathes, although he is fighting for air. “Relax,” she kept saying. “Relax… .”

But to whom was she speaking? Clayton? Or herself?

“God, what have I done?”

“Hopefully, you’ve saved us,” said Mirko. “Hand me that towel over there. Help me dry him off.”
In a very short time Clayton’s body would grow accustomed to its new state, it would grow accustomed to being dead and not operating and functioning as it once did. In time Clayton would forget about being in Heaven, about having ever experienced the total, loving embrace of the Universe.

Years ago, when the very first Phantom Ghores began to kill the ones they allegedly loved and brought them into the House calling them “Acquisitions,” the process of Resurrection was a rare and striking event. They would watch the body in its insane return to reanimation and wonder at it, stare at it with unnaturally large eyes in amazement; “Something only we can do,” they would arrogantly whisper to themselves as their victims would return from the grave.

Nowadays, Resurrections are so frequent and so common that it is not particularly eventful for the Phantom Ghores. Therefore, with no fanfare, no unusual announcements to each other as to the supernatural disturbance they had just witnessed, and thoroughly accustomed to the procedure, Gabby and Mirko dried Clayton’s body off and put him in the bedroom to the right of the bathroom. A bed was there, nothing more. Nude, he lay on his back, face towards the ceiling, the eyes still unable to open properly, the light (even though now there was nearly none) still causing the natural reaction of the lids to shut tight. Nude, they laid him on the bed, the wounds still visible, his torn heart and lungs exposed. The door was shut and he was left there alone, left there to slowly return to conscious thought....and begin his Period of Remembrance.

When the dead form is brought back, when the soul is given
a refuge once more in the body it had abandoned, it has an initial sense of shock, of disbelief, and cannot consider rational thinking to even the slightest degree. It cannot speak, cannot move of its own voluntary accord. To think, to use the mind to ponder, is an impossible act. So, Clayton lay there alone in the dark, his newly Resurrected body twitching sometimes, eyes clenched closed, and the tongue too swollen to speak, let alone scream.

Outside the bedroom door, Mirko quickly demanded that Gabby stay with him. “You should stay here. I can inform the other Rogues that you won’t be able to spy for us anymore.”

“I’m going back to the House.”

“You can’t go back. It’s too dangerous. Someone’s likely to know you took Clayton. Then Uwe will know that I’m still here and that will be the end of us. He’ll know we’re looking for the Lady Pearl, too.”

“He spared me once. When he couped, he spared me.”

“But, he’s changing, Gabby. He’s suspicious of you already!”

“No one saw me. Not even the Digger.”

“But, they are sure to suspect you! Don’t you understand? He does not trust you, Gabby! And you’ll be putting the rest of us in danger if you go back!”

She began screaming at him, “How dare you! Yes, Mirko, how dare you! The allegiance I’ve had to that House since Marinus founded it has never waned. NEVER! And just because its now at the helm of some madman doesn’t mean I still don’t have an allegiance to what Marinus had intended. I risk my own dissection everyday just by walking through the front door, but I walk through anyway because of my allegiance to the House! I need to see Uwe destroyed just as badly as you do! I will cooperate with you in any manner that I can, and I will spy for you, and I will risk what I can for you, but I have no allegiance to you. Mine is to the memory of
Marinus.....and the *House of BERLIN!* So, spare me your hiding here and plotting and planning and waiting for the right moment to get rid of Uwe, when everyday I spend hour upon hour afraid its not going to happen.....that we won’t find the Lady Pearl....and that my allegiance is for not.”

Mirko stood quiet.

“I have to go back, Mirko! There *is* a war coming. It won’t be avoided. A *war*.....and to think that it’s actually come to this pains me. I have to go back. I have to help restore some order....and if it does come to war, then I want to do what I can to keep Uwe from being the victor. Do you understand me, Mirko? If its going to be war, then I don’t want Uwe to win. I will sacrifice *myself* to see that he doesn’t win.”

“And what if they dissect you for treason? You’re no good to anyone chopped up!”

She paused for moment, considering his course of thinking, that perhaps someone would directly link her to the missing Clayton and have her shredded. But, her mind also gave her some other confident movement.

“I can’t say that I really care anymore. You’ve got Clayton now. You’ve got your own American ticket to Savannah. Use him. I could care less if I’m dissected now.”

“Gabby, I can’t let you do this.”

“I need to know what Uwe is doing. If you don’t hear from me by Tuesday, then worry.”

She paused for a moment, sensing the foreboding in her decision. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m afraid. Very afraid,” she said.

“I know you are.” He moved towards her affectionately. Those brilliant blue eyes of her, blue beyond measure, peering back at Mirko with a reassuring tone that helped to comfort her.

“We’ve been friends since the beginning. Do you remember how happy we were then? You, me, Arkadi, Lydia....Just us with
Marinus and the Lady Pearl. I want those days back again.”

His own eyes now confessed the memory of happier days, alas... He looked at her squarely and said, “Those days are gone, Gabby.”

“I know....I know.”

She nodded her head and left whispering under a choke, “Tuesday, Mirko....Don’t worry until Tuesday.”

Mirko slowly opened the bedroom door where Clayton rested and moved towards the bed. Clayton was still, the eyes moving about curiously, and the expression on his face was one of wonder and curiosity which is common for the Resurrected Phantom Ghore. It wonders what has happened, remembers nothing, and regrets nothing. Everything is new and somewhat euphoric.

Clayton’s eyes were now wide and wild, looking at Mirko, but only second guessing who or what he was, and then moving on to another object in the room, studying it for a moment only to move on to something else, the doorknob perhaps, or the window shades, only to give it but a moment of thinking, then moving on again, his eyes giving all things only a flitting moment of attention.

“We need you, my new friend, more than you could possibly ever know.”

Did Clayton smile, or make any gesture of having heard Mirko? Of course not. Clayton was not yet ready to express emotion, was not yet ready to even know how. The body and soul newly reunited only watched all around for the time being, wondering and pondering what all things are, like a newborn, unable to relay the importance of things, categorizing everything into two
categories: animate or inanimate.
   Yes, all things are either living or not.

By the time Gabby returned to the House the Birth Party had fallen to the wayside and the sun had begun to rise. The Ghores had gone back to their lounge areas and had changed back into their uniformed and presentable 1930’s black and white clothing. Many hours would be spent primping themselves for the day ahead.

Ghores do not require sleep; the dead are not subject to moments of rest as the living are. So, while those with a pulse do what they can in the world of dreams, the Ghores sit before mirrors reapplying makeup, recharging and changing the wardrobe until they look as perfect as possible. Attention to detail resonates as they paint their faces repeatedly, change their clothes again and again, and reexamine and restudy movements and manners. While the world rests in slumber, the Ghores will practice speech, wit, and banter. They will sit in parlors with other Ghores and exchange friendly commentary, practicing seductive skills and getting the necessary feedback.

“Darling.....when you say, ‘darling,’ use a little less of the ‘R’ and more of the ‘awww,’ as if you want to remind them of being awwwe-struck by you. Try it once more. Dawwwwling.”

“Oh, yes, I agree. I would also like to mention how refreshing it is to see the way you use your eyes as you say it. The way you roll them when you say, ‘Dawwwwling.’ Yes, I like it very much!”

While the living clutch to pillows the Ghore practices walking. “Yes, that’s it, perfect! One foot directly before the other when you stroll! Balance your mood on your hips! Ah, perfect!”
They practice standing, sitting, faux sipping and the illusion of smoking. They do all of this for the moment of daybreak, when the bustle of busy feet outside the House heralds the movement of life and gives rise to the idea that the Phantom Ghore is one step ahead of you. So, you see, while the living man rests, the Phantom Ghore is an active mess of self-indulgence and self absorption...And if you were to ask him why, he would reply simply, “Dawwwwling, art imitates life! And I am a work of art!”

(Be sure to say ‘art’ in a fashion that reminds one of being awwwe-struck by you....)

By the time Gabby had returned to the House the Birth Party had long since dispersed, so entry into the abode was much easier than she had hoped for. Perhaps even too easy. She entered through the front door, feeling that any slip through a side door or back door would have raised a few suspicions. Slowly she stepped across the marble floor towards the staircase.

Her ears caught the tone of some people discussing. The sound came quite muffled through the pocket doors of the study, and as had become her chore as self appointed spy, she wandered over slowly to hear what the voices had to say.

An attempt had been made to close the pocket doors by the parties inside. Yet, there was still a small crack where the doors shied an inch from meeting and Gabby stood close there listening intently.

One voice belonged to Bettina. The other voice belonged to the new girl, the American trouble, Justine.

“Who was that man at my Birth Party?” Asked Justine.
“His name is Clayton. Ring any bells for you?”
“No. Should it?”
“You’ll remember someday. You’re sure you don’t remember him?”
“Oh, I am quite sure I don’t remember who he was. I would
remember someone that rude, wouldn’t I? Oh, don’t look at me so awkwardly, Bettina! Yes, he was rude! To leave my Birth Party with such a fit! Rude! What was the trouble anyway? And why wasn’t he dressed? Again, rude! I found it appalling that he did not even have the decency to wear something appropriate to my Birth Party! Rude, rude, rude! Who invited him, anyway?"

Now you can imagine why many of the Ghores simply smiled and nodded when this Miss Justine came their way. She spoke incessantly and behaved like a terrific bitch on occasion. I mean, really. Once a princess always a princess, and death cannot change this. Some traits, no matter how hard a Phantom Ghore may try to subside, will always prevail in Acquisitions.

“Uwe invited him,” responded Bettina, who was smiling and nodding the whole while.

“I am so surprised! No! Shocked is a better word! I wasn’t aware someone in Uwe’s position would invite someone so rude to be in his company! Why on earth did he invite the rude boy?”

“To play with him! To make fun of him! Oh, you weren’t here when your little rude boy arrived, where you? Oh, such a look on his face when he realized he was sooo out of place! That’s just one reason why! Uwe wanted to make him feel different in front of everybody! Oh, it was hilarious! God, maybe you ought to ask some of the others about it, because just thinking about it makes me want to laugh!”

“But why did he leave like that? So rude!”

“Because he feared for his life!”

“Is that all?”

“Yes, that’s it!”

“How silly. Afraid of being dead. Whoever heard of such an idea! Why would anyone want to fear death? Death never hurt anyone! What is all this business about bringing any person off a trash dump and bringing them into the House? If I am going to be a
Ghore, if I am going to belong to this little Family then it should be filled with only the best, right?”

“Clayton’s not just anyone, Justine! Clayton’s very special, or Uwe seems to think.”

Yes, the Ghores, like any creature that can speak and think, tend to gossip.

“Does Uwe want him?” Asked Justine sharp eyed and quietly under breath.

“For?”

“You know.... just...want him.” A leering look that steered the conversation sexually.

Bettina only smiled.... “Uwe likes trophies....Don’t you?”

“I hardly call the rude boy a trophy. Dirty! So...dirty! And rude!”

Gabby found no interest in the conversation and proceeded towards the grand staircase. Not yet confident to confront Uwe, she wanted to change clothes, change her make up and then think for a moment. It was regularly thought that if she approached him first, then she would seem as though she had nothing to hide. The less suspicious Uwe was of her in the coming days the better.

Gabby began thinking of an excuse for her absence during the Birth Party, and where she had been the entire evening. Although Ghores are not required to answer to anyone about where they go and what they do, stepping out of the area of contemporary Ghore movements and locations would seem odd, different, and many questions would arise. “Why have we not seen you at Café Einstein? Don’t you want To Parade at the Linientreu anymore? Why do you insist on running to that awful bar near Steglitz? We’re not the sort that ventures there. And why weren’t you at the Birth Party???” All this and more would be heard over and over again until at some point someone would realize and suspect Gabriella Kreitzler-Ghore was no Phantom Ghore at all…but a Phantom
Rogue. (More on that name, Rogue, in a moment.) Despite the fact that Gabby is legend, dear reader, in the Phantom Ghore House System the times are changing and the young ones are eager to push her off such a high pedestal. The young ones despise the elders. Youth and arrogance are apt to marry violently.

While Gabby ascends that monumental thing that twists in hundreds of steps around the perimeter of the grand hall, I shall take the liberty to explain why she is such a legend in the Ghore House.

Gabby is not the typical Phantom Ghore, you know. She could be considered in terms of living vernacular old school. She is legend because she was the first Acquisition made by Marinus and the Lady Pearl, she is legend because is the oldest one left. (Why there are not others like her in the time that is allotted.) She has gained only one Acquisition in her time and the whole affair was a disaster. Since then, she has been primarily exempt from having to hunt down Acquisitions, having been pardoned from the murderous chore by the Father of Fathers, the very first Phantom Ghore, Marinus Halasz-Ghore himself. She is not required to haunt the streets toying to find just the right man or woman to persuade into the House. She is immune to such policies, a figure not unlike an icon in the Phantom Ghore lineage. Gabby’s purpose is to simply be, to behave as the idea of what a Phantom Ghore should be, how they should look, how they should behave. Not how they kill.

Yet, the woman could not have been bothered. She cared nothing about the bastards in her midst. Though the younger Acquisitions treated Gabby as an old, outdated concept, she wished each and every one of them hell and more. Yes, the young ones didn’t respect Gabby as a matronly design in their midst. Behind her back they spoke with ruthless contempt about her and gossiped about her inability to Acquisition anyone. Oh, to hear some of the pettiness by the young ones! “She is pretty…but, that’s just it…pretty. Not gorgeous, and that’s what you need to get good
Acquisitions into the House. You must be gorgeous, Dawwwwling. Simply gorgeous!”

“Isn’t she a little old for this, though? I mean, after all these years, she is the oldest, isn’t she? Old. And with old ideas…but, you’re right. She is…pretty.”

She took the grand staircase in bountiful measure, hoping to reach her private room and escape the interrogation of anyone. Surely, her being the only person missing the night before would warrant some suspicion. She made it to the second floor landing and down the hall, but when she opened the door to her chambers Freddy was sitting at her vanity.

“So nice of you to return, Gabby. I thought you might have left for good.” One of the peculiar nuances of Freddy’s verbiage and voice is its feline-like roll through octave scales. It can be dark at the beginning of a sentence, and then lean towards a lilt at the end.

“What do you want,” she questioned angrily. “What are you doing in here?”

“So sorry. I just wanted to meet up with you before anyone else had a chance to talk with you.”

“Why, what’s the matter?”

“You were gone all night.”

“Is something wrong with that? Last I checked you were hardly in a position to be questioning me about my whereabouts. I think it discourteous of you to even bring it up.”

“Well, you missed all the excitement!” He reached down and grabbed some lipstick off her vanity and began to apply it to his cracked, thin lips. “I hope you don’t mind, but you have the best make-up.” He smacked his lips for effect. “I thought I would try some on.”

“Fine.”

“Like I said, you missed a whirl of good fun last night.”

“God, I hate Birth Parties these days. Besides, that girl
annoys me.”

“Justine, you mean?”

“Yes, that one. Justine…” Having said the American girl’s name as though it were pornographic.

“Well, she is who she is and no one can change that now. Besides, pretty soon she’ll be back in Savannah hunting down the Lady Pearl for us.” Now came his attempt at some use of her eyeliner.

Gabby simply stood behind him, a stance that emoted perturb.

“Where were you anyway, Gabby?” He looked back at her. “Just trying to indulge you in some conversation.”

“With a new Acquisition.”

He gasped quickly, behaving facetiously. “My my my! An Acquisition, you say? Why, you haven’t done that in what? 20 years or so?”

“I still can, you know.”

“Why now, after all this time?”

“Because I like him and I think he could bring some much needed balance to this House.”

“If I’m not mistaken, you said that with your last Acquisition. What is his name, this new one?”

And everything she said was a lie.

“His name is Alfred.”

“Ouch! Sounds pitiful. Alfred? Blech!”

“But, looks good.”

“Well, I guess that is what matters right? Do you think you can get him to change his name?”

“What should I call him?”

“How about…,” he pretended to think really hard, then caught her gaze in the mirror. “How about, Clayton?”

“Excuse me?”

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“It is a very nice name. He was at the Party, you know.”
Innocence and ignorance please come to aide our darling Gabby!
“Yes, I know, Freddy. Uwe had me hand him the invitation. I imagine he wanted Clayton here so he could kill him.”
“He survived. The Digger is an awful shot apparently.”
If the dead could muster chills they surely would have traveled the spine of our Gabby.
“Survived?”
“Yes, that’s right. The Digger chased him down, fired his gun, and missed the boy. Can you believe it? Missed! What a rotten Digger. I can’t wait for the day someone fucks up really bad, gets demoted, and takes his place. Then we can just get rid of this one.... Clayton left without harm.”
“Oh, no!” That’s it, Gabby. Play concerned.
“Oh, yes. One can only imagine what he will tell people when he gets back to America. ‘I went to Berlin, and there was Justine alive, plain as day.’ Even if he does tell someone, whose likely to believe him? He’s a rodent. A live, drunken rat.”
“So, Uwe isn’t worried?”
“Oh, most assuredly, he is! As a matter of fact, he wants you to go after him.”
“What!”
“He wants you to go to Clayton’s hotel and kill him! Bring the body back here. Uwe has no intention of allowing the boy to go back to his country. He must be killed in Berlin.”
“But, why? I don’t understand! If no one will believe him then why is it necessary to kill him?”
“I don’t rightly now. You know Uwe. What kind of Ghore would he be if he wasn’t hunting for fun. The word ‘trophy’ keeps coming up. I think he’s kind of decided on a new idea: two Fathers ruling one House? Who knows.... I’m just following orders. Do you
think I have enough eyeliner on?”
   “You have too much on.”
   “Oh, I don’t think so. I like to wear make-up. It is my
   favorite part about being Ghore. I was never allowed to do it while I
   was alive. People would call me queer. But now! Oh, my goodness,
   I just simply love it!” Gabby was staring at the floor, practically
   ignoring Freddy.
   “Gabby, dear. Don’t you think you should head to the
   hotel? After all, time is wasting. Tick tock, tick tock! Clayton could
   very well be packing as we speak, checking out of the hotel room,
   and off on his way! Run along, dawwwwling, run along!”
   She looked at his reflection, as he sat primping himself and
   adoring his own cheekbones.
   “Hurry! Hurry! Shoo! Off you go! That’s a girl, off you
   go!” All the while he applied cosmetic powder from a compact to
   his dead complexion.
   “Yes, I should hurry. Tell Uwe that I have gone.”
   With a mad dash she sprinted from the House, the mind
   attempting to induce scenarios, situations of excuse. The most likely
   thing she could produce was that she had arrived at the hotel too
   late and that Clayton had left. Yet, the entire part she was asked to
   play seemed entirely too shady. Someone would be following her.
   Someone would be watching to see if she accomplished the killing,
   surely.
   She immediately headed for a pay phone in a most discreet
   and unlikely place hoping no traveler, no follower, no person living
   or dead might see her make the phone call to Mirko.
   She at once told him of the situation and explained that he
   had to adorn a white t-shirt and blue jeans as soon as possible. It
   would be necessary to procure a ball cap as well. Mirko was told to
   present himself, dress himself, and create some illusion that would
   suggest he was Clayton. With the horrid eyes of the dead, and
surely from a distance, Mirko could pull it off.

Mirko then took the keys from out of the bloody pants that had been thrown away and took leave for the hotel.

Mirko entered the Ambassador from the rear and went up to Clayton’s room, clearing out his passport, money, and a small suitcase. He then promptly descended to the lobby where he checked out with the hotel clerk. He pulled the brim of the hat well over his eyes and kept his head lowered to the floor.

Mirko’s attempt at English was brilliant. He sounded quite American, and the Hotel Clerk suspected nothing, and even considered to himself how tragic it was that Americans should visit Germany without ever once learning the first German word.

“I’m ready to check out.”
“Rough night, sir?”
“Why do you ask?”
“People with hangovers love to study the floor.”
“Yeah...too much to drink.”

Papers were signed and a receipt was handed to Mirko, pretending to be Clayton, who then wandered boldly, confidently out the front door to an awaiting taxi, and then gone.

To complete the ruse, Gabby wandered into the hotel lobby a few minutes later to ask the hotel clerk if he would not mind ringing Mr. Clayton Strickland’s room.

“Kindly ring the young American for me. I am a visitor who must speak with him urgently.”

The clerk informed Gabby that the American had checked out some ten minutes before and was now gone.

“Gone to where?” Her ignorance completed the scenario.

“Who can say? Perhaps America.”

She was certain, leaving the front door of the hotel that somewhere in the background was a Ghore watching her every move. She was, however, incorrect. Oh, it is true that a Ghore had
been there before. It had been Freddy, as instructed by Uwe. At some distance Freddy was sitting in the old Rolls, inconspicuous to some degree, for it is rather hard to hide an old 1930’s Rolls in the modern world without everyone gawking at it.

Now, ten minutes before, at the moment the alleged Clayton was seen leaving the hotel in a taxi, Freddy followed close behind to see if the taxi did in fact head for the airport. By the time that Gabby had made it to the lobby, Freddy was already gone, trailing the taxi by some few cars behind to avoid any detection. And Freddy witnessed the most unusual thing happen. The taxi stopped at a subway station far in the southern tip of Berlin, near the House. It was the Subway Oskar Helene Heim, just at Clay Allee. The alleged Clayton, the assumed-to-be Clayton, paid the taxi, and then wandered down to the subway, to the U-Bahn.

Freddy without delay dashed out of the Rolls, then followed the man he assumed must be Clayton through the underground, followed him through two switches in subways to finally Kreuzberg, where the now disputed Clayton entered an apartment building and disappeared. This was not Clayton, most definitely, most confidently. It was a decoy of some kind, Freddy thought. It was his turn now to return to the House with a myriad of secrets and scandals ready for explanation.

Gabby returned to the House once more, but this time proudly stepping though the front door and past the Ghores that lounged around tossing wit toward one another, past the Ghores in the parlor practicing flirtation, even past Justine who was practicing the basic “head up, chin out” pose. Casually, and without very
much thought at all, dear old Gabby made way towards the grand staircase, ascending it with a rather quick pace. She remained virtually unseen by the new Ghores, the younger Ghores, and the fresh Acquisitions busy doing their own ego trappings. That is, all but Bettina who called from below.

Now, Bettina is a sordid case whose misdoings deserve a novel all their own. However, we shall not oblige her with such an honor and shall simply say that she despised Gabby for reasons that are too complex.

Bettina was the sort that needed something other than lineage and legend to make some sense of you. She needed something heartier. The fact that Gabby was allowed to do what she wished, when she wished, and how she wished, and be except from all possible rules under the sun while Marinus was alive, was something that truly irritated Bettina immensely. Now that Marinus was gone Gabby was not so protected and Bettina savored the moments she had to torture poor Gabby.

Bettina was favored by Uwe because she refused to be subject to ridiculousness. She meant business and desired no half hearted attempt at anything. If you are going to be a Ghore, a truly great and noble Ghore, Bettina thought, then you’d better do it right, because I’ll be there ready to slice you apart if you DARE make a half ass effort of it...We are too important to allow idiots to bring down the curve!

“Oh, Gabby! Uwe wants to see you in his chambers.” Gabby nearly halfway up the staircase shot a glance to Bettina over her shoulder, then continued on. But, Bettina stopped her with a very uncouth, very inappropriate, “He wants to see you NOW, dear. Or do you have somewhere else you think you ought to be?”

“I thought I might like to change first, if that’s ok with you…dear.”

Bettina laughed. “Yes, those clothes are horrible, really.
What did you do? Steal them off a corpse or something?” More laughter from the younger Ghores. “I would agree, it would be best to change. However, he insisted that he see you the moment you arrived. I guess you’ll just have to look bad.” Bettina smiled.

Yet a few chuckles more were heard throughout the grand hall. A few of the younger ones, truly unaware to Gabby’s legend and presence in the history of the Phantom Ghores, chuckled with little sinister snickers as Gabby was treated badly.

But, our dear Gabby is not apt to be treated cruelly without repercussion. There are other reasons, aside from those previously mentioned, why Gabby was famous in the early days of the House of Berlin. You see, the subtle sound of the giggling little young ones below set her eyes forward, kept her solid in her stance, frozen....

Then slowly, that one peculiar nuance that so many in the world are never able to possess simply bled from her every movement. She rotated slyly on the marble step, rotating on only one high heel. The face was lifted to gather whatever shadow and light might be emanating from the dim glow of candles and gas lamps, the cheeks rose, the slight Dietrich smile of hidden accomplishments and confidence quietly shadowed the cheek, and the heavy lid of seduction all took their place in the artful frame of a face. The left hand was dutifully placed at the hip. And the right hand! The right hand was lifted slightly in the air, allowing the long tendrils of fingers to simply spill from her wrist, as though to balance her on an imaginary banister. She wriggled the fingers gracefully, this glamorous charade of brushing away bad air. Then! Oh, dear reader, it was only then that she began to descend the staircase, stepping with one priceless pump before the other. The sound of her determined, yet slow, very slow stride resounding with echo and thud throughout the House. The sound of a rhythmic lioness’s heart beating as she leans with stalking towards her prey. Half way down the staircase she stopped in mid-step, leaned her
head towards the Ghores below, cleared her throat and continued walking. Every Ghore in view of dear Gabby stopped suddenly to see how it was really done. Oh yes, they all gawked in admiration as a certain sort of presence enveloped her, guided her towards the bottom of the staircase. She possessed what they all study and yearn in all hours of the day and night: that eye-catching elegance that is never learned, but inherited. Finally, she was at the bottom of the staircase and made way through the little crowd watching her, moving towards Uwe’s chambers, his office.

Bettina moved towards her, about to say something. Alas, it is always the little things in pomposity that complete a self made shrine. Gabby simply lifted that right hand as if to stop her, never once looking at her, never allowing her to speak. She just stopped Bettina in her tracks with one nonchalant pose of the hand and said, “Dawwwwling, you just don’t have It.” Gabby continued on unaffected.

These are the moments the younger Ghores could never master, those little things that had them watching her like little dead pupils in awe of a master. Watching someone who has “It.”

They applauded our beloved Gabby, as the uncompromising Bettina rolled her eyes in disbelief at having seen the legendary Ghore steal a few moments of everyone’s time with a simple stroll down the staircase.

That, dear reader is what defines the grace of a Phantom Ghore: the grace and poise in the most mundane of movements, thank you very much. The epitome of Phantom Ghore grace rests in the ability to make the most boring of occasions lavishly yours and seemingly a chore for anyone else who would dare mimic you.

Through Uwe’s chamber door Gabby stepped, closing the door behind her.

“Have a seat,” he said. “I won’t keep you very long. I know you must be busy with this new Acquisition of yours.” He gave a
sharp look to her and she looked away. The idea of Gabby bringing an Acquisition into the House was quite far fetched and his look told her so. His look reminded her that he knew far more than she thought he did.

“I’ve been thinking about that all day, you know. I can’t believe after so long that you would finally decide to bring an Acquisition into the House. If it’s true, then I can understand why. You must be lonely. I know how everyone treats you. I find it deplorable sometimes, the things I hear about you…. However, if this new Acquisition you told Freddy about turns out to be a lie, then I could certainly believe that, too…."

“I didn’t appreciate being interrogated by Freddy. If you suspect me of something then you ought to question me directly. I deserve that. I don’t appreciate being questioned by that dramatic faggot.”

Uwe took to a chair opposite her. “Clayton is not dead, is he?”

“By the time I got to the hotel he had already checked out.”

There was a pause and another look from Uwe that spoke volumes about suspicions.

“Well, I guess this one got away,” he finally said.

“It happens.”

“Yes, I guess it does.” He leaned in with a serious tone. “I don’t plan to deny my suspicions about you.”

“I’m not sure I follow you.”

“Something’s not right with you. Not right at all. I’m not sure what it is, but I see it. You’re hiding something…. Do you remember when I first became a Ghore? I was devoted to you. I had a fondness for you. You were the sort that needed never to explain anything you did to anyone. Confident, above all rules… You were a very good influence on me. Life was not good to me. Not at all. Then I met you…and the Ghores…and death was much kinder than
life had ever been. I looked up to you. You taught me everything I needed to know. I felt indebted to you.” Then came the sharp shift in his loyalty. “But, don’t think for a moment that I won’t have you cut to bits for betraying me.”

She started to say something, but he immediately stopped her.

“I don’t think its time for you to do or say anything that might incriminate you right now, Gabby. You see, I am going to give you the benefit of the doubt and I hate saying that because I hate clichés. I am going to let you walk out of here and return to your daily activities, whatever they may be. I like being challenged like this. I like the mystery behind whatever it is you’re up to. Keeps me from being idle. I don’t know what you are doing, who you are working with, and what you have planned, but I know that you’re up to something. I can’t prove it yet, but I hope that you will cease before I do find proof,” here came another one of his sharp looks, “… enough proof to have you dissected. Stop now or pay the penalty. I am giving you fair warning, Gabby.”

Even closer he leaned, almost at her cheek, almost as if speaking in her ear, the lips close enough to her cheeks to kiss them. “Die down whatever ploy you have in the back of that dead head of yours to destroy me and I will overlook many of the inconsistencies I have seen in the past two days. Continue with your deceit and trickery and I will have you shredded.” She only looked forward.

Uwe pulled back and head for the window, assuming a very pompous, if not victorious sort of stature.

“I have only one desire at this time: to see the other Houses that oppose me gone, and to find the Lady Pearl. If you can help me to achieve these things I will be grateful and will more than likely keep you intact. Go against me and prevent me from these things, and I shall make it my only goal to see you chopped and diced into small pieces, and your remains scattered for the birds to peck and

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take away. Now get up out of that chair, walk out that door, and go
tell whomever it is you are plotting with that you will not be seeing
them any longer.”

The conclusion to the conversation was quite simple. He sat
back down, leaned back in the chair and crossed his legs. She stood
and walked away, never once looking at him, never once uttering a
word.

I only make declaration of his movements to prove that all
his gestures, whatever they may be, were forever extravagant,
forever theatrical…and the simple movement from the chair to the
window and back again was nothing more than his desire to look
important, prestigious, and empirical as Gabby sat helplessly in her
own chair.

It should be noted also, that Uwe’s voice was never
condescending, never loud, and never ever without an eerie sense of
calm. This frightened Gabby more than anything. And did she dare
go see Mirko to tell him that she would not see him again? Naturally, she did not. Gabby was certain the moment she stepped
out of the House someone would be there to follow her to her secret
destination in Kreuzberg. She had sacrificed too much to allow
anyone in the House of Berlin to find Clayton.

I beg the reader’s patience. I am waiting, so waiting, to tell
you when the moment is appropriate the secrets behind every
scandal the dead are attempting to hide. Alas, the time is simply not
right. You must know every mystery before you can begin to have
the answers. All enigmas must be shown to you in one form or
another before you can begin to unravel truth.

There are some things I do wish to mention before we go
any further, some inclinations you as a reader must have firmly
planted in your opinions about these illustrious dead before you
should continue. The priorities of the Ghores are not like those of
the living. Never forget this. Their desires are not like yours. Their
minds are not clouded by the same judgments as yours. Alas, their
greed and jealously is just as horrendous, if not ten times more than
than that of the living.

Gabby did make a phone call to Mirko the following
afternoon. To call it brief would be an understatement.
“You must proceed without me. I will call you again, when I
can. I don’t know when that is. Good bye.” Dead, went the receiver.
And so it was.
Mirko had initially intended to tell Clayton everything, to
inform him of every detail he could about who and what were the
Phantom Ghores, what the House of Berlin was, and why they
needed the Lady Pearl, and even more so, why Clayton as an
outsider had been so quickly brought into this scheme. Nothing
would be held from the American, who had incidentally been
walking again in the hours past his Resurrection, had begun asking
questions, had begun to remember more and more with each passing
moment who he was, where he had been and how he had died. That
is to say, he remembered nothing at all of being dead. He did not
remember Heaven, nor his brief time spent with God and the angels,
but he remembered running from the Digger, remembered being at
the Birth Party, and most importantly, remembered seeing Justine.
Remembered, Why doesn’t anyone love me?
Clayton was aware that he was no longer alive and, by some
design that he was ignorant to, that his soul had returned to his
corpse.
They had redressed the boy with the simple outfit left
behind at the hotel. Ball cap, jeans, white t-shirt.
At some point Clayton took to exploring the odd perimeters
of the apartment. You see, in the room that should have been a kitchen, a large hole had exposed the apartment next door, and with boredom and unanswered questions mounting continually, Clayton took to stepping through the rough opening to see what lay beyond.

Now, what he found there, aside from the tattered shred of what was once a domicile, was something he could only attribute to hallucination. With these new dead eyes, why not? Nothing made sense to him, nothing at all. Everything he saw was slightly sepia to a degree, and marred by the animated specks of a certain graininess.

Newspapers cluttered the floor, dust piles had taken residence, cobwebs kept close the gothic sensation of a condemned dwelling. Now, these remnant things alone are not enough to warrant any oddity, however, what these things had for company did require some concern.

There at the window, perched in a chair and looking close enough to resemble a Ghore, was a woman staring forward into her view of the city from behind some rather dark and ostentatious sunglasses. Clayton could see that she had a bold scarf fashionably tied around the neck. Indeed, she was a beautiful woman, distinctly shallow and sharp in her features, much like the Ghores. And the clothes, the clothes showed no difference between her and the scoundrels that had signed his death certificate. They were the polished, iniquitous garb of the Ghores.

What a sight it must have been to see her, stoic in that chair, chin held high, all entrenched in a sepia glow, the dust behaving as her soiled red carpet, and the tattered newspapers swirling around and past her as tired old guards, as she held firm an unknown gaze into the world outside.

The statuesque woman showed no sign of noticing Clayton’s arrival, but kept tight her gaze of the cityscape before her. Clayton dared not disturb, but rather cringed from her, fretted at the sight of someone so beautifully monstrous.
In the time since his death the Ghores were the primary thing Clayton could remember, the first thing he was apt to recall…and it disturbed his conscious thought greatly, for those images of that deadly clique were tainted with a sourness.

Creeping quietly behind the woman to investigate the rest of the empty apartment, Clayton came across the sight of a man. He, too, seemed so focused on his endeavors that he did not notice Clayton. The man sat at a small table, his profile to Clayton. The man sat scribbling furiously into a book, page after page with such a speed that the penmanship must have been unintelligible. Yet, when the man stopped in his thought to lift his head and think deeper for a moment, Clayton could see the most morbid scarring across the face, slashed upon slashed gashed wounds kept forcefully bound with staples and stitching. The repulsion of the man’s appearance and the woman’s Ghore presence disgusted Clayton and the investigation into the allegedly empty apartment next door was over.

Back inside his own close quarters, Clayton questioned Mirko about what he had seen.

“Do not worry yourself about them, they are fine. They shall not harm you, I promise. They are, as you would say, the good guys.”

“Why are they over there?”

“They want to be left alone, for their own unique reasons. I don’t question them on it, I just let them do what they will.”

“Are they dead?”

“Oh, yes, quite dead.”

“Are they Ghores?”

“They were. They’re not any longer. They are called Rogues now. They have no home.”

“Are you a Rogue?”

“Eventually, I’ll be able to tell you everything. Just not
now.”

“Well, when?” A slight sense of anger was already running through Clayton. His patience was dwindling quickly and all these many quiet hours in the apartment were now alive and sliced with questions.

“I assure you, when the time is appropriate I will tell you everything.”

“I don’t need to know everything, just one thing.”

“What?”

“How did I come back to life?”

“You didn’t. You’re still dead.”

“I don’t understand.”

Now, rather than trying to explain to Clayton all the precise didactics behind Resurrections, or any Ghore chore for that matter, Mirko carried on with his business. He sat in a chair behind a desk quite a bit of the time, speaking on the telephone in either Italian or French, but never German. Consequently, Clayton could understand nothing of what Mirko spoke about. However, he could gather from his tonality on occasion, that it was severe, dramatic, and tragic, to say the least. Sometimes, the conversations would end in fierce screams in French, or would end in hushed whispers of Italian. Mirko would not explain anything to Clayton even though Clayton was always asking questions.

This sort of questioning lasted for hours, Clayton hoping to antagonize Mirko into a suitable response.

Most of the questions revolved around his own death and begged for reasons on why he died. Clayton felt that he had died for some cause for which he could claim no responsibility nor involvement, and the constant shred of influence of the Ghores over him did warrant a certain amount of hatred. So, he questioned Mirko extensively. Who are they? Why did they kill me? What do they want? Why did I see Justine? Is she dead too? Are they all dead?
Mirko would say again and again, “I’ll explain everything at the appropriate time.”

“Listen, man, all I want is to go home. You got that? I don’t know who you are, I don’t know what you want. You’re always too freakin’ busy to talk to me. You got something better to do than put in plain words why you won’t let me go home?”

“As a matter of fact, yes, I am quite busy at the moment. I promise to tell you everything later.”

Finally, Clayton could stand no more and began screaming at Mirko in the middle of another one of his foreign spoken conversations on the phone.

“To hell you will! You’re gonna tell me everything, do you understand? I’m afraid to leave this fucking apartment cause I don’t know what’s happened to my body! But, I can’t stay the fuck here anymore! You owe it to me to tell me why I died and why the fuck you brought me back! You need to explain to me why you won’t let me fucking go home! I want OUT GOD DAMMIT! I WANNA GO HOME!!”

Mirko sat stunned, the phone dangling from his hand and the shrill voice on the other line begging for attention.

There are but a few expressions a simple man can give to elevate one’s fear. There was a certain spark in Clayton that was dangerously close to igniting into a full, uncontrollable blaze. Mirko was quite certain that within moments, his own existence would be engulfed with that flame and all would be lost.

“My apologies, Clayton.” Mirko whispered some farewell into the phone and hung up. “I am afraid that I do not prioritize very well. You are quite right. We do owe it to you to tell you everything. So, I shall not let you wait another moment longer.”

Mirko went into another room and emerged with a small, alligator skin piece of luggage. The narrow thin case was complete with a domed top and brass clasp and no bigger than the size of a
large treasured tome, or large book. Mirko sat aside Clayton and held the alligator skin box in his lap, inspecting the clasp at the top section. Unlatching the clasp the top fell open wide, and from out the interior was pulled a leather bound book wrapped in leather straps. The alligator case was placed to the side.

“How is your eyesight, Clayton?”
“There’s no color.”
“That’s right.”
“But it aint black and white. Its got more of an orange color.”
“Yes, that’s sepia. And is it grainy? Gritty?”
“Yeah.”
“Can you make out shapes?”
“Pretty much. Its just little things I have a problem with. Little things I have to look really close at, but its still too hard to see.”

“Unfortunately, that’s about as good as your eyesight is going to get.”

Clayton nodded his head, as if to say he understood, and although it was only a beginning Clayton was relieved that at long last he was being given some kind of information, some explanation about the unusual state of his body.

Mirko handed the leather strapped book to Clayton, which resembled more of a diary, or a journal.

“This is but one of many copies of this work. You must start by first reading it. It is written specifically for someone in your position, someone who has just been Resurrected. It was written in very large print so that it could be read with our very bad eyesight. And it’s in English. It was decided it had to be written in a language that was more universal so that anyone could pick it up. It has been used by the German, the French, the Austrian, and Italian Houses, as well as The House of London.”

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“Houses?”
“There are five Houses...or at least there were.” Then Mirko stopped, seeing the confusion on Clayton’s face. “Don’t worry, the Houses are explained in the manual. Let’s see how good your eyesight is. Open it up and tell me what it says.”

Clayton did as he was told and was immediately impressed with how much his terrible new eyes were able to make out. The whole thing was written in hand, in beautifully scribed, languid penmanship that was regal and passionate. However, it was larger than living penmanship.

Clayton uttered the words on the title page. “House Rules...Methods...and Manners...for...Newly Dead...” he struggled for a moment..... “Acquisitions?”

“Yes, Acquisitions. The term ‘Acquisition’ will be explained also. This manual will explain what the Phantom Ghores are. When you are done, I will answer any questions that you have, and then explain to you why you were killed.” Mirko looked down, almost ashamed. “And why we brought you back. Why we need you, Clayton...”

Mirko then stood as Clayton said quickly, “I remember Gabby. Am I gonna see Gabby again?”

Mirko was surprised not only that he remembered Gabby, but that he remembered some emotion about the woman, some kind of comfort in knowing her....

“I don’t know. But, we’ll discuss that later.” He then left, leaving Clayton alone in the small apartment in Kreuzberg to read and ponder The Methods and Manners of Newly Dead Acquisitions.

Now, the House Rules that Mirko handed Clayton is much lengthier than the simple text at the very front of this book. If you have neglected to read it, you should at this time, before all confusion takes hold of you, read and study it carefully. It is vitally important that you do not proceed before having read this manual,
for the mysteries surrounding this story have a genesis and they begin there.

If you have read the House Rules then kudos to you. However, a glimpse back at them may be required to refresh your ill equipped, living memory.

Mirko returned a few hours later and as promised told Clayton every slight bit of history he knew of the Phantom Ghores.

I shall make no fuss at quoting nor of paraphrasing Mirko’s attempt at telling the brief bit of history of the Phantom Ghores, so I shall oblige the reader with my own interpretation of the events beginning in 1933 and leading up to the death of Clayton Strickland. As scribe of this story, I shall make no promise to keep it riddled with details. The complexity of the Phantom Ghores and their society is simply too great to explore on paper. Therefore, please be advised that much of what I shall relay upon the page is only a fraction of what has happened to the Phantom Ghores in the six decades since their first Resurrection.
PART TWO:
A Slight History of the Phantom Ghores

We can only begin the Phantom Ghore history with its founders and not with the genesis of this dead race...That particular knowledge of existence remains the secret of its very first, Marinus Halasz-Ghore and his companion, The Lady Pearl.

For some time there existed only these two dead beings, mingling along side the living in a strange sense of separatism, of voyeurism, amid the growing frustrations of an increasingly more populated world. They were not separated from society, not extravagantly pulled away as the Phantom Ghores of today, but assimilated rather well into the living scheme virtually unnoticed when they had to. They simply preferred to be left alone by the demons of the world, by the pains of the world, and found their retreat into each other’s company more fulfilling than the spectacles of war and ambition. This pleased the two of them, as they found comfort in each other’s secret dead state.
Marinus and the Lady Pearl had an enormous villa in the southwestern tip of Berlin, the green area called Wannsee. However, they also had a small apartment in the center of the city utilized only when they wanted to witness the sadistic art of a city that was on the edge of madness. On occasion, the two would sport the town in search of avant-garde art and theatrics, would prowl the cabarets and watch sublime spectacles of camp and disaster fill the stage. And when they had their fill of such hysteria, they would leave their apartment and return to the villa at the Wannsee and reside in seclusion. Often they would sit and speak for hours on end about nothing in particular, just chatting away and laughing loudly as the dead of now tend to do.

On one of their weekends into town, they found a young woman huddled in the alley behind their apartment building. Marinus and the Lady Pearl would have not thought twice about the young homeless woman had she not possessed something that other vagrants don’t. In her possession was not a bag of clothes and odd trinkets, but paintbrushes and oils for the use of fine art. Marinus and the Lady Pearl were impressed, simply smiled to each other, and went about their routine.

The girl became an addition to their property almost instantly, sleeping nightly beneath discarded newspapers in a cuddled corner that kept her clear of the wind. On occasion the dead couple would acknowledge and smile to her, but they did not speak to her. They were not being rude, of course, but they rarely spoke to anyone. The simplest exchange of salutations led to conversations and conversations led to questions. “What do you do? Where are you from? What is your profession?”

The Lady Pearl and Marinus did not wish to be bothered, wished their secretive life to stay quite quiet behind private lines. So it was rare that they spoke to anyone.

However, as the weather began to get viciously cold, they
thought often about helping the girl with whatever she needed to stay warm. But, some distance was prudent; for the truth behind their dead existence was not something they wished anyone at all to know. Perhaps they might anonymously leave blankets, a warm coat, maybe even some money…

One morning the Lady Pearl went into the alley to check on the girl and was amazed to find the entire alleyway had been painted with such a grand mural that even with her dead eyes she could make out the shapes and figures of what was obviously a beautiful spring day in the vein of Cézanne. The mural, covering what appeared to be a square area about 16 feet by 6 feet was breathtaking and startled the Lady Pearl into a messiah complex. She waited patiently for the girl to return.

When the homeless girl did return the Lady Pearl met her with smiles.

“This is the most beautiful work I have ever seen! What is your name?”

“Gabriella Kreitzler. How do you do?” She bowed her head as if to curtsey kindly to the obviously wealthy upper class woman.

“Oh, stop that! I’m not royalty! I’m not even German!”

“So sorry, dearest Miss. I was hoping you would like the mural.”

“I do very much indeed. Why is someone with such talent sleeping near a dumpster? Why are you homeless?”

“I don’t know if its something you’d be anxious to hear.”

“Would you come inside for a nice sit by the fire and tell me?”

The girl did oblige and told the Lady Pearl this: Gabriella had just arrived in Berlin from a small town far in the western part of Germany. Her father had died when she was young, her mother was not suited for parenting and often neglected Gabriella to the point
the young girl often had to find her own food. She had ambitions to be an artist, a successful and famous artist, and the elusive pull of the big city had her trapped. She ran away from home and traveled to Berlin with no money, hoping that the sight of her paintings would lure someone into paying her to work for them. Alas, the money was not as forthcoming as she had hoped and she found herself on the streets with nothing but her supplies to keep her company. She had begun painting in the alleyways where she spent her time, signing her name in bold letters at the bottom hoping that someone would see them and ask her to paint something for them, for money, so that she could begin to get on her feet and out of the cold of winter, hoping the sell of her soul’s deep contact with the brush would offer her independence.

The conversation helped to convince the Lady Pearl of something about the girl: that she was not meager; she was not a rodent vagrant without any sense about her. She found Gabriella to be a rather ambitious intellect who did not mind sleeping in the cold in order to pursue her ambitions. Real ambition, real determination requires the sacrifice of even the most modest of moments and luxuries. Be wary of anyone attempting to strive without sacrifice.

Gabriella then excused herself, saying there was someone who wanted to look at her work, another mural she had painted on the side of some other rich person’s building.

The Lady Pearl at that moment decided she and Marinus should do everything in their power to help the unfortunate girl. When Marinus was told what the Lady Pearl had learned about Gabriella, he too, decided they should behave as benefactors and pay the girl whatever they could to assist her in her quest for first a stable life, then a fair amount of success as an artist. As advocates of art, they could no longer simply witness it, watch it, approve or disapprove of him...they now had to participate in its inception and birth.
The next two evenings had made Berlin very cold. Having not seen Gabriella in that time, the Lady Pearl and Marinus began to think that all was well with the artist. They deduced that Gabriella had been paid enough to find an apartment of her own, no longer needing the alley way, nor the assistance of two very willing strangers.

On the third day they made their way into the alley again to admire the painting that Gabriella had left behind; as they pondered the beauty in the strokes, the meticulous attention to pointillist detail, they noticed the heap of trash down at the opposite end of the alley, at the darker end of the alley, where even rats dared not wander. From beneath the heap of rubbish they spotted a foot protruding. Their hearts, could they have even beaten, fluttered for a moment and they went to investigate.

It was Gabriella’s body, having been stabbed, raped viscously and tossed beneath the trash heap to avoid any kind of detection.

On many occasion the Mr. and Mrs. of the dead had seen how destiny makes its exclamatory points heard so often on occasion.

*If only* they had seen Gabriella the day before, *if only* the girl had stayed to visit with the Lady Pearl a bit longer until Marinus had returned, *if only* she had not gone to visit the “someone” who wanted to commission a painting from her... Alas, life moves as it should.

The Lady Pearl and Marinus decided to give the girl a proper burial, would see to it that her journey into death was treated with the utmost in dignity.

Gabriella’s body was taken to the villa at the Wannsee, but instead of it being buried right away, it was laid before them on a table. The two circled the corpse, both deep in thought. As is customary with two people who mark themselves as soul mates,
words do not need to be spoken for a conversation to take place. The Lady Pearl knew what her companion thought, and Marinus knew very well what his Lady Pearl was thinking.

_The better one’s ought not be robbed of the moments here in life. Art, her art— should have continued. She should have had the opportunity to paint more— pull from her soul more of those beautiful paintings because she— didn’t have a chance. The world spits on cases like hers for they— simply don’t care. They don’t want to see what an artist can— remind them of. That a soul exists. That we— we are made to be creators, not— destroyers. She should have lived. She should have— painted more._

On either side of the body they stopped and looked at each other with joyous eyes.

“Can you do it again?” Asked the Lady Pearl.

“I can.” He smiled.

“Will you do for her what you’ve done for me? Can you bring her back, too?”

“I will.” And she smiled at his response.

Although perfectly content with their decision to stay quietly alone forever, they Resurrected the girl, utilizing the vocal ability supplied by Marinus.

And with Gabriella’s death, destiny had decided that a new sort of creature should seek shelter in the world....

For years it was hypothesized why they even bothered, unless they were truly moved by Gabriella, to steal her from the
Heavens. Yes, even back then, far back when there were but three Phantom Ghores, they knew quite distinctly that Resurrecting someone meant stealing their soul from the Universe. Both Marinus and the Lady Pearl would give their own answers as to why they Resurrected Gabby, aware of the consequences.

“Because art would be better served with her hand on the canvas,” the Lady Pearl would say.

“Because we felt it was time to start a family,” Marinus would say.

Truthfully speaking, that is what they finally decided upon, that was the reason they needed to bring Gabriella back from the dead: to complete a family. To make things just right, they asked Gabriella if she would not mind hyphenating her name to Gabriella Kreitzler-Ghore, to make their trio more unanimous, more like a family. She naturally, did not object.

Now, the reader should not be inclined to think that Gabriella was something of a daughter to the two. Absolutely not, she was more a sister to them. The more Gabriella remembered about her life after being Resurrected, the more intellectual she became, the more in her own element she wandered. The Lady Pearl and Marinus taught her how to stand, how to walk, how to speak in such a resonance that anyone close by, no matter how softly you whispered, would be anxious to hear more of your words. Gabby was a natural, anxious to dismiss some prior lineage and adopt a new identity, one where there was no pain, nor hurting, nor crying anymore.

The Lady Pearl was the first to call her Gabby and it stuck. At first Gabriella laughed, then accepted. She even went so far as to suggest that she would never introduce herself as Gabriella again. That was a different name for a different girl.

“Please, call me Gabby,” she would say. “I can’t tolerate the name Gabriella.”
Incidentally, Gabby never painted again. Oh, she made a few attempts at it, but they were not the same. Her paintings in death were technically good, yes, but not as brilliant as they had been in life. They did not speak about the human condition as they had while she was still alive. A valuable lesson about art was learned after that: only life gives art the passion to be luminous. Anyone can be a fine painter, but it is only the urgency of a temporary existence in this world that makes the *artwork* and not the artist want to be immortal. Gabby’s paintings after the Resurrection were very good, please do not think me wrong...they were just missing something that tragically only life could supply. But that didn’t stop the three from attempting to uncover the mystery of art beyond death...for none of these three perceived this philosophy plainly.

The Lady Pearl and Marinus lavished Gabby with praises at the speed in which Gabby tirelessly (literally) painted. Her strokes across the canvas came quickly and without hesitation. The Lady Pearl was the first to applaud. “We’ve done it...True art will thrive forever!”

With the success of Gabby’s resurrection they decided to scourge the streets of Berlin looking for the downtrodden. They weren’t hunting for simple vagrants, mind you, but rather sad and beaten people who were tossed to the side for being different....The three went chasing after those who had been dejected by society for reasons beyond their control.

There was Lydia, an incredibly talented writer who had been left on the face of the earth to suffer under societies strange desire and pretentiousness. She was a writer with a spitfire pen who quickly caught the attention of the three dead Ghores at a café she recited her work at. Lydia had yet to publish anything and spent many of her evenings with some impressive eyes that pierced towards the truth of anyone in her attendance. While reading,
Marinus could swear she stared at him, as could the Lady Pearl. And Gabby? Gabby could have told you nothing of the sort. She had been hypnotized by the machine gun rapidity with which Lydia delivered her poetry and verse.

There was also Arkadi Malinowski, a young Russian immigrant with a svelte hold of the violin. I write his full name in the paragraph, for that is how he would introduce himself continually. “I am Arkadi Malinowski. I make love with the violin.” Ah, to watch him play on the street corners, pompously playing while in tattered clothes was a vision all its own. The expressions in the face of the good looking man held them all at attention when they happened to pass him. In his mid thirties his soul reeked of despair, unable to ever find the stature in life he had dreamed of, or that he called upon while playing his violin. The classical instruments and sounds were dying…and the musicians that knew the key secrets to making the violin scream or sing, died along side with them. The three Ghores noticed most distinctly Arkadi Malinowski’s angry eye and grit teeth while playing some mad piece of symphony and it was with that they fell in love.

“If he makes that face while making love to the violin,” asked the Lady Pearl with a smile, “I can only imagine what he looks like while making love to a woman.” She and Gabby giggled.

Then there was Mirko whose talent was something subtler, something a bit more hidden from those who seek something obvious in the creations of man. His talent was being able to swoon and delight you in persuasive conversation. That is not to say that he was proficient in the art of debate, but rather never argued any point. He did not have to. The simple sound of his voice, the inflections in their proper consonant places, and the unyielding good fortune of articulation had Mirko able to convince you of anything he said without receiving much challenge. Mirko was a master conversationalist, able to discuss with you any topic under the sun,
any topic intellectually pleasing to those in highbrow positions. But, what made it completely genuine was when he didn’t know anything about a certain topic or subject he was apt to tell you. Rather than pomp in front of you with all sorts of convincing nonsense, he would say simply, “I am afraid I know nothing of that. Please, tell me more,” and would give the most impressive impression that he was truly listening to you.

Through macabre discussions around candlelight Marinus, the Lady Pearl, and Gabby would discuss just how each of these artists would die. Scenarios were tossed about, manufactured. Durations were constructed. *Would it take ten years for one of them to die on their own? Or would it take five? How long does it actually take for an unsuccessful artist to die? How long does it take for corporate commercialism to kill the independent artist? Would any of the three young artist even achieve any greatness?*

More than likely, not.

Now, this summation has nothing to do with their talents, for they were truly remarkable talents; they were artists that challenged the very nature of what art *could* be, of what talent meant. Art is a reflection of a society about to thrive or die. Not something to entertain the population with while it waits to do either. These were real artists, who would never be great, because they were honest people in a society of living liars.

This is where the three dead Ghores began thinking about a new society, a different breed of creature, and a new kind of species that would carry valid art to the grave and back again.

The Ghores decided to have a party and Gabby went around town passing the exclusive invitations to Lydia, Mirko, and Arkadi.

“*Arkadi will play his violin, while Lydia recites her poetry. Mirko will discuss and analyze when they are finished. What a splendid evening of synergistic artistry it will be!*"
P.S. You will be paid greatly for your talents.”

The evening did happen, however the promised concert never did. To be paid greatly meant not cash....but something darker, for which the struggling artists were never given negotiation.

On that evening Arkadi, Lydia, and Mirko met with the three Ghores at the villa at the Wannsee. Glasses of champagne were handed out. Each of the hopeful artists took one with gleaming smiles reflecting the subtle shine of a candle’s flicker. The evening and its promises were toasted, as the unsuspecting sipped themselves to their poisoned deaths.

Mirko was the first to clutch his throat. Seeing him drop to his knees, Lydia then dropped her glass and struggled for air, as the Lady Pearl, Marinus, and Gabby all stood back and applauded, smiling, holding onto each other. Arkadi was the last to die; falling back on the floor, wide eyed with terror, blood dripping from the palms of his hands from clutching his violin for dear life so tightly.

And that was how it all began. These three artists were but the first in a long line of Resurrected in the time that followed. However, it is always regarded that this group of six were the original members of the House of Berlin, or even the Ghore House System for that matter. They were the first, and truly, there would never again be others like them.

Some other author may go into detail about these incidents with much greater fervor at some other time, with some other desire to tell their version of these events. However, I wish to move right along to the scandal, to when it all began to fall apart.

The Ghores, Phantom Ghores, as they preferred to be called, (Phantom referring not to apparitions, but to the Rolls Royce they were seen around town in) never paid attention to living politics for they had no real interest in them. Those trite things did not affect

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their daily actions and bored them senseless. Therefore, they did not see World War II coming, going, and finally ending in Berlin. So detached were they from the madness that living men had created that the now 16 Ghores at the Wannsee villa were practically oblivious to the explosions when the bombings began. The Ghores had become self absorbed and remote from the living world, its welfare and wars. As the living lay dying nearby, as the starving took to clawing at their villa looking for food, the Ghores barely took notice and went back to their discussions and art. They had become the epitome, without truly recognizing it, of a highbrow class. The Ghores were unbothered, unaffected, and uncaring.

Once the war was over the Ghores often took to venturing from the villa, if for no other reason than boredom.

It is during this time that one of the newer Ghores named Sara fell in love with a man named Reginald, a very sour man whose empty belly had been affected by the recent blockade by the Soviets. Berlin was to be locked behind the isolating lines that the governing powers had drawn. Berlin, thought the Soviets, was to be choked and strangled into submission. Meanwhile, the Americans and their allies had begun the Berlin Air Lift; C-130’s departed Frankfurt to Berlin nonstop in an arial circle of support. Packages of food, medicine, and supplies were dropped from the sky constantly, keeping the inhabitants of that great city alive. It is throughout the blockade that Sara first met Reginald, enamored by him for some reason no one to this day can remind you of. But, deeply in love was our Ghore and she chased after him ruthlessly.

As she went into discussion on art and its prominence, he went into the wide eyed chatter of a man who was hungry. I shall take extreme measures of politeness when I say that Reginald was.... *plump*. Food was scarce, inspiration for art was not.

“Art? Fuck art! The world’s gone to hell and we’re starving, Sara! You’re lucky. You’re skinny, you look like you eat like a
bird...A bird....Yeah, I’d kill for a bird, a hen...A turkey! I’d settle for a sparrow about now!”

No one could understand precisely why Sara felt so much adoration for him. There was nothing obviously grand about the man except for his girth. Yet, Sara was convinced she could not exist in eternity without his presence. She was in love and no excuse can ever be made for that wretched feeling.

As Reginald and Sara Frisch-Ghore arrived at one of their usual rendezvous, one of the Allied packages of food that Reginald had so hoped to come across came falling from the sky. The parachute attached to the crate to make its landing soft detached suddenly and the massive box came thundering towards them, hitting Reginald on the head and killing him instantly.

Sara, so heartbroken by the episode wailed at watching her beloved die. She had no choice but to Resurrect him, for her wailing was precisely the right tune to conjure back and steal the man’s soul from heaven.

Alas, the first thing on Reginald’s mind when he died was the first thing he remembered when he was brought back from the dead: food.

Marinus had always given some indication about the dangers of ingesting food or anything else for that matter, but it was never seriously discussed. The Phantom Ghore does not feel hunger; therefore, it was not talked about often, this disaster that would ensue if one of them were to help themselves to a pot of stew. But, he did say on many occasions, “Don’t do it. Ever.” Trusting the advice of their founder, the Ghores always complied.

Reginald simply could not abide with the demand. He remembered food, remembered what a steak would taste like, what lobster felt like as the flesh and butter dripped down his throat, off his portly lips and down his chin, remembered it so vividly that he could almost taste it. Almost...but not quite.
He dined extravagantly as a dead man and dined often, the food never digesting. The rotting was far too slow for decomposition, so the lobster, steak, hen, potatoes, corn, cheeses, pork, sausages and breads simply sat there in his belly collecting and piling up.

Reginald was so unaware of the problem that he did not notice while proudly stepping Ku’Damm that his stomach had burst, that his intestines were dangling from his pant legs, that his stomach and other organs were splattering to the street as he took bold stride after stride. People were fainting, falling to their knees in shock. The sight of such unusual carnage was one thing, but this man walking, still smiling, with his guts spilling from his body was another. However, the smell was another matter; that smell of food rotting within a corpse’s torso exposed to human noses. Oh, can you just imagine?

There was nothing they could do for Reginald. Of course, the incident never hurt him, he barely even knew it had even occurred until he passed a mirror, and in true Phantom Ghore fashion, could not resist looking at himself. It was only then did he understand why people saw him and ran in terror. But, the Ghores could not allow him to wander forever with a gaping hole in his torso. No matter how they tried to conceal it, it remained an obvious defect. Stitches did not work. The dead skin did not hold them very well and the wound would split apart again the moment he moved. It was Lydia who decided to put the man out of his misery and cut him up.

The first dissection done so out of misery rather than murder or punishment.

It was here that they decided no one would be allowed into the House simply because you loved them. Your judgment was clouded with the emotion, you could not think properly about how they might behave once Resurrected. It was also here that it was
constantly said from one to another never ever eat, nor drink, nor ingest anything.

The Ghores returned to Berlin society in the early part of the 1950’s. The price of the war began to dwindle, the remains of the broken buildings were patched up, the soiled faces of depraved individuals were nourished again, and Berlin was again in roaring fashion, hideous horrid fashion...But nothing like the old days.

Now, to know a Phantom Ghore is to know someone who does not equate time in terms of day and night, weeks and months. Their minds are not akin to such concepts. “Forever.” This was a term not only used in idyllic situations, but one that did tend to bleed into their daily actions. There is always forever. One day for you is equal to one hundred for them. Even in 1957 the Ghores were still wearing the same clothes they had in 1933, still behaved as they did in 1933, still thought, in all possible ways you can conceive without looking at a calendar, that the world was still 1933. They were reclusive to a degree, naturally, but still mingled on some occasion with those in the living.

Decades would pass, fashion and style would change and shift, but they remained the same, primarily because they had no one else to tell them what to wear, how to wear it, and whether or not they were chic enough if they did. They were not poisoned by glossy magazine covers, were not tantalized by charades of faceless people, devoid of personality screeching in their ears, none of the trends blistering their identities.

And if someone did happen to give the Ghores an odd look or two because of the way they were dressed, then heaven help the onlooker, for a Ghore simply cannot tolerate pretentiousness, especially from something as vile as the living. The arrogance and pretentiousness would bind itself to a high level, swooping down to destroy anyone and everyone that would criticize in even the slightest gesture a Phantom Ghore.
Besides everyone knows it’s not what you wear; it’s how you wear it. It’s not where you live, but how you decorate it. Consequently, that legendary pomposity that makes a Phantom uniquely Ghore made them popular, made them trendy, and in some aspects, made them untouchable when it came to criticism. People who saw them knew they had a power that they could never possess, something that was similar to dark chivalry. People knew when they happened to spot a Phantom Ghore, that they had money. Enough money to buy and wear whatever they wished. But, this odd and dated look was preferred.

The arrogance did backfire to some degree in the 1970’s, when fashion met liberation and all hell broke loose. People decided, finally, they could not only think any way they wanted, they could dress and behave any way they wanted. The Phantom Ghores would venture to this café or that and see someone equally bold in some brazen 1930’s clothing. And this fellow or that, whomever they may be, would not only dress like a Ghore, but would act like a Ghore, would follow the Ghores wherever they went, did whatever the dead did.

Acquisitions just seemed to start happening with such a frequency that they were now commonplace. Marinus nor the Lady Pearl didn’t even know half the names of the dearly departed in their midst that had been Resurrected. There would be five more, maybe six more, ten more people they had never met before now permanently dead, now permanently a fixture in their existence, in their eternity. The Ghore family was growing at a rapid rate.

Now, Marinus had no intention of stopping it. Not at all. Justifications came in these sorts: there are people everywhere, born into this world constantly who simply do not belong and will never belong. We will give them a home and a family. Or in this: they have been shunned for far too long by the very people, the very society, that gave life to them. We in death do not dare shun anyone who
appreciates the majesty of our corpse culture.

Marinus and the Lady Pearl had sympathy for the lowest of men and women, a sympathy that fascinated many of the Ghores. It was the cringing man in the corner, the thoughtful woman with no life before her that the founding Mr. and Mrs. Ghore clung to with their unusual messiah complex. Marinus and the Lady dared not turn anyone away from the prospect of Acquisition. If death would resolve the problems of the lonely life, so be it. Let them have it. The Ghores would be there with welcome arms when they returned from the grave.

You may now have your chapters on the infamous Uwe Krieg-Ghore which, if I may add, is not even his real name. No one can recall what his birth name is, but it hardly matters. This is a precious thing about being Ghore: in death, you may be whomever you should so desire.

It is known that he was from America, he was 27 years old, and that he was full of incredible anger. He had run from America, run from its “homogeny” he said. But, anyone who might have known that man now or then can tell you he was definitely running from much more than that. Many Phantom Ghores tend to agree that “Uwe Krieg,” or whatever his name was, was running from an embarrassment of some kind. Many assumed it was the kind of embarrassment you are born into, whether it is the wrong family, or an association with someone by lineage from which you cannot escape. Social standing, poverty, uneducated breeding, these all lend the Phantoms to think that at some point in his life he was so embarrassed to be who he was that he fled truth, came to Berlin, adopted a name that would forewarn all who met him with what his intentions were (Krieg means “war” in German) and had sinisterly devised a new personality for himself.

It was Gabby who first spotted the monstrous man at one of the discotheques the Ghores frequented often during the 1970’s.
(the Ghores do have a tendency to shift allegiances to this club or that, depending on which has the most current, most fresh faced living prospects for Acquisition). The name of the disco does tend to escape me at the moment, however, it was Gabby who spotted him there one evening attempting To Parade.

All the Ghores were aghast at how beautiful this living, breathing thing could move about the dance floor in elegant poses and sardonic satire. The man pulled off moves that not even some Ghores could reproduce, and mesmerized everyone in attendance with that solid look of arrogance that decorated his chiseled face. The nose seemed to sneer, the frown impeccably disapproving of anything worthless, and that one right brow lifted high, so high that it arched into an exclamatory reverie of his social prominence.

And yet, when Gabby went to him, introduced herself to him and began to know the man, she discovered he was something of a fraud. He was full of lies and half truths, was gilded, you could say, by shading his past with a more illustrious illusion of a presence. Yes, he lied about his name, where he was from, what his identity was based on, and what in life he wished to accomplish. The perfect candidate for an Acquisition.

Uwe Krieg was not his name, he confessed with a smile, and instead whispered, “It’s what I want you to think I could do if you double crossed me,” and then pulled away with a smile.

“I wish to think I was from Germany, of solid German breeding, but I’ve been made a mutt by my ancestors’ desire to breed constantly with other, less superior species. In other words, I am an American.” Oh, the rude comment and conceited delivery pleased Gabby, who simply stood back, arms folded, listening with such pleasure at the most suitable set of Ghore standards Uwe could muster without ever even knowing it.

“I want to be very important one day… I want to be famous and I want power. I will do whatever it takes to get it.”
“Well, do you have a sort of plan on how you want fame and fortune?” Asked Gabby with such fascination in the blatant man’s haughtiness.

“Oh, yes. I’m going to be a writer.”

“Well, I must say Uwe, that I admire the way that you’ve been mimicking the way we dance! And the way we dress! We’ve been watching you from afar all evening and we think you’re marvelous! Really! I would love to see what you’ve written.”

Uwe looked at her with such arrogance and said, “Mimicking? No, I don’t think so. Its my own style. Its just coincidence that it looks like yours…”

With that Gabby knew she had a catch. “I would love to introduce you to some people…. ”

Within the days that followed Gabby kept close to Uwe. Other Ghores followed behind and watched with mesmerizing pull at the cleanness in which Uwe simply fell into their midst. Never had an Acquisition been so easy, so perfect. A relationship quickly developed between Uwe and Gabby, for Gabby found in Uwe something remarkably honest. He knew he was a nothing, a no-one with no chance at greatness ever…and the way in which he flaunted his approach at an illusion at one day being great and powerful was nothing but…honest.

He lived in a deplorable apartment and ate nothing. He never had money, but he always had money for the famous Ghore clothing, which he forever commented was his own and that it was “simply coincidence that you people dress like me…”

The moment Gabby read Uwe’s writing she was enthralled by him. He could move through languid prose as if there was nothing else in the world that fed him, from sinister and beautiful, to pained and heartbroken, his words on a page were the resonating cacophony of a maniac’s screaming. Gabby had to pull him in, had to make him a Ghore. And as Uwe sat before a blank paged journal
writing the accounts of his own morbidity and yearn for power, she entered his apartment unnoticed and stabbed him in the back. With no notion of a real name, nor a place to contact, there was no need for the trappings of a funeral. Uwe was resurrected by Gabby almost immediately.

Now you know the only Acquisition Gabby ever brought into the House of Berlin, and why on many occasions the idea of who it was need no mention amongst the other Ghores.

Allow me to mention though, that upon his Resurrection the fanfare over him quickly dashed into mediocrity and he became another Ghore, a nobody in the Ghore ranks, a simple face in a crowd of dozens who all dressed the same, behaved the same, and spoke the same. Whatever secrets he had inside, whatever his intentions in death were, whatever that psychotic need for fame and fortune was fueled by, did not surface until the opportunity to advance and be someone else was claimed.

Eventually the Ghores were met with a quandary. There were simply too many of them under one abode. Furthermore, there were too many of them running about Berlin for their charnel secret to remain hidden from the rest of the living society. Before too long, too many of them would be talking, speaking, explaining how it could be possible that they were alive one day and dead the next. A deeper sense of family was conjured. Some of them would have to move away. Indeed, thought Marinus and the Lady Pearl, are there not hopeless people somewhere else in the world? Indeed, recommended Gabby, there are striving, suffocating people all over the planet. Especially now and especially in America.

Marinus did not care for the prospects of his tribe, his family, being in America. They had run his companion away from Savannah years before, the beautiful Pearl he called a Lady. However, Europe was very much spotted with the broken hearted.

In 1982 the call was made. Who wished to live elsewhere?

Lydia offered herself to go to Italy. Mirko jumped for his opportunity to spend time in Vienna. Others were chosen for the remaining locations. Eight Phantom Ghores, one man and one woman, were sent to each of the following cities with a group of devoted Ghores in tow: Paris, London, Vienna, and Venice.

Now, though these new locations may have been very well called colonies, this would have been incorrect. That would consider something far too imperial. Despite all the new unspoken hierarchies being developed, and despite all their concepts of sovereignty, the Phantom Ghores preferred terms that designated them still as a family. These new locations were called Houses and the people who were in control of their functioning operations, were more like matriarch and patriarch and were therefore called “Mothers and Fathers.”

Marinus decided to write a set of generalized rules that would accompany the new Mothers and Fathers to their prospective locations. Alas, his ability to contrive the most simple of formulated sentences was meet with doom, so he asked Gabby for the young man she had Acquisition, the writer with the aggressive fake name.

With the guidance and dictation of Marinus, Uwe completed the House Rules before any new Acquisitions were admitted into the Phantom Ghore’s little clique. This document was treated as a manifesto if you will, and was highly regarded by the Phantom Ghores as a declaration of their independence from the living. It was their official set of doctrines, and theirs only, and made the Phantom Ghores a “society.”

Suddenly Uwe was famous. Everyone knew him as the one
who had transcribed *House Rules* under the many deep discussions with the utmost Father of Fathers, Marinus. Such a respected moment it was to have attendance with Marinus, but to spend so many evenings, so much time, so many conversations with the Father of Fathers made Uwe an icon.

By 1988 everything in the Houses seemed well enough, except for one troubling realization experienced by the Lady Pearl and Marinus. There were too many of them. The set up of new Houses in other regions and cities and the disbursement of Ghores to foreign soil was not the issue, really. You see, though it was never discussed with anyone else, both he and she respectively knew that every single soul Resurrected was a soul stolen from Heaven and “forever” would someday end and they would have to account for a number of felonies in the eyes of the Universe.

Hundreds were now stolen. Not one, not two, not even three as they had originally intended. But, hundreds of people had been robbed of an eternity in the ether, had been dug up from their own graves and were now wondering the earth, pompous, arrogant, and evil. And everyone knew, once you had been taken you could not go back. Nothing at all would end your existence on this plane. Nothing. You were forced to walk dead forever. There was no second death to look forward to, or escape into. You were trapped. Not even cremation could cease any existence of your kind. Your body would be destroyed, of course, but your soul would still be here, misty and vaporous and mingling alongside the living with no ability to express or convey your own heartache and loneliness. You would be a Phantom Ghore forever...

There were too many dead souls to account for. Too many dead souls that Marinus and the Lady Pearl knew that one day “forever” would end and they would have to account for them. And daily, if not to make matters worse, daily there were even more brought into the different Houses across Europe.
At first the two spoke privately of their intentions. When they had decided it was the right thing to do, they told Gabby and only Gabby.

“We’re going to dissect all of them. Every single one. It’s the only way to keep them from producing more. When we are through all that will be left is you, Mirko, Lydia, and Arkadi.”

They would have commenced their macabre mission and succeeded if the first Phantom, the original Ghore, Marinus, the Father of Fathers forever and more, had not suddenly disintegrated into a pile of dust....

May we all bless his passing.

Yes, that is correct. The man was found, or what was left of him, a pile of ash and dust in the parlor. The clothes were there, as were some dreadful skeleton remains that resembled what might have once been a human. But, the man was gone and with him every single sense of security the Ghores had held close.

As surprising as this might have seemed to many, it is still unclear to many of the Ghores whether or not he knew something physically might be happening to him. The Lady Pearl would later confess, “I reached for his arm, grabbed it affectionately like I normally would, but when I pulled away some trail of dust seemed to come off him, something like skin cells shedding off of him. He had this look in his eye, this strange look like he knew he was dying or something.

“What’s more,” she said, and this is most important, “he had been writing furiously in a diary. When I asked him what was keeping him so preoccupied within the pages, he said to me, ‘I’m writing a book about my life...about my death...about what we can do with our dead states should we try hard enough to learn the mysteries of the Universe.’ Well, you can imagine, I wanted to read it, wanted to know like every Phantom Ghore would where he had come from, what had made him able to walk from the grave as he
had and, consequently, the rest of us! But, he wouldn’t let me, I tell you! He wouldn’t let me!”

The entire House System erupted into various degrees of panic. For one thing, their blessed leader, their Father of Fathers was now gone, suddenly taken back by the same death he had defied. They were without guidance, without leadership. But, that news was only the beginning.

Weird hypotheses and theory began to float about the House System, from Berlin to Venice and all Houses in-between. If Marinus were the first, then everything that happened to him would happen to the rest of the Phantom Ghores. Therefore, this nonsense about “forever” was a sham! A dreadful sham! It was only a matter of time before they all began to “disintegrate” as it was being called. But, how long? How long had Marinus been dead? How long had he walked the earth before he had disintegrated? How long before they would all drop what they were doing and begin shedding their skin cells, turning into dust, getting older and older with each passing second?

The vain ways of a Phantom Ghore were challenged. Imagine, if you will, the hordes of the dead suddenly considering what it would be like to be old, to be decrepit and ugly.

The word “forever” was suddenly banned from the lips of every Phantom Ghore without any decree ever having been written into law. It became understood that this word was deceitful. It had been replaced with the phrase, “for all time possible.” And so they each waited, frightened “for all time possible,” however long or short that would be, before they were mere piles of ash.

And what of this business of writing his life story? Rumors began surfacing. It was said, by those as noble as Gabby and the Lady Pearl, that the mysteries of the Period of Remembrance gave them adept abilities. They could learn, each Phantom, no matter how long they had been Resurrected to utilize their spirits and their
souls to transfer their consciousness into the living, where they
could hear the thoughts of those they inhabited. It was rumored
Marinus had written instruction on how to travel without the body,
how to maneuver through time and space, how to utilize the thought
to influence others....and even more so, you could enlist these
transcribed secrets he wrote of to feel the senses again.
Where was this book that he left behind? In the confines of
the Lady Pearl and it would go nowhere else. She demanded it. She
had not yet read it thoroughly, but of the pages she skimmed with
such morose heart and an attempt to shed tear, she realized that this
was too precious, to valuable to allow any of the Phantom Ghores
to read. It was dangerous, knowing her breed. They would not
follow the instructions written in those pages for their own
betterment, but would muster them for hellish purpose.
“There is something in there,” she said, “about us, about
what we can do, that we should not know.”
Suddenly, their entire Ghore structure was brought into
question. The Lady Pearl, in agreement with the Mothers and
Fathers of the other Houses, decided a new Father of Fathers must
be initiated. Although no succession had ever been discussed, they
all agreed it should be Mirko. He disagreed, saying he wished to
stay in Vienna, and that he would not be the best Father of Fathers.
Arkadi was next in line, and he did agree.
Like in many hierarchies the ruling class does not keep
constant communication with its lower echelons. Those in power, in
even purest democracies, do not speak on levels the commoner can
appreciate nor participate in. Our sweet Ghores were no exception.
There was some trouble brewing beneath the very noses of the
Mothers and Fathers.
Someone was sneaking about the House of Berlin
whispering, pulling the young ones aside, confessing to them that
the Mother of Mothers, the Lady Pearl could not be trusted, and
that the man she appointed to be the next Father of Fathers was equally ill minded. It was Uwe spreading the gossip. From tenant to tenant, to whomever would listen, Uwe would confess he had heard them talking weeks before, had heard their plan to shred every Phantom Ghore piece by piece, had heard of their plan to dissect their own children and begin again. Uwe would whisper in hallways, in back alleys, in darkened corners of the parlor all that he had heard about Marinus and the Lady Pearl’s ambitious decree to end the Phantom Ghore race and begin afresh with but three.

Many of the young ones in the House of Berlin believed him, followed his advice, and even pledged a helping hand when time came to revolt and get rid of the ruling monarchy. He already had some plan devised.

On the evening before Arkadi was to be officially inducted as Father of Fathers, Uwe in a room deep into the House of Berlin paid Arkadi a visit, a room Arkadi was using as a private primping area for his impending ceremony.

Arkadi was sitting in a chair before the vanity, applying the slight touches of make up that mock living flesh. Uwe said nothing, but slowly and quietly approached Arkadi and beheaded him.

As the torso fell one way and the head another Uwe then dismembered him, the head screaming what gurgled noise it could, the hands still groping for some reasoning. Arkadi was savagely shredded by Uwe, who left the little pieces of the Russian man squirming about, rolling along the carpet...

Reader, don’t look so tortured! Arkadi felt no pain, no pain that you can understand. It is not a pain that is equivalent to nerve endings. No, he felt no blade, no slicing, and no physical pain at all, I tell you. It was an emotional pain knowing that his soul with no body to harbor would linger expressionless and blank for all time possible. A true Phantom. A vapor. A cloud of morose, somber, pain that traveled about unnoticed, unseen, ignored. So, don’t feel
for a moment that the pain he endured during his beheading is the sort that you would feel during yours.

Now, be sure to keep careful attention, because the speed of the events that shall follow are dizzying to say the least.

Arkadi was not the only person dissected that evening. There was a list, and all involved in Uwe’s little coup were assigned one person to dismantle, limb from limb, piece by piece. The list included names that you would have never assumed to be involved in the scandal, however, Uwe needed a clean slate to breed from, a tabula rasa that would assure him victory. So anyone, anyone at all that he had a negative association with, or who had an unyielding allegiance to Marinus and the Lady Pearl would be dissected.

The Lady Pearl was the first name on the list. He needed that book that Marinus had written, had to have it in his possession so that there were no more secrets, no more surprises about their existence. That book bespoke a power the Phantom Ghore’s could obtain if they were able to read it. He would remove her limbs should she dare clutch with gripped fist at that book.

With a small collection of Uwe’s more loyal followers, they entered the Lady Pearl’s private room wielding machetes and hatchets, alas the room had been cleared. Not only was the Lady Pearl gone, but her things, as well. Her steamer truck had been packed and she had fled, covertly, secretly out of the House of Berlin. Uwe was certain she had fled to Vienna at the first sign of this coup to enlist Mirko’s aid.

Uwe sent as many Ghores as was necessary on a mission to Vienna within moments of discovering that the Lady Pearl was gone. They were to find her, obtain the manuscript Marinus had written, and then shred her along with every one else in the House of Vienna, especially Mirko Polzfuß-Ghore, the Father of the House of Vienna, whom Uwe felt was his most troubling threat.

Once they arrived in Vienna some hours later they
discovered that the Lady Pearl was not there either. Furthermore, Mirko was no where to be found, and all Ghores in the House of Vienna, pledging allegiance to their Father and to the Lady Pearl vowed to say nothing to the band of murderers that had arrived from Berlin. They would confess no knowledge of the two’s whereabouts.

Upon hearing this Uwe gave the command.

“Shred them, all of them, then torch the House and burn it to the ground. Leave no Austrian Ghore remaining.”

He had already unceremoniously claimed himself as The Father of Fathers and considered every action Vienna had taken an act of treason. If they would not say where the Lady Pearl or Mirko was, then they were to be dissected. He had no use for anyone who defied him. The House of Vienna and all its loyal Phantom Ghores were not only dissected person by person, but was also torched by the Berlin Ghores, leaving all bodies that writhed inside to perish in the fire.

Now you know why the five Houses had been diminished to four.

There is good reason neither Mirko nor the Lady Pearl was at the House of Vienna. They were both at a train station in Berlin. She was on her way out of Germany, leaving in quite a hurry, unaware there was a slaughter going on in Vienna. She was done with this madness, wanted no party of it and was quite prepared to live her death as a recluse.

Mirko was at the train station arriving from Vienna, coming to spend some time with Arkadi on the evening of his initiation as Father of Fathers. He had no idea what had happened in Berlin, nor to Vienna for that matter. But, it was at the train station the two met quite accidentally.

“Mirko! Oh, God, Mirko! Why are you here? Something terrible has happened!”
“I’ve come to see Arkadi! Why are you so frantic? What is the matter?”

“You mustn’t stay in Berlin, you must leave now! It’s over, Mirko! There’s been a coup! Oh, I’m so upset! Some younger one, the writer who helped Marinus with the House Rules....Uwe! Uwe had Arkadi dissected! Can you believe it Mirko? Arkadi is gone! I am leaving before they do the same to me! I have to get out of here!”

“Come back to Vienna with me!”

“It’s too dangerous for me to stay in Europe. I have to go home. I’m going back to Georgia.”

“You couldn’t get back there! It’s impossible.”

“Marinus and I never wanted this! Never wanted this breed of demons! I am denouncing it, leaving it for good! I want to go home! I don’t want to go to Vienna, I want to go home! I’m leaving now!”

“Have you told anyone else where you are going?”

“No, no one. I couldn’t find Gabby! I fear she was dissected also. Oh, Mirko, it’s terrible! The House of Berlin has been cut in half. Literally, cut in half! So many were dissected. It’s a mad house! Pieces of my beloveds all over the place! There is the signal for my train. You must warn Lydia! Please Mirko, go back to Vienna! Cut off your associations with this maniac who has done this! Be well! I love you!”

“How will I find you?”

“I will find you, my dear! I love you!”

And she was gone.

Mirko went to a telephone booth and attempted to call the House of Vienna, but there was no answer. Fearing the worst, he boarded a train head back home to Austria only to find when he arrived that his own House had been obliterated, the ruined remains of his great Phantom House left in ash and crackling timbers. He was the only one left.
Surprisingly, Mirko returned to Berlin. He did not dare venture anywhere near the House of Berlin, at least not noticeably close to the House. He watched it from afar, kept distance and wore living clothes, no more antique 1930’s garb. He wore contemporary living clothes and behaved as a living man, even going so far as to change his hair. He spied on the House of Berlin at all hours of the day, watching everything they did, everything that happened.

The Lady Pearl was correct. Some man he knew nothing about was running the House of Berlin; a young one with a striking presence, a narrow frame, and an eerie calmness.

Mirko found a dark flat far from the House of Berlin in another neighborhood called Kreuzberg, a neighborhood overrun with poverty and ethnic sorrow. The Ghores and all their pretentiousness would never venture to the likes of it.

It is really no surprise that Gabby was not on the list of individuals to be dissected. Uwe had a devotion towards her, although not romantic, still strong enough to command some respect and he wished no harm to her. Besides, despite whatever Gabby did, she had taught Uwe everything he knew about being a Ghore.

A short while passed and through some attempts at peaceful intervention, the remaining three Houses did what they could to challenge Uwe as the Father of Fathers. Knowing that he had willfully and skillfully dismantled the power of one House and had destroyed another entirely, they were not about to provoke him into more violence. He was deranged, they all agreed, and the best possible solution to this whole crisis was to listen to what he required, complied with what he demanded, all the while building what they could in resource and manpower to ultimately slay him, rid him of their lineage, and proceed with things as they had been before this whole fright had begun.

The other Houses ultimately agreed to some sort of boycott of the House of Berlin. The German House did not exist. If Uwe
wished to be the Father of the House of Berlin that bad then so be it, let him have it. Alas, the House of Berlin would no longer be the House of Houses, the epicenter of the Ghore Society, and he would not be the real and recognized Father of Fathers. There would be no Father of Fathers until this entire situation had been resolved.

Mirko finally did reveal himself to Gabby in a darkened alley one evening. Throughout this whole episode he had never once approached nor contacted anyone. No one knew of his existence and as far as The Ghores were concerned, Mirko had been destroyed with the rest of Vienna. But, Gabby was desperately needed, for she was the only one in the House of Berlin he could trust.

Immediately the two dead ones contrived to make Gabby a spy, and Mirko some sort of revolutionary planner. She would keep close to Uwe, to all the dreadful members of the House of Berlin and would report to Mirko what she had heard, what Uwe planned, what he was plotting. Mirko could only function solely in the role of plotter, waiting for the proper time and the proper channels for which he could use whatever intelligence Gabby supplied him with against Uwe.

What they required more than anything was an allegiance with another House. They chose Lydia in Venice as their confidant for a number of reasons. They did not dare contact Paris, for the Mother and the Father of the House of Paris were simply too new, had not been dead long enough, and could possibly venture into a liaison with Uwe. They did not care for the prospects of London, either. It was too far for communication, was too isolated from the rest of the Houses. Lydia was by far the best choice. Not only was she one of the first, as was Gabby and Mirko, but also she was incredibly resilient, and very intelligent. She had been the Mother of the House of Venice since it began. The Father of the House had been Christian, although he had never really done much to inspire the role. Oh, do not get me wrong, he did well enough when he was
asked too, but Lydia was the one really in charge. Christian’s lack of interest had always bothered Lydia, so they agreed to allow her sovereign leadership, while Christian retained the honorable title only.

“Will I be bothered with the responsibility?” He asked her.

“Of course not. Go back to your parties, I’ll take care of everything just as long as we have an agreement. You never undermine my authority.”

“Deal.”

Christian Segatto-Ghore quietly accepted the proposal to be Father of the House in name only, and would have no say in its day-to-day operations. Lydia made the House of Vienna a success, treated the members of the House fair, while ruling with strength and compassion.

Lydia did not need to be forced into forming and allying with Gabby and Mirko. The three had a unique devotion to one another considering their past. They were the first Phantom Ghores, and had remained akin to siblings since then. Furthermore, when hearing what had happened to the House of Vienna Lydia grew enraged and vowed to one day slice Uwe with her own blade.

Mirko remained in hiding; Gabby went to spying, and Lydia trained her loyal House of Venice in the art of dissection.

“Someday, there will be a House Wars, I promise you. We will do everything we can,” she said to them with swords and daggers in mock training, “to keep peace in our lineage. Be prepared to destroy your brothers and sisters when that day comes. Now, begin with the legs, a slice from behind the knee cap should be your first blow...”

Then they all waited for each of the other Houses to make their own aggressive moves. Uwe patiently made some attempts to hunt down the Lady Pearl and the desired manuscript she had in her possession. But the leads ended in cold failure.
Over time Mirko denounced the Phantom Ghores more and more and if it was true that the Lady Pearl and Marinus had agreed it was time to start over, then he couldn’t have agreed more. He no longer called himself a Phantom Ghore, but given to isolation and hiding, he opted to call himself a Phantom Rogue. It was no time at all before he had some company.

Jason Schunemann-Ghore was one man whose early promise in the House of Berlin had everyone adoring his every move. But within time, Jason proved to be a very disruptive man that Uwe could no longer tolerate. That, my dear reader, would be the official version, if you spoke with anyone in the House of Berlin. However, there was something much more sexual and romantique beneath the fallout than anyone was aware of.

You see, Jason Schunemann was gorgeous.

There were movements in Jason’s heart, however, that were not interested in being looked at all the time, in being pampered, in having his face adored constantly. Everywhere he turned there was yet another Ghore stopping to stare at him, to study his alleged perfection. It made the boy sick. It would make anyone sick!

Uwe had seen Jason at the Café Einstein many times, had stared at him with dutiful fantasy, thinking and contriving again and again the prospects of having such an addition to his side. Every once in a while Jason would peer up from a book he was reading and see Uwe….and the living man would smile flirtatiously to the dead man, unbeknownst to the invitation he was accepting.

This little back and forth method of flirting happened for only a short while before Uwe approached Jason at the Café Einstein while the beautiful boy was, as usual, reading a book.

“So what is it this time,” Uwe asked. “Fact? Fiction?”

“Factions.”

“Ahh, yes. Yes, boys like you who read too much generally tend to read about rebellions, revolts, dreaming daily of how nice it
would be to make a difference. So, what is it?”

Jason held the book up. “Wuthering Heights. You can’t get more rebellious than that.”

“Really...”

“Yes, really. Love after death so strong that it haunts Heathcliff.”

“Who is Heathcliff?” Asked Uwe, ready to change the conversation at once.

“Who is.....You mean you never read it?” Of course Uwe had not read it.

“No, I tend not to read, it’s so bad for my eyes.....all those little words scurrying along that white paper....ghastly, really.”

“You should read, especially this book. Its beautiful...I can’t believe you haven’t read it. That’s just crazy.”

“I much rather prefer to look at beautiful things, not beautiful words.”

“Really....”

“That’s my line....”

Jason smiled and asked Uwe to sit down.

“Well, I imagine I could tell you about it,” Jason said. “Maybe we could go for a glass of wine or something and I could tell you about it.”

“No, that’s quite alright. I mean, the wine would be fantastic, but I would much rather hear about you than this Heathcliff fellow.”

“I’m not as interesting.” Still smiling, this Jason fellow was unbeknownst of what smiles can do to a Ghore.

“I bet you are.”

Oh, what more can be said about the incident that ultimately had Jason so enraptured with Uwe that he was eventually murdered?

Jason felt that Uwe’s suggestive, secretive slyness was
And Uwe simply thought that Jason was... well, *gorgeous*. On many occasions Jason would urge forward the conversation away from himself and into something political, something that involved current events, something that required an honest opinion in general....and while Jason was talking he would realize that Uwe wasn’t even listening.

“You didn’t hear a word I said, did you?”

“No, not really. I was looking at you.”

Jason gave the impression he would have been a horrible Acquisition. He did not dress like a Ghore, did not walk, nor talk, nor even take an interest in the Ghores, but rambled on an awful lot about books and events instead. You see, he was too smart for the Ghores.

The night he was killed was no different. Jason invited Uwe to his modest apartment. They would dine, said Jason, and then be off to a symposium on the current state of political affairs in Berlin. Reagan and Gorbachev both had speculative eyes on the city, and many were anxious to see who would change the great place’s identity for the better, or for the worse. The communist or the capitalist....

Jason opened the door, let Uwe in, took his coat and immediately moved into his thoughts on the situation. “If the East is freed from communism, what kind of impression will we give them, being so money hungry and-”

The studious young stud had not time to even finish his sentence before a knife had been placed between his shoulder blades, and he fell to the floor in shock and dying.

Uwe simply wiped the blade clean with a handkerchief and said simply, “I thought you’d never shut up....We’ll have to do something about these open discussions of politics of yours when we bring you back....It just simply will not do. I find you much more interesting to look at, Jason, than to listen to....” And that was
the last thing Jason heard when he died. “...more interesting to look at than listen to...” Consequently, it was the first thing he remembered when he was Resurrected.

The usual procession of Ghore didactics followed and within time Jason was brought into the House...never once with any inclination towards anyone else that he wanted to be there.

If only you could have seen the way Uwe carried on when he spoke of Jason to the rest of the Ghores. “Gorgeous...he is mine and all mine...he doesn’t need to speak, or say a word, just sit or stand beside me and be gorgeous! I want you all to look at him, really look at him and tell me that is what God had intended when making man in his image!!! You cannot be more perfect than Jason! You couldn’t be more......gorgeous!”

Everyone in the House of Berlin began treating Jason as though he were a Phantom Ghore icon, the face that should be celebrated and given homage by all Ghores as a shrine of some kind. When they went To Parade they would give their languid hand movements in honor of him. Paintings were done of Jason, as well as photographs and busts, all scattered about the House of Berlin for everyone to see and hold true as a symbol of what the Ghore arrogance and perfection should mean.

That’s all Uwe spoke of. “Jason is so...,” yes, gorgeous. Jason grew increasingly annoyed by the whole nonsense. Aesthetic beauty was not his stronghold, and as a matter of fact, it was a disinterest of his. He cared not for the way things looked, nor how things felt, nor seemed. He was interested in the substance of living, in the prospect of beautiful sights the rest of the world views as an atrocity.

The Phantom Ghore system, as you have seen by now many times over, is based primarily on the appearance of matter, and not the matter itself. You will also see the more daring Phantom Ghore do what he can to undermine the matter at hand. Phantoms
hide their scars, sneak away the scandals of their killings, ignore their own ideas of pleasure and pain, and hide under the gruesome yellow stained smiles of people who appear to be allegedly content and happy. They are a band of monotones really, all waiting for the next thing to sharpen their appearances with. What new jewelry design to wear, what new garment they can find, what new method of seduction works wonders.... and when they find it, they rape it of all its worth and meaning until all of them copy and clone it into mass produced uselessness.

Jason’s face was no exception to all this bourgeois tediousness. His face was the next new trend. Not only the face itself, but how you reacted to the face had become trendy. When in conversation it was chic to confess things like, “Have you seen that boy’s bone structure? Oh, I would KILL to have that bone structure! Oh, wait...I did! Ha ha ha!” The comment is truly only valued if it is affected with some laughter.

Jason’s face, and nothing more about the pleasant boy, was the latest rage in the House of Berlin. As is the case with all things trendy, a celebration of its existence must be made. A party was held for Jason’s face...

Notice the phrase was “...a party for his face....” The boy was inclined to join if he should so desire. His heart? His thoughts? Even his astounding intellect? Those were not invited. If the boy should even venture to use emotion, to even speak profoundly, it would be somewhat vulgar, for it would be the equivalent of having some filthy vagrants at some swank affair.

Said with some jest, but all things said in jest do have their sincerity, the invitation to Jason read something to the effect of, “May your plump lips and muscular chin join us for a party this evening....” And truly, it was only so the real thing, the real face, standing alongside the busts and portraits could be seen in comparison.
This darling though, with all his cleverness and all his pretty trimmings could not be outdone. In life he once said, “Since I was a child, that’s all anyone saw. If they saw me reading a book, they would stare, never care what book it was, but stare at my face... watching me...always. I don’t care to be looked at so much. I would also like to be heard.” And heard he would be in death, he was adamant of it.

Moments before the party was to begin, while all the other Ghores were down in the parlor ogling over the homage to Jason, the gorgeous boy was upstairs in one of the dressing rooms peering into a reflection that was no longer perfect. It was marred by the very impressive brow line dipped low into the gaze, scarred by the eerie departure of the full lips, and in their place, some thin pierced thing that resembled nothing short of a slit....

Anger enveloped him, emotions of betrayal swarmed over him. Yes, that’s right, in life he had been seen, in death he wished to be heard. That is the only way you can surmise those feelings of his. Betrayal. The dead had robbed him of what the living never desired. So, that mirror showed a troubling face, a face in mourning for itself.

From out his little pocket he pulled a smiling knife to the rescue and began to make rude incisions with it carefully. At first carefully, a slice from across the cheek, the flesh falling open to reveal no blood, just a wound, unnatural in the way it no longer desired to immediately heal itself. Then another was done across the bridge of the nose.... then another at the eyebrow, towards the temple, and then another incision right across the chin.

But, it would not do. No, there was something terribly wrong with it. Morbid? Not quite. It was... too clean. It did not ruin his face it simply changed it. He was still gorgeous. Those dead hands pressed against the wounds, watching the skin fall to the side, watching it do nothing to appease him.
That was when the madness in him erupted. He reached for that little knife again, that little smiling knife that took such pleasure in its chore, and began to shred his face rapidly, horrifically back and forth and up and down, grinning delightfully watching the skin fall from his skull in chunks, watching everything that God had made taken away from the devilish Ghores waiting for him in the parlor down below. The lips were torn to shreds, the brow chopped and broken. All that remained in perfect harmony was his blue eyes peering from beyond a wrecked appearance, the teeth grinning brightly with a feeling of final victory.

The bountiful head of hair Uwe once commented on as “golden” was then shaved to the scalp. Jason pulled himself away from his own reflection with the absolute best sense of self repulsion.

He then took his place at the top of the stairs. Drunken Edgar in one of his appearances slowly stopped his inebriated stride aside the piano, a few gasps were heard, and a mass of eyes below him in wide surprise took flight to the sight of Jason’s new deformity. He took his place from atop the landing with chin held high, placing one foot before the other with the subtlety of finally feeling that all was at ease, that the world and its dead living things and living dead things finally made sense, and that life now, so long gone, so fleeting and never to be had again, meant something, something wonderful. People, whether they be in this plane or another, had no choice but to accept him for what he felt and not how he looked.

There at the bottom was Uwe whose piercing brown eyes were no match for the manner in which Jason descended. Uwe’s presence was determined, as though he hoped to stare down the boy into some fear, into some embarrassment, but it was no use. Jason was too happy to be deterred. So happy he even asked aloud, “Would anyone care to hear what I have to say?”
Uwe sharply responded. “What’s the meaning of this?”
“I was reading a book once, not too long before I died, where
the hero was an orphan, spending most of his life trying to-
“Was this done on purpose?”
“Oh, yes, I meant to read the book.”
Uwe slapped him.
“Did you dishonor us and your face for some reason?”
Jason looked onward, partly in a daze. “Yes, yes, I did.”
“You have embarrassed us.” With teeth grit he nearly lunged
at Jason, “You have embarrassed me. Do you understand?
Embarrassed me. I want you gone. Keep walking down that
staircase and out the front door. Do not stop and do not even turn
back to acknowledge us. You don’t belong here anymore...you never
did.”
“No shit, Uwe.”
The Ghores, wherever they stood in the parlor, or in the
foyer, or even at the foot of the stairs, all suddenly pivoted on a
foot and turned their backs to Jason as he completed his trek past
Uwe. He even stopped to speak to the man who now exiled him. It
was hushed, of course, for it was meant for Uwe only, although
others could hear.
“Instead of looking at me, you should have listened to me. If
you had, you would have known I had no desire to be here at all....”
He then asked of all who had their backs to him. “I guess no
one wishes to hear what I have to say?”
All Phantom Ghores ignored him.
Not even hurt in the least, Jason pressed on through the
front doors of the House of Berlin and into the quite dark of an
anonymous world of imperfection.
Indeed all evidence of Jason’s existence in the House of
Berlin was destroyed. All paintings, all busts, all pictures were all
obliterated into incinerated ashes.... that was the party that evening.
A revenge party. The moment Jason was gone from their House they all picked what they could, found what relic they had in homage to him and sent it to a roaring fire....and a trendy fad came to its end.

This was also an historic event, for it was the first time that someone had ever been expelled from the House. It was the first time someone had ever left. With exception given to Marinus and the Lady Pearl, of course. Marinus had become ash all his own and the Lady Pearl was simply gone. It was the very first time in Phantom history that a member of their coveted dead race was asked to go. This was the initial trouble with Uwe....there were far too many precedents to keep up with. Rules kept changing, concepts were devoured by new philosophies. No one understood what they were supposed to do and when. They simply waited for Uwe’s lead. (Here marks the true nature of a ruthless leader. Keep them confused, feed them information that suits your current need, deny that need when a new one surfaces, and confuse the populace again).

Watching Jason leave the House, Gabby could not help think, *there goes one more to add to the rebellion*. Whilst the party of Ghores did what they could to burn Jason’s memory and image, she quietly left the scene to find him, and when doing so, confided to him of her secrets, of her intentions, then took him to Mirko.

His skin was sewn to the best of the dead flesh’s functioning. The dead skin of a Ghore does not hold stitching very well. It does not heal; therefore, the string and such will only keep the dead skin held tight together. The result was something even more gruesome than the shredding.

While these three waited patiently for enough members of their own to overthrow Uwe, Jason sat before a mirror adoring his new face, writing about it, writing about the way things look, writing about aesthetics versus aestheticism. Beautiful work I would
encourage anyone to explore.

When the fire finally died down, when all had finally forgotten Jason, the Ghores began to feel that loneliness a man encounters when he has nothing to worship, when nothing spurs the interest of his being. They needed a new icon to adore, some other being to personify their perfection.

Enter Mele, an unnaturally ravishing beauty to begin with. Alas, it was not until she stepped from the coffin that those features of hers, those legendary features, were accentuated. For instance, those stark cheekbones as high as Dietrich’s were given a new definition with the slight slimness that comes with being a corpse. Those bright blue eyes were a subtle shade softer, a more crystal sort of a fading strain of blue. Those eyes were besieged by some mighty long lashes that flickered out when they were batted, reminiscent of a carnivorous plant catching the tragic gaze of those who dared to stare into them for far too long.

Mele’s dark hair in life was shoulder length and allowed to drop straight solid along side the jawbone. God, what a darling!

We shall have to spend some extraordinary time on the subject of Mele and how her own peculiar history influences the remainder of this narrative.

She became as famous as Gabby in the Ghore circles, even before she had become an Acquisition. Even while Mele was alive the Ghores knew who she was and thought often of how much better she would look dead, how much more interesting would be that refinement of hers if it were to be polished with a tomb. There are even some who say that once she became a Phantom Ghore she even out shadowed the fame of Gabby, which had been virtually impossible by any woman before. Style is an inherited thing, it cannot be learned and it cannot be acquired.... Very few women, very few people in general have that particular style that is uniquely refined. Gabby had it, and as many of the Phantom Ghores
discovered through time, so did Mele.

Uwe first spotted Mele shortly after Jason had been exiled into the world. Mele had been stepping the streets with no fuss, in no scurry on the opposite side of the street as Uwe immediately darted what traffic he could to approach her.

“Pardon me,” said Uwe approaching with a swank smile and an earnest rolling of that growling throat, walking right up beside her with a sturdy strut of arrogance. Goodness, the man could be sexy when he wished. There is a gait he has that is unique to him, one Gabby taught him when seeing him trying to flirt once. It is a one-hand-pocketed confidence that suggests something sexual about that one hand hidden.

Mele simply rolled her eyes and kept walking, albeit this time a bit faster.

“Really,” he said, “I do not mean to intrude upon you, but I must say that I could not help but admire how dashing you are.....even from across the street.”

“Is that so?” She sounded so deeply uninterested.

“Yes, definitely. Now, I wonder if you would not mind the company of a gentleman, an escort to your rendezvous?”

“I don’t think that will be necessary. I’m not headed to a costume party.”

And it actually took Uwe one sly moment to realize to what she referred: the trademark Ghore uniform. When it did hit him, there was a distinct shift in the manner of his tongue. He was no longer cordial or comforting, he was sarcastic, powerful, arrogant, and to a slight degree mocking her. He had shifted from “gentleman,” as he had said, to Phantom Ghore.

“Aren’t we?” He asked with batted lash, stopping in his tracks to act bewildered. “I could have swore we were. I mean, you don’t possibly walk the streets looking like that everyday, do you?”

Now she stopped. There was of course nothing at all wrong
with her style, her clothing, or anything else for that matter. She was beautiful from head to toe.

“Are you implying there is something wrong with the way that I am dressed?”

“Imply? Oh, no, you misunderstand me! I did not mean to imply that....I meant to say it flat out.”

Mele’s brilliant eyes were all alight with the rude audacity of this total stranger.

Uwe continued. “I shall not waste any more of your time, dear....I just felt that a woman of such refinement, of such exquisite beauty wouldn’t be caught dead with an attitude like that. True, you may seem beautiful, but you’re not. Your alleged sense of regality makes you horrid to look at.”

He strolled with precious saunter towards her. “You see, you can wear whatever you want, fix your hair in whatever fashion you think fit, and stride yourself with pride through the streets of Berlin thinking that you’re the sexiest bitch who ever did smile at her own accomplishments...But, people like us know you better, much better than you think....You want to make a judgment call on the way I am dressed? Then don’t think that you’re immune to a few observations yourself. Not every man who approaches you with good intentions means to bed you, dawwwling....Some of us would just like to admire you...”

Now he reached in his pocket and pulled out a small notebook with a pen and began to scribble. Mele still in shock, could only stare at him.

“This is my phone number,” he said. “My name is Uwe Krieg-Ghore. When you’ve graduated from bitch to temptress, give me a call. Until then, don’t waste my time. You’re not the only one I’m fawning over.”

Mr. Uwe Krieg-Ghore then slowly, calmly, and with rhythmic step proceeded back to his side of the street leaving Mele
not only enraged at the directness of this man, but of his honesty, as well.

The slight encounter left no bitterness in her presumptions of Uwe. As a matter of fact, they made her interested in him, made her consider his method of operation when asked to be truthful, when summoned to be courageous. He left no hint of weakness, no trace of impurity....and his delivery? His tact, his articulation impressed her.

She called him later in the afternoon at which point they did actually talk. Uwe made an apology that was nearly sincere and Mele only partly accepted. The two agreed to meet at the Café Einstein and the rest as they say, is a Period of Remembrance.

Mele fell into Uwe’s charm quickly. There was a streak in Mele that hinted at sexual perversion. No, nothing that was blatant nor obvious, for the woman behaved as a sinister prude in the eyes of the public. Her sexual frivolity seemed latent to some extreme, as though she fantasized often about the darker acts of copulation, while in reality she made no attempt at all at something beyond the missionary position. She fell swiftly into Uwe’s charm, as do all who cannot look beyond his wild smile and pleasant deep voice. Mele was enraptured by the sound of it, like smooth smoke coating a harem bed. Yes, the women was fond of Uwe from the very beginning, wondering if maybe he could be the one who freed her from the confines of a social prison that did not ever explore carnal methods not defined in the bible (my apologies, it was left lower case again). And what’s more, she was pulled deep into the hypnotic persuasions of Uwe, for there is something striking about a man that recalls authenticity and an eerie nobility.

Mele quickly became something of a verbal consort to him, a woman he fondled cleverly with only words, of course. It is forbidden to touch a living human, or to even allow them to touch you on purpose. So with clever words, with well-chosen verbiage he
designed a plan of seduction that Casanova could have only hoped to excel with.

To hide the inability to touch her, or her him, Uwe fed Mele some delicious story that fueled her fetishes.

“Sex is best expressed through constraints.” He said. “What would give you the greatest pleasure during your climaxes?”

“To be holding you close to me, tight to me, feeling you deep inside me.”

“Then that shall be your constraint....You’re not allowed to touch me when you have your orgasms.”

He would command her to lie on her back on a bed, or on a chair, and fondle herself while he sat across the room, he fully clothed, dictating to her what to do, how to do it, and how to express her orgasm: quietly or with torturous roar. She adored it, became addicted to it, and the whole episode of their meetings became something both sinister and safe. She could enjoy a certain perversion without ever once touching another human and would degrade her sexuality while imploring him to continue.

The two would sometimes meet at the Carmer Strasse flat, an apartment not unlike the one Marinus and the Lady Pearl had in their early days when they wished to mingle in the middle of Berlin. At other times, Mele and Uwe would rendezvous to a hotel. And by choice, by sheer irony, they would decide upon a hotel that would cater to the more conservative. They would be fine establishments that bedded those with good Christian values, all totally unaware their temporary tenants were up to no good, using the name of God to express ecstasy rather than penance.

There was very little romance involved in these delicate moments of speech and masturbation. Her heart rarely went into fluttering excitement at the sight of him, but her body yearned for him, for his voice, for his intellect, and she obeyed it with such discipline. When he would sit across from her, cigarette lit, legs
crossed, and eyes intent on her and beginning to speak, she would melt.... fall limp into submission, and would do with her body what he commanded.

“Remove the shoes. Remove your dress. Remove your bra. Remove your pantyhose...now stand there. Just stand there. Don’t look at me, look somewhere else. Look out the window. Turn your back to me and look out the window. Move to the bed. Cradle the bed and hold tight to the pillows. They will be your lovers tonight. Lick your fingertips and move to your nipples. Brilliant dawwwling.... simply brilliant...”

“Would you like me to...”

“I do not require your assistance, dear. Do not speak until you are told to. Now use both hands.... pinch them. Harder...harder. Move onto your belly, and allow one hand to reach down into your fruit. Feel it, move your hands about it. Now taste it. Enjoy it.”

I doubt very much if I can continue.... Really.

On the last night of her life, Uwe begged her for a rendezvous at the Carmer Strasse apartment confessing in gelatin sweetness that he needed her, desired, and that he finally wished to touch her. If she refused him, he said, he would suffer irreparable damage to his bloodless heart.

She batted her eyes and asked with prurient flicker, “Why not the villa at the Wannsee? I have yet to see it, I truly want to see it. Your house sounds so grand.”

Oh, the echo of naked truth screamed into frame and the eyes slant and sharp suggested, the noise and bustle of downtown Carmer Strasse’s breathing will muffle sounds your final cries. Yet, his lips said otherwise, “Our first night was at the Carmer Strasse flat. It holds such sentimental caress for me.”

And with that she snickered through white teeth clenched. As for the better part of the day Uwe sat about the House toying with the idea of his fair woman’s end. His fingers were nearly bitten
and gnawed upon, out of sheer habit, as he attempted to contrive a most seductive sacrifice. She belonged to him, yes, but could she belong to him forever? Many woman (and men) had he endeared and many women (and men) had he endeavored, but none of them had he wanted at his side forever...until now. She would be the most appropriate Mother of Mothers, a woman to easily overthrow any history that the Lady Pearl had left lingering about the halls of their House. Mele would be the one they looked to, the one who manifested, personified in precise detail the perfect Phantom Ghore woman. But, the lessons learned with Jason.... would she also retaliate? No, of course not. She wanted it; he could sense it. She wanted it and yearned for it...with her legs open.... how could she not? She openly gave herself to him, openly allowed her body to be commanded for the sake of an orgasm. Ah, but Mele was sharp and quick, and not at all a dopey little do-all. She held the simple elegance of a woman whose silent coyness is more revealed by action than any word she might choose to utter.

They met, barely said a word to each other, with the exception of Uwe whispering slightly in her ear, “I finally want you to touch me.” She looked at him surprised.

“At long last,” was her desperate and provocative reply.

At the Carmer Strasse flat they took their usual positions. He sat in a chair whilst she began to remove her clothes.

“Aren’t you going to take off your clothes?” She asked.

“In a moment. I was anxious to watch you undress first. I like to watch you disrobe....”

“I’ve been meaning to ask you something.”

“Ask.”

The question came poignantly as she unrolled her silky nylons. “Have you ever...experimented?”

“In what way do you mean?”

“Men....have you ever....well, I don’t know how to ask.”

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“Ask me directly, Mele.”
“Have you ever been to bed with a man?”
Uwe smiled and replied. “Not recently no...”
“So, you have?”
“As a matter of fact, I have...Does that bother you?”
“No, of course not.” Then as if to urge him on she said with a coy tilt in the lips, “I find it sort of arousing.”
“Really?”
“Yes, really.... I think two men together is beautiful....”
“I’m glad to hear that.” The tone in the air was marked by Uwe’s subtle growling voice and Mele’s equally smoky approach to hidden sexual adventures. There was something real about the moment, something that you never see plainly beyond the two dimensional sheets of a magazine.

Mele now unfastened her bra, let it slide downside her arms and fall to the floor. Fully nude, she made her way to the bed.

“Tell me about it,” she crossed her legs and held tight to the pillow behind her. “Tell me what it was like.”
“And why should I?”
She bit at her bottom lip. “It would excite me....”
“Why should your excitement interest me?” Oh, how well Uwe played this game of confessions and honesty.

“Because,” here came her bit, “...it would make me wet.”
“Really?”
“Yes, really....”

Uwe stood and looked at Mele with such pleasure. Indeed, had he been able to experience the touch of her he would have ravaged her, would have yielded seduction aside and would have bed her. No discussion, no movement into psychology. Only sex.

“I will tell you all about my experience with a young man named Jason on one condition...”
“Anything.”
“I speak of it, you say nothing. You pleasure yourself instead.”
“But, you said we could touch.”
“Not until I am done, not until I say so.”
Mele thought for a moment, a glimmer of sexual provocation in her eye. A quick lick of her lips sealed the agreement.
Uwe removed his suit coat, unbuttoning with slow precision as he spoke.
“He spoke an awful lot, you know. But, I never truly listened to what he said. I was too busy transfixed with his face, his body...Amazing, isn’t it? How profound the impact something can have simply by the way it looks? Jason was no exception. We spent very little time together. But, in that brief I was transfixed with nothing more than the appearance of him.”
Down went her hand between the crossed legs, feeling herself, beginning to breathe with slow pulsation.
“I need poetry, Uwe. I want to hear poetry. Dirty poetry. Speak of him like you do when you’re with me....use your dirty poetry.”
He slipped off the jacket, then with the slow spider like movement of his hands began to untie the tie, with a sigh from Mele who was so anxious to finally see him disrobe to the nude. Uwe continued, this time, as she had suggested, with some very dirty verse.
“At first glance I was quite aware I wanted him. I wanted to penetrate him and deeply carry him away from his humdrum. I wanted to excite and inspire him. I wanted to lay him in the meadow of sexual contentment, dripping sunbeams touching his lavender eyes and the sun reflecting some heavy sighs of ecstasy.” The tie was pulled slowly from out of the collar of his crisp white shirt, as Mele closed her eyes, digging deeper into herself with her own fingers.
“Yes, wanted him, wanted his defined muscular form to be bathed in moonlight as the sand of the desert touched his cheek in breezes, kisses, as I move in to take a bight of his life, wanted my hands to move along his abdomen, across his breast, towards his neck, grappling softly, ever so softly the chin strong and defined, then those lips, to fondle with my fingertips, the taste of flesh and intimacy on his lips, as I would move in even closer now to take a bight of his existence.”

Mele gasped with self pleasure as Uwe unbuttoned that crisp white shirt revealing an unusually defined torso, a cut physique that was not emphasized enough under his 1930’s clothing.

“I wanted his beauty against my own; his body, his gazes, darkly aware of more than he would ever care to let you know, against every sin I had ever known.”

Mele began to move about the bed in a rhythm that suggested a certain gyration of her pelvis against her own fingers, as they deliciously moved in and out of her own gender.

“Oh, yeah, he was to be my trophy, my masterpiece. All you in the world who think me serpentine and undeserving of anything aesthetically precious, look here now and see what I have writhing between my knees. Look at him and see his tongue dancing in tango with mine own, look here now and see his chagrin melt into torturous grin as he revels in the erotic passions in which only I can excel...The smell of sandalwood, the scent of sex.”

He unfastened his belt, but let it hang there as he mounted the bed, Mele’s steady breath now approaching a huffing moan of self indulgence as she watched Uwe come closer and closer to being over her.

“Eros, androgynous homoeroticus, agape, incestuous agape. Oh, what pleasures filled my head when I dread to say I saw him, the very first creature visible in the room.”
She reached for him as he moved over her body, but he pulled away quickly and shook his head. And there, like a suspended spider dangling from a web over her, as she like some fly writhing in his trap, he would lean in towards her neck and pull away, or move his lips closer to her breasts as he spoke, but never touch them, never kissing them.

“I hunted him, I admit, like some predator needing some kind of kill,” that word there, that word ‘kill’ said perfectly as his tongue barely brushed across her nipple, “before his manhood is made visible to the world. A hunting, a chase that made my ego smile with delight. I introduced myself, befriended myself to him, became an addition to his life, not necessarily for the sake of having sex with the most sublime creature I had seen to date, but did all this to prove something to myself, that I, in my present state of meek, half destroyed and wraithlike, was capable of capturing something that physically beautiful.”

They were now face to face, as Mele tried so hard to keep her eyes focused on his, alas, they kept turning back as her self indulgent fingers had her peaking into the verge of a climax.

“So I restructured everything. More lies upon more lies so that he might view me as some icon, something he could be proud of, flaunted myself in peacock fashion before him, all feathers shining bright and alight with every possible color imaginable, the arrogance in my stance, the posture severe and enticing, obliterating the weaker in my step, calling to all, I am in command...,”

She began to whimper, nearing closer into her climax, the hands trying hard not to touch him!

“What I say is law and I decree that you and me shall cling to each other in painful climax.”

Her whimpering now becoming a crying, a heavy gasping rush of air pumping in and out of her lungs as the climax slowly arrives.
“Yes, brother, you belong to me....”
Mele’s free hand did its best to keep from grabbing him.
“Sexually...”
Coming closer was the orgasm!
“Emotionally...”
God save her from her own desires! His voice so titillating!
“Vindictively....”
Suddenly, the rush of electricity enveloped her, the orgasm so jolting with its power that it caused her to scream. She suddenly grabbed Uwe, pressing his tight torso against her warm breasts...and her eyes...yes, her eyes suddenly revealed some strange sense of fear.

No words could express that unnatural feeling of his body, that corpse like coarseness, coldness.

She looked up to his face, to find a smile of such sinister proportions enveloping her. His left hand moved behind her, grabbing her hair, and pulling her into a lock. Frightened, Mele then began to pound Uwe’s chest screaming!

“NO! DON’T!!! PLEASE, GOD NO! WHAT ARE YOU!!! WHAT ARE YOU!!!”

And with his right hand, Uwe reached into his back pocket and removed a small dagger. With one swift and barely seen shift of his arm he made a perfect incision across her throat. He then let her go, only to lean back, clean the blade across the thigh of his trousers, and watch her fall with struggle in the sheets of the bed.

Mele grabbed her throat attempting to scream, but only the rough sound of gurgles and gasps escaped her lips. In some shock she reached for him, pleading for help.

“Keep looking at me,” he said. “I want the first thing you remember when you come back to be my face.”

Moments later she was dead, her body a mess of blood on the bed.
Policy prevailed next. As is customary, the woman’s living existence was put to rest. Now, the details of this are uncertain to me, for the entire manner in which Uwe performed the task could hardly be called customary. It is not advised to give the Acquisition a death scar where the living will see it... and what did Uwe do? Sliced her right across the throat. Right in plain view. But, as can be expected, Uwe did things his way.

Furthermore, Mele’s body should have been left somewhere for it to be discovered so that a funeral can take place, so that there is closure for the living, so that you are in all respects dead to the living, no question about it.

Mele was Resurrected by the Phantom Ghores and was given the usual number of days to acquaint herself with the House Rules, with the customs, with the Ghore brand of doing things, and was given a Birth Party where she was offered to the House of Berlin.

Nearly everyone in the House had seen Mele long before she was murdered, and everyone simply agreed this was the woman they wanted to be their Mother of Mothers. She had the look, the style, the presence they all felt necessary for the most illustrious of positions for the Phantom Ghore woman.

And what exactly about her was it that they all conceded was perfect for the chore of Mother of Mothers? Nothing more than presence. Mele had it....that thing, that one thing that is indescribable yet, terribly explored into tortured word to no avail.

...It.

To conceal the sliced throat Mele wore a diamond choker given to her by her seducer. Uwe explained later that this was his intention all along. He wanted her to have to wear it. There was no better way to be certain she would without slicing her throat. She had to wear it and wear it always. But, beyond the fact that it concealed her death scar, it became a sort of crown. The diamond
choker was terribly expensive and not another Phantom Ghore woman was ever allowed to wear a choker after Mele wore hers. It set the new Mother of Mothers apart from everyone else, made her complimentary, elegant, and slightly different from everyone else. Not even the Lady Pearl herself had anything at all that nice, nor expensive.

Mele, by her own design and choice lavished the praises made upon her and accepted her Ghore role with ease.

Speaking of the Lady Pearl, all Phantom Ghore Houses were still on a quest for her and for the diary Marinus had left behind. Even Mirko and his three-man band of Phantom Rogues did what they could to find the woman. Mirko knew she had decided to go home, to Georgia, most likely to her birth home of Savannah. But getting to America was a hassle beyond any measure he had confronted before. With no passport or such, a plane trip for a dead man abroad was impossible. With fake documents, it is easy for the Phantom Ghore to travel about Europe on a train. Venturing to America by plane, or even by ship, was another matter all together.

The remaining Ghore Houses were unaware that the Lady Pearl was in Georgia. Some thought she had fled deep within Europe. Others did question her arrival in America, but where? She had held her privacy so close that all they had known about her was that she was from America, anywhere in America, and anywhere in America she could be.

Then, when all roads finally seemed to go nowhere, a young woman from America came calling.

Miss Justine Sizemore, newly arrived from Savannah, Georgia went looking for the Phantom Ghores, and the first one she found was Mele.

There was nothing out of the ordinary about the girl at first. No, she was quite pleasant (although she did talk quite a bit), and the fact she had sought out the Ghores was not that peculiar. All
kinds of living people had found there way into death by having spotted a Ghore and thought, “How I wish I could be that grand.”

What stirred everyone’s attention was when she came to this confession. “Actually, I was told that if I ever saw one of you I should just embrace you.”

“Oh, really, dear? And who would say such a kind thing?” Asked Mele, with only a matter of fact nonchalance.

“You probably know her. She said she was very respected by all of you.”


“She called herself the Lady Pearl.”


“Yes! Of course! Are you ok, Mele?”

“Yes, I’m fine!” She stood with excitement from the table at which they had an afternoon coffee. “You met her!” And an insane laughter fell from Mele’s lips! “She’s in Savannah! Savannah, where?”

“Georgia! In America! What’s the matter?”

Mele played along. “Because...because its like meeting royalty, silly girl! She’s the Lady! And she’s in Georgia...Georgia?” Her face went inquisitive.

“That’s right. Georgia. She said she was born there.”

Miss Mele Frei-Ghore sat promptly back down.

“Oh, do go on, Justine!”

Justine told Mele all about her meeting, all about the young man at the Gallery Espresso who had told her not to smoke, all about the cigarette case, all about their afternoon together. Mele smiled the whole while... until Justine could reveal nothing more.

The coffee was paid for and Mele was out the door, leaving
Justine behind quiet, confused, not thinking about anything other than how she could get her hands on the same satin suit Mele wore, and that expensive choker! “God, I would love to be able to look like that.”

“Now, you do realize you’ll have to be the one to Acquisition her. You’ll have to sponsor her into the House.”
“Yes, Uwe, I know. I’m ready.”
“I don’t question your ability to do such a thing, but....”

They were sitting in his private office, in hushed tones, the door closed. “I don’t want anyone at all to know what you’ve discovered, do you understand? I don’t want anyone to know that she knows where the Lady Pearl is.”
“But, why?”
“Spies.”
“Oh, really?”
“I think there are spies in Berlin and information about the Lady Pearl is the last thing I want the other Houses to know. The Lady Pearl is in Savannah. Excellent. We Acquisition Justine, spend some grand time on making sure she is a model Phantom Ghore, then send her on her way to Savannah to retrieve the Lady Pearl, and retrieve the manuscript. We can’t let the living know she’s dead. We need her to be able to keep the passport she had so she can travel back to America.”
“The girl has taken an apartment.”
“Why?”
“She wants to live here full time, for good.”
“You’re going to have to work very hard for this one, Mele.
Tell no one about the Lady Pearl being in Savannah, primp that Justine for everything you can, make her the perfect Acquisition, but do it without letting her anywhere near the House and the others. Does she talk much?"

"More than I care to listen to sometimes."

"Then definitely keep her far from here. We can’t have her babbling on about Savannah."

Mele took exceptionally good care of Justine. Surprisingly, Justine was an excellent Acquisition. Justine was always adamant about looking perfect, which is a trait Phantom Ghores respect with vigor. Justine not only wore everything perfectly, but her behavior was equally satisfying. She had a certain bitchy quality that made her suitable for the high ranks of the dead. If only she would not talk so much!

Throughout this time Mele and Gabby became rather fond of each other. They both offered the world of the dead that elegance and that genuine pomposity it had lacked in the many Acquisitions recently. Therefore, it is not surprising to note, that when Mele began to feel overburdened with the enormous task of making Justine an Acquisition that Mele went to Gabby for assistance.

Unbeknownst to Uwe, Mele introduced Gabby to Justine. Mele’s confidence was beginning to wane with the pressure of this particular Acquisition and Mele felt she was going to lose the girl if Gabby did not come to her rescue.

Now, Mele did not expect Gabby to actually Acquisition Justine, she expected and relied upon Gabby’s Ghore uniqueness, her clothing style, her walk, her manner that was legend, to help close the deal of death on the young girl.

Justine was in awe of Gabby and took to expressing it too often.

There was a sudden clincher in Uwe’s desire to dominate some secrecy. Justine had spotted Mele from across the street and
wandered into the Café Einstein and following her in to say hello, stumbled upon a multitude of men and women in the same highbrow fashion as Mele. The Café Einstein is open to anyone, so what were Mele and Uwe to do, but offer Justine their salutations and invite her to sit with them, with all of them.

“Just see to it,” said Uwe in quiet whispers to Mele, “that if she starts rambling about Savannah and the Lady Pearl that you shut her up and change the subject.”

The next day another crinkle in Uwe’s plans was revealed.

“We have a slight problem,” confessed Mele. “She told me she’s been writing letters home.”

“So? What do I care. As much as that girl talks I’m not surprised. She has to torture someone in America with a 10 page note, I’m sure.”

“They’re letters about us! She told me she has been writing back to Georgia to tell people all about us!!!”

“You should have stopped her! What’s wrong with you, Mele? You’ve got to have total control over your Acquisition!”

“It’s done! I didn’t know until today! She’s been writing letters back to Savannah about us for weeks!”

“You should have said something, done something! ANYTHING!”

“What was I to say? And how was I to know?”

“Then you’ll just have to kill her. Now. Tonight! Once she’s in the House, once Resurrected we’ll explain why we need her to return to Savannah, why we need the Lady Pearl.”

All moved as it should have, you know. Mele prepared herself throughout the day, attempting in every way possible to be the representative of the dead species she was hoping Miss Justine would fall into easily. The hair was done especially proper, as were the clothes, having been brought back from a dry cleaner who offered a substantial amount of money for the long forgotten frocks.
“I could give you a small fortune,” said the fat woman behind the counter. “It’s all original, this material! You don’t see it anymore! Look at the cut! The lines...oh, marvelous. And you! Oh, I imagine you look so beautiful in it!”

“Oh, thank you....But, I already have a small fortune.”

Mele went to a shop near the Fehrbelliner Platz to purchase Justine a gift. It is not a custom in the Ghore arena; however, it was a gesture of good will that Mele hoped would capture an interest in the House of Berlin. “Bah!” Some would scoff. “We’re already giving her the most prized gift! We’re letting them be one of us!”

Alas, Mele kept to her manners, some manner she felt some of the others could learn from, and bought Justine a lovely silk scarf, nothing grand, but as said before, something more of a gesture. Then she returned to the House of Berlin, and instead of deciding to do her own make up, asked the most regal of all women, an expert in the field of applying the life like features and glamorous hints of eye shadow and lip liner: Gabby.

The two women discussed in quiet detail the summation of the events that had led to now. And it was here that Mele confided, finally, in someone other than Uwe.

“Do you know how important Justine is?” Asked Mele.

“Chatty Cathy? She can’t be all that important. Uwe’s made no fuss over her. You know how he tends to get with important Acquisitions. Look at you, for instance.”

Mele laughed with roar, as did Gabby.

“No. Well, yes, but.... no.” She grabbed Gabby’s hand. “She is our ticket to the Lady Pearl.”

Gabby crouched beside Mele, who sat before the vanity, as Gabby applied her precious make up. “What do you mean?”

“She knows where the Lady Pearl is.” Her eyes darted left and right and finally her voice went very hushed. “The Lady Pearl is in Savannah. Can you believe it? I would have thought definitely
something more refined, you know? Perhaps Paris. Maybe even London.... but Georgia? America? Oh, how dreadful!”

“I don’t understand. How does this girl know where the Lady Pearl is? Or even who she is for that matter?”

“I’m not supposed to say anything to anyone. Uwe’s afraid someone in the House is a spy for the other Houses. But I know I can trust you. You’re Gabby! You should know!” Mele leaned in closer. I have told you before how famously awful the hearing of the dead can be.

“She met her, this Justine girl, in Savannah. Met the Lady Pearl! Can you believe our luck? It’s like it was supposed to happen this way! Justine gave the most marvelous description of her.”

“How can that be? You never even met the Lady Pearl.”

“Oh, Gabby, all the stories you hear about that woman, the way everyone is always carrying on about her, how could you not know every detail about her?”

Gabby sort of looked away, trying so hard not to reveal her intention to know more, to extract all information possible from Mele.

“Why is the Lady Pearl in Savannah?”

“That was her home when she was alive. She was born there.” Offered Gabby.

“Once Justine is in the House Uwe will send her back to Savannah looking for the Lady Pearl. And the manuscript, of course. That’s why Justine is going to be an Acquisition.”

“As if anyone needed a reason these days...”

“Well, that’s sounds rather bitter, Gabby.”

“It’s true. I think you are one of the only real Acquisitions I have seen come through the doors of this House in decades.” Very good, Gabby. Hand the woman confidence, secure her trust in you.

“The rest.... rubbish. I mean it, pure rubbish.”

“But, Justine does have those qualities. She fits in, she
belongs.”

“Is this why no one else has seen her? Or heard very much about her? Uwe doesn’t want anyone to know about her meeting with the Lady Pearl.”

“Yes.”

“I won’t say a word. Your secret is safe with me.”

Gabby then began to apply more make up to Mele.

“So, tonight is the night?”

“Yes. I bought her a scarf.”

“Really! How lovely!”

Then Mele had this look of apprehension on her face that spoke volumes about the impending action.

“Are you ok?”

“Yes...yes, quite fine, Gabby.”

Gabby crouched beside her once more.

“You’re lying.” Now, comes the motherly instinct that should have warranted Gabby the position of Mother of Mothers and not Mele.

“Everyone is wondering how well I can pull this off. Usually its some time before an Acquisition makes a killing of their own.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“I’ve only been a Ghore for a few months. I don’t...I just feel an awful lot of pressure. It would be one thing if she were just another girl, but no; she’s an important Acquisition that must be had in order for the House of Berlin to survive. This whole business is resting on my shoulders.”

“Would you like me to come with you?”

“Would you?”

“I will if you want me to.” And a look of such love came from Mele’s gaze into Gabby’s.

“Gabby...you’re like a sister to me.”
Gabby only smiled.

After this little episode Mele went to get dressed, her meeting with Justine was but a short few hours away. And Gabby? She rendezvoused to the Kreuzberg apartment where Mirko and Jason sat discussing.

Mirko had been organizing Phantom Ghores across Europe who were against the rule of Uwe, who were eager to toss him from the House System before his solidarity and tyranny spilled over into a war. Mirko had collected Mothers and Fathers from some of the Houses and had contrived a beautiful network of a dead society within a dead society. Yes, they were indeed Phantom Rogues. Alas, the apprehension of these new Rogues was overwhelmingly somber. Paris was afraid, simply afraid to get involved in a counter coup. London was willing to help, but worried about any repercussions that might occur if a counter coup failed. They wanted to help desperately, but felt that if they made any attempt at all it had to be successful. Failure was not an option. “We’d be the first to be attacked, Mirko. The very first. We’d love to help, but a secure plan of retaliation must be approved of first before we will get involved.”

Gabby explained to Mirko in quick detail the events that were to happen that evening. Mele had in her possession the girl who could help them reach the Lady Pearl, who was in Savannah of all places. They unanimously agreed that no matter what should happen Mele would not survive this episode. They had no choice in the matter. The Rogues needed that American girl. They needed Justine. They would be more than happy to sacrifice Mele for it. Justine could not be allowed in the House of Berlin. Mirko and his Phantom Rogues would see to it that Justine would be killed, furthermore, would see to it also that Uwe never get his hands on Justine.

Gabby offered a contingency plan: Justine’s body would be
so mangled and broken that Resurrecting her would be pointless. If for some reason the Rogues could not possess the American girl, then neither would the Ghores.

Later that night, when all positions were into play, when all was moving as well as it should, Mele arrived at Justine’s little apartment with Gabby in tow.

At first Justine was surprised that Gabby had come along, but when Mele explained that it was “girl’s night out,” she smiled heartily.

“I know you’ve been playing around with a few Polish boys, Justine. I thought we might introduce you to some Russian ones tonight.”

“Oh?”

“Absolutely! They have the same brutal sexuality as German men, but have the softness of French men, and the passion of Italians, and all without the poetic bore of the English. They’re perfect! Oh, by the way, I brought you something!”

The gift was given and the three women sat about on the couch. Mele kept looking towards Gabby with some sort of fear, as though she couldn’t proceed with the intent to murder. Gabby looked back with courage.

Justine unwrapped the little box and exclaimed with such sincerity how marvelous the silk scarf was.

“Well, why don’t you try it on?” Asked Mele.

“Oh, indeed I will-I just love it-it must be very expensive I think my grandmother had one almost like it once a long time ago and to think I have one now-oh, just marvelous, marvelous-do you think it will bring out the color in my complexion-the lack of sun in Europe has made me rather pale, darlings-not like it was when I lived in Savannah-you know it gets so hot there in the summer-so much sun-I can’t imagine living without the sun-that would be the only reason I would ever want to leave-but why would I leave-I
mean you have a beautiful city and so much to do-so much more
than anything in Savannah-except for some places in Savannah-
actually Savannah’s not bad, it’s just not big enough for me-even
though its not as big as Atlanta, Atlanta just scares me-because I
went there once with-.”

“Just put it on, dear.” Interrupted Gabby.

Justine wrapped the scarf around her neck. “What do you
think?”

“Hmmm. Hard to say. I love the color on you, but I think....
yes, I am sure that it needs to be a bit tighter. May I?”

With a nod from Justine, Mele reached for the scarf and
slowly tightened it around Justine’s neck. “I hope that’s not too
tight, dear?”

“No....No, not really. A little uncomfortable, but
no—AHHGGG!!”

Tighter went the scarf around Justine’s neck, so tight that
with Mele’s quick pull Justine’s breath was suddenly gone, and
Justine’s eyes went wide with the fear of this shocking revelation
bulged from the cranium, as her arms wildly, madly flailed about for
strength.

Justine grabbed for Mele’s hands, but Mele pulled only
tighter, closing down all hope for air, choking the girl quickly,
without mercy. Suddenly, the unthinkable happened. The antique
scarf tore, falling to pieces and giving back Justine her windpipe.

Justine stood trying to scream, the hoarseness of her voice
of no assistance, the damaged voice box pressured into submission,
the mad rush of air back into the lungs preventing any real scream
from being born. Mele fell back onto the couch shocked! She had
not intended for such an escape! The girl was going to beat her! Was
going to live! What was she to do?

Gabby went for Justine, pulling a dagger from her pocket
and lunging it into the girls chest. Justine’s scream were a hushed,
rough muteness, that lingered only a few inches from her lips, never once reaching a neighbor, nor corridor. Justine tried, oh how she tried even harder to release a sound of panic as Gabby then grabbed the girl by the dress, near the bosom, and begin to stab at her whilst Mele stood hand over mouth, gasping at the speed, at the professionalism, of Gabby’s murderous intention.

Again and again went the dagger into the American girl’s breasts; over and over with such maniacal speed that nothing at all would have saved the girl now. Nothing.

Justine did what she could to hit Gabby, punching her in the face to no avail, ripping at her clothes, ripping at her hair, anything at all! But, the knife went in and out and in and out too many times. Madness enveloped Gabby, reader, suppressed madness that had been boiling for years. Yes, it was the first person Gabby had killed in years and the curse of being a Ghore, the need to kill for sport was all coming out of her, giving her the addictive desire to see the suffering cry and pain in a body as it goes limp, it was all feeding her as she stabbed again and again and again more and more until Mele finally screamed, “Stop it, Gabby! Stop!”

Gabby turned around a bloody mess, her eyes shining with the demonic glow of a woman possessed. Her teeth were grit, her entire presence a dangerous mess. The knife dropped next to Justine’s dead torso.

“She’s dead, Gabby, leave her be!”
“I can’t Mele, I can’t! Oh, God, I can’t!”

The two women only stood for a moment, looking at each other, and then looking at the body.

Justine’s blood was everywhere, her body a muddled mess of blood and tissue.

There was no time to wait, no time to think of consequences and reactions. If anyone were to ask, Mele had done the killing.

“I was never here,” was Gabby’s statement.
“Oh, my GOD, GABBY! What have you done to her?! Uwe will be furious! Look at her! She’s been destroyed! I was supposed to kill her not mutilate her!”

“We need to remove her clothes. Now. Help me.”

“No! No, let me. You should go clean yourself.”

Gabby went for the girl’s bathroom as Mele crouched down beside the body, leaning in closer to look at the girl’s muddled face, the expression of pain and shock, of surprise even. It was the first time she had witnessed death before. The first time with her own eyes she had watched a soul leave a body in panic, in fear. And Mele felt the need to rest there for a moment and marvel at it, at the most natural of occurrences: death.

Justine’s eyes were wide and seemed alive...yes, alive, Mele thought. Fascinating. What was the dead girl’s soul experiencing now? The initial sight of God? The arrival in Heaven? Mele leaned in closer. What do the eyes look like as the life leaves the body? And closer. And Justine’s hand moved slightly, reaching very softly with such exhaustive tone towards Mele’s face.

And without warning Mele could suddenly not see.

“GABBY!!!!!!!!!!”

When Gabby turned around she saw Mele clutching at her eyes and Justine clutching the dagger while still on the threshold of death. Justine had managed with just a few bouts of energy and determination left behind to blind Mele in the left eye.

Mele fell to her back screaming, not out of pain, of course you know this, but out of fear for her beauty! She sat back screaming at the prospect of one of her eyes being dimmed! Of not being able to see! Of what it would mean to her precious House of Berlin, of being the Mother of Mothers! Of what it meant to no longer be perfect! Deformed! Defected! With pristine anger Mele raced for the dead girl, picked her up with very little effort and carted her a few feet to the balcony and tossed her body over the
side of the railing.

“That should kill you, you bitch!”

The madness of these dead members.... I don’t expect you to understand. I won’t attempt to help you understand. There is a deficiency in their minds that not even they can understand.

“We have to go,” shouted Gabby. “We have to go now!”
“I’m ruined! Do you understand me? Ruined!”
“Mele, please. We have to go!”
“What am I to do? They won’t have me back! Uwe will throw me out! I’m not perfect anymore! Do you hear me? I’M NOT PERFECT ANYMORE!”
“We’ll figure something out, Mele, but we have to go! We have to go now!”
“What do I do? What do I do?” Said Mele clutching her blinded eye all the while.

Justine’s body was left where it had fallen, far down below on the pavement. Gabby quickly changed into one of Justine’s garments hanging in the closet, her own clothes soiled beyond measure.

When Mele and Gabby were back down on the street, the two dead women raced towards the alley to find Justine’s body. In the alley, a pivotal part of the Rogue plan was foiled, that of dissecting Mele and stealing Miss Justine’s shredded and battered corpse. You see, just before being seen themselves, they spotted Uwe. Standing with him was Freddy and a few more unnamable Ghores all peering with disgust at Justine’s corpse.

“I can’t be seen with you, Mele.” Was Gabby’s sudden announcement. “Oh, God, they mustn’t know I was with you! It’s too dangerous!”

“Gabby! Please! Don’t let them see me! Please! They will be horrified to see me!”

“I must go back to the House! I can’t be here with you!
They’ll see me!”

“Please don’t leave me! Please!”

“I must!” She screamed in hushed whisper, all beyond earshot of the Ghores standing with gross complexity at the dead American’s body.

“I am going back to the House, Mele! I must change before they see me! I will be there in my dressing room if you need me! If you need anything at all!”

“Please Gabby, please don’t leave me alone!”

“No matter what happens, I’ll help you, I just can’t do it now!”

With not another word uttered, Gabby was on her way back to the House of Berlin leaving Mele alone at the edge of the alley, Mele cowardly stepping towards the others to reveal her one eyed defection.

Freddy was the first to see Mele, and flipped his flamboyant lip wrist over his mouth with a gasp. Uwe immediately took notice.

“What in the hell happened?”

“She fought back, Uwe! She wouldn’t die peacefully!”

“And what made you think she would?”

“I....I don’t know, she just fought back so strong! I never expected it!”

“You look disgraceful. Like a failure.”

Mele looked to the pavement with her one good eye, frightened to find herself scolded, frightened to not know of what punishment, if any, awaited her.

So interesting to note that this new dead Mele, unlike the living version of herself, had lost the aspect that had made her bright with life to begin with. She had been unyielding while alive, graceful, bitchy, of course, and only accommodating to a degree. She desired more than anything to belong.....and to belong meant to sacrifice
some part of yourself that does not measure entirely with the whole....In death, as a Ghore, that sacrifice is your identity. That part of you that makes you distinctly you is asked to die when you are killed.... However, your personality is not Resurrected along with the rest of you. Your personality is left to rot, and decompose into nothingness.

Uwe said, “Well, just so we don’t make a sham of this entire evening, we ought to finish the job, complete the Acquisition. Remove her clothes, Mele.”

As she moved towards the body, Uwe snapped his fingers and he and his little demon entourage headed towards the Rolls.

“Uwe, will you be waiting for me?”
“At the House, yes. Here, no.”
“How will I get back?”
“How did you get here?”
“I took the U-Bahn!”
“Then you must take it back....”
“But, my face....I can’t!”

“Don’t worry. You look just as imperfect as the rest of the living. They won’t even notice. You’ll simply blend in...” He turned and kept walking away, the other Ghores close behind, none of them even stopping to acknowledge the screams from Mele.

“Uwe! Uwe!!”

The American girl’s body was quickly stripped and left nude in the alley, not even overtly hidden behind trash or even a receptacle. Justine’s body was simply left in the open. The sooner her corpse was found by the living, the sooner the Ghores could Resurrect her, the sooner the manuscript written by Marinus would be theirs.

“They can’t treat me too badly,” Mele kept telling herself. “I’m the one that got her! I got her body for them! She’ll be headed to Savannah soon to get them want they want and its because of
me! I can’t be treated too badly!”

When she was finished, she made her way back to the House of Berlin by creeping through alleyways, covering her eye when she had to, and at one point hitting a man walking lonesome on a small neighborhood road to the point of unconsciousness because he had seen her defect.

Back at the House, Gabby had made her way inside and round about the back, moving in covertly, moving into her private dressing room and changing clothes again. The nearly close, but not quite close enough lack of authenticity in Justine’s choice of garments would have warranted suspicions. The Ghores would have noticed Gabby wearing something that was not genuine and Justine’s clothes were not genuine.

She thought of Mele’s future and waited with patient deliberation as to what might happen. She would take Mele back to Mirko if Uwe banished her, and surely Uwe would banish her. The Mother of Mothers, the perfect Phantom Ghore woman could not be one-eyed, could not have a scar as great as day across her face. And even if she did hide it, an eye patch was not very becoming for a lady of their breed. Mele could no longer be seen in public with such an atrocity.

Mele arrived about an hour later, walking in through the back door embarrassed, ashamed, and afraid of her appearance, and made way for Uwe’s office, his little study where he spent most of his day.

Indeed, Mele was banished. But, Uwe was cruel about it. Too cruel. She had fouled up the whole situation with killing Justine. Fouled it up so bad that there was no room for penance, he thought.

“You left me a mangled mess of a body I’m going to spend a lot of wasted time trying to repair.”

With one smooth move of his hand he robbed Mele of her
other eye, then snatched from her neck the diamond choker. He said that he was doing it for her own good, preventing her from ever having to look at herself imperfect again. This way, she was certain to never have to pass a reflection, a mirror, that would remind her of her own failing.

As he had done with Jason, he told her to remove herself from the premises at once, told her not to take a thing, but to leave with the clothes that she was wearing, told her to find some place back in the living world “where other imperfects dwell.” She pleaded, God knows, begged for some kindness from him, but of his ill repute there is some explanation that can only be found much later in our story. But, at this time, his devices, his desire for aesthetic perfection can only be marveled at with psychotic perception.

Gabby followed Mele close behind as the banished woman attempted to find some way to cry. The dead, no matter how hard they try, cannot cry.... And Mele surely did try, mocking the impressions, sobbing with sounds that might have Resurrected more ghastly dead things had they been a pitch slightly higher.

Gabby followed Mele in the darkness outside the House, approached her in an alley, comforted her with the bond of sisters (and to think she had planned on dissecting her), and took her to Mirko and gave her the refuge required. She, too, became one of these unknown Phantom Rogues.

You know, more or less what happens next. They found Justine’s body and buried it. It was her landlord who sent the telegram to her family, through some name found on her lease in the event of an emergency. She was Resurrected...The Phantom Rogues had failed to retrieve the body of Justine, leaving Justine to the hands of Uwe and the House of Berlin. They would surely find the Lady Pearl before anyone.

Again all hope was lost for the Phantom Rogues...until they
stumbled onto Clayton. Or rather, Clayton stumbled onto the Rogues. You see, he was the ticket the Rogues needed now to find the Lady Pearl. If the House of Berlin had Justine, then they had her jilted lover, Clayton. And the race now was to see who could get to Savannah first. Justine? Or Clayton...

This is your slight history of the Phantom Ghores. We may now proceed.
PART THREE: Taylor Holt, Marshes and Mysteries

Mirko lowered his head, ashamed but willing to be honest. “I don’t think you realize the importance of this.”

“Important? Are you out of your fucking mind? IMPORTANT??!! It’s important to YOU! Its not important to me! Or anybody else for that fucking matter! What the fuck do you mean important?”

“How the fuck can I control myself? You people planned to kill me the day you met me! You wanted to fucking kill me so I could be some PUPPET???”

“We had no intention of killing you, Clayton! We would have eventually spoken with you! But, it was UWE! Uwe was the one who had you killed! Not us! We needed you alive so you could help us find the Lady Pearl!”

“That’s all a bunch of bullshit!!!” God, the deplorable rumble of his anger
could have killed and Resurrected all at once. “And you fucking bring me into it? None of it means shit to me! They don’t mean shit to anybody, but because it’s important to all of YOU everybody else has to suffer! Talk about fucking arrogant! What the fuck do I care what happens? Who the hell cares about your goddamn book!”

“We’re trapped in Europe, don’t you understand? We can’t leave! We’re dead to the world, Clayton! We have no papers to travel with! Only you can help us!”

“Then how the fuck did she get to Savannah?? If she could have done it-” the anger was too much now, his fist went swiftly into the closest wall “-then why can’t you? Why the fuck did you have to fucking BRING ME INTO IT???”

“Please Clayton, I beg of you...if only you hadn’t come!”

“That’s right, if only I hadn’t come. But, I fucking did! You understand me? I did! And do you know why? Cause since the day I was fucking born I’ve been trying to do the right thing! The right thing! I’ve been trying to be the good guy even though everybody’s used me and abused me and treated me like shit! I’ve always fucking looked the other way, cause that’s the way I was brought up, god dammit! I was taught to respect people! So, I came here to bury someone I love, even though she didn’t give a SHIT ABOUT ME, I did it anyway, because it was the right thing to do. And you! You sonofabitch, you planned to use me the minute you heard I was here! All of you can fucking rot!”

Clayton went for Mirko’s desk, still angrily screaming at his German foe, “I’m going home. Nobody needs to know I’m dead. You want my help? Tough shit! I’m going home! I’m gonna do what’s right for me for once and nobody needs to know I’m dead! WHERE THE FUCK IS MY PASSPORT!!!”

“Clayton, you can’t! We need you! Clayton! If you want to do what’s right, then you’ll help us! Please, for God’s sake! Don’t you understand what would happen if Uwe could use the mysteries
that Marinus wrote about?”

“WHERE THE FUCK IS MY PASSPORT! AND MY TICKET!”

Mirko stood silent as Clayton tore apart the desk, as papers went flying, as drawers were flung open. Mirko even attempted to stop him, but Clayton’s force was too much. The young American picked up Mirko by his collar and threw him against the nearest wall. Yes, the strength of the dead, who can feel no weight, no feeling, no measure of strain, is enormous.

Finally, in a bottom drawer and under some papers whose foreign print was illegible to Clayton, the documents needed to flee from this insane episode were found; the passport, and his return ticket home to Savannah.

Clayton said nothing, clutching the ticket and passport and running for the door.

Mirko leapt to his feet, dashing after his hope, his one last hope of overthrowing Uwe.

“Don’t be a coward, Clayton! HELP US!”

Mirko showed the enormous force of the dead, grabbing the back of Clayton’s shirt and pulling him powerfully back, pulling Clayton so hard that the American boy went flying across the floor, causing another hole in the shallow wall.

“You have to stay! Your death will not be in vain! I won’t allow that, Clayton!”

Clayton quickly stood unaffected as Mirko lunged for him, knocking him back down, trying to grab the passport and ticket from out of Clayton’s hands.

“Listen to me Clayton! You’re needed! We need you desperately! I cannot let you leave like this! Fight me if you must! But, get rid of your anger! Get rid of it!”

With a mighty force Clayton lifted Mirko and tossed him to the furthest extent of the room. Oh, such vigor the boy had! Such
anger that was building within! Fearing broken bones that would never ever one day heal, Mirko sat against the wall screaming at Clayton, pleading with the boy.

“For God’s sake, don’t let your death be in vain! Please, HELP US!”

“Fuck you!”

And Clayton was gone. Out the door and down the stairs with a speed he had not known in life, not while playing football, not while chasing a girl through a field, not even while trying to dodge the Digger’s fatal bullet. Never.

Mirko chased after him immediately, darting pass what ever fool lay in his path as he went out the door of the crumbling building, peering left, then peering right to find Clayton running down the street. “Clayton!” He kept screaming. “CLAYTON! I beg you, STOP!”

Clayton did not. He went running for the U-Bahn station and jumped on the first available train that he could find, regardless of where it went.

Although Mirko was fast, very fast, by the time he reached the landing the train was speeding on and out into the tunnel, out of sight.

“Fuck!!!” Disgruntled profanity was all he could muster much to the dismay of the polite strangers standing nearby.

Undaunted, Mirko raced for a taxi and demanded the driver take him to the airport at once. Mirko was hopeful he would arrive at the departure terminal long before Clayton and would do whatever was necessary to keep the American from leaving Berlin and destroying with one angry moment of rage all hope the Rogues had of defeating the Phantom Ghores.

On the train Clayton did a double check of the things he had grabbed from Mirko’s small desk. He had the passport and the ticket, still very much valid. That was all he needed. He was going
home.

If he could have sighed, he might have. Instead, he laid his head back and closed his eyes making some sense of what the future might hold. Didn’t matter, truly didn’t matter. He could go home and all would be well, he could stay at his uncle’s rickety old trailer, that old oak tree out back protecting him from the world he knew he should never have trusted, should never have ventured into.

*And what of being dead?* It was nothing but a problem, a thing that was recoiled and shoved to the back of the mind. He would not be able to deny his new state of existence, but it was something no other human needed to know either. He would remain reclusive; after all, that was what he had wanted to begin with, living far from the world, deep in the low country corners of that remote place called Brunswick.

Clayton opened his eyes and studied the people on the subway. Did anyone notice him? Did they notice something different about him? The man sitting across from him did not even look at him. However, the woman to his left kept her face crinkled and her hand politely near her nose smelling what she assumed to be the total filth of an unclean vagrant….

Mirko, cursed by the determination of destiny was not able to arrive at the airport in time. Traffic slowed him, kept him from reaching Clayton before he got on his plane destined for America. By the time Mirko arrived at the boarding gate, the plane was on the runway, ready for departure. Angered, depressed, and disturbed Mirko returned to the flat in Kreuzberg to consider his own defeat and the silent victory of the Phantom Ghores.
Just before the juxtaposition of the slight history of the Phantom Ghores began, do you recall Mirko having been enraged? The reason should now fall upon you, for it shall defiantly awaken some more hurt to this story.... The one candidate for success that Mirko had in his little Phantom Rogue network, Miss Lydia, was gone. She had not been seen, nor spotted by her very own House in Italy in months, having disappeared totally.

*She’s been dissected*, thought Mirko with disgust. Although there was no trace of foul play on Uwe’s part, it did seem awfully suspicious that she, too, had fallen prey to the reign of a man whose only desire was to rid anyone not involved with grins and giggles in the House of Berlin.

Mirko had been yelling to someone at the House of Venice, yelling at a subordinate Italian Ghore for their ineptness.

“What do you mean you don’t remember? How could you not remember?”

“All I know is she walked out one day to run an errand and she never came back!”

“What was the errand?”

“I told you, she didn’t say!”

So you see, all our darlings were up to something. Uwe was sending Justine to Savannah, and Justine was enthralled with the idea, hoping to return a different girl, a wonderfully unique girl and more interesting than before...the only thing that had the Ghores worried was her incessant talking. Would she speak too much and reveal too many of their hard earned secrets? Her mission was clear: find the reclusive former matriarch, cruise and haunt all streets you think necessary until you find the woman, get the manuscript, dissect the Lady Pearl, then return to Berlin. Justine had been
THE PHANTOM GHORES

transformed into a new woman and should anyone inappropriately mistake her for Justine Sizemore, her memory wouldn’t allow it. She was now Justine Sizemore-Ghore, lacking the important aspects of her Period of Remembrance, abating all thought of her previous life in Savannah. With only the thoughts of her last months in Berlin on her mind and her new style, she was a different woman, a different creature unable to even lie should she want to about having once been “the bitch daughter.” It would be impossible for she had no memory at all of it.

Mirko, on the other hand, was at an enormous loss with the quick departure of Clayton. With Lydia missing he had no ally of any power. He was now alone with a blind woman and a man with a shredded face. Furthermore, Gabby had not called him in days. His venture now seemed hopeless. Uwe had the resources and now the ability to find the Lady Pearl before Mirko could, which meant only one thing: the Lady Pearl would be dissected and the diary would be Uwe’s and no one could then stop him from claiming his place as Father of Fathers over all the Phantom Ghores...and the chilling thought of what Uwe could do with the mysteries revealed in Marinus’s diary made him panic. Of those mysteries, of those abilities utilized by the mind, Uwe was certain to perform atrocities on other Ghores....but would he spill that sinfulness onto the living?

Uwe had been recently allowing any and all Acquisitions acceptance into the House. Multitudes of murders were being carried out, so many Resurrections being performed that one could hear the slight hum of dirges in the Berlin soundscape well into the night.

And Clayton? Clayton was back in Savannah looking for the Lady Pearl....
The world had yet to wake, the remnants of the night prior still lay scattered through the streets of Savannah. The living could smell beer in the air as little red plastic cups littered the squares. The dome on city hall caught what reflections it did as the sun rose, turning the sky a muted blue...alas, to him, those dead eyes gave the sunrise a sepia scream instead. Despite the discomfort of not being able to see natural beauty any longer, Clayton knew that it was daybreak, that it was a beginning, that all that had happened before can stay exactly there: before. What happens next is new, and all its moods remain entirely up to him.

He had arrived back in Savannah early morning with nothing more than the clothes he wore. Once people began to move and mingle throughout the squares he would go to Susan, let her know that he had returned. He was adamant that he behaved and remained as much as one of the living for as long as was possible. By telling Susan he had returned she wouldn’t worry, wouldn’t send word for him, wouldn’t begin shuffling rumors about his whereabouts, and people wouldn’t be questioning what had happened to the “Strickland boy.” As far as he was concerned he would pay Susan a visit and all in that moment of his life would be over; Sizemores, Berlin, Justine, Ghores and Rogues would all be a memory.

And the reader may question....Period of Remembrance. How is it possible for him to remember precisely all of this? Because emotions catalogue moments for us. Pain and unrequited love had been close to Clayton every moment of every second during his last days, and all it took was for him to remember pain and unrequited love for him to remember Sizemores, Berlin, Justine, Ghores and Rogues.

By 10am he was in front of the Sizemore family home,
knocking on its foreboding door.


“Yeah, I’ve been ill the last couple of days.” He said this as she made some wave of her hand to remove the smell. “I just wanted to let you know that I was back...and to thank you again.”

“Clayton, I’m concerned. You don’t look well.”

“I’m fine, Miss Susan.”

“Please, come in. I can call a doctor for you-”

“No, ma’am. I just wanted to stop by and say thank you.”

Clayton bowed his head and walked down the steps back to the street.

But Susan called for him. “Clayton? Clayton....Should you need anything, please let me know. Anything at all!”

A thought crossed his mind. A very quick, rapidity of truths that offered themselves at his mercy. You can’t go on like this. Someone will know. There’s so much about this you don’t know anything about. They can smell you, they can see it on you. You need someone’s help. For God’s sake, Clayton, finally realize you need someone’s help. Where is this Lady Pearl?

He quickly turned around and asked, “Do you still have her letters?”

“No. I burned them. They’re not a part of her I want to remember.”

“Where did she say she met this woman in Savannah?”

“I think it was the Gallery Espresso. Clayton? Do you need a ride back to Brunswick?”

“No, ma’am. I’ve got some business to do around town first.”

The obsession that can drive a man to linger and wait despite his dead state haunted Clayton for the better part of the day. He
wanted to see this Lady Pearl, wanted to gaze upon the women that ruined him without knowing it, wanted to witness the expression of a face that had no idea of it’s own consequence. Clayton sat in the Gallery Espresso for hours studying every person that spilled through.....and none of them held any resemblance to the Lady Pearl. None of them.

Now, there were two very distinct reasons for wanting to find the Lady Pearl, neither of which had anything at all to do with a manuscript that he could have cared less about. The first had much to do with survival. He had no idea what this dead state was about, and knew with each moment that passed that he was finding it difficult to function. He found it difficult to sit, for he could not feel the chair beneath him; he found it difficult to walk, for he could not feel the pavement beneath him; he found it difficult to speak, for his lips moved merely by conscious action; he found it difficult to behave as a man, for the processes of the body which he remembered as instinctual habit were pressing on him. It’s lunch time, must be time to eat...but there is no hunger.

The second reason rested on vengeance. He wanted to curse her for the chain of events that had led to the slow dismantle of his simple reality. She had been the influence that had turned Justine against him, the influence that had been the cause of her death, and consequently his.

Throughout the rest of the day he sat in the Gallery Espresso waiting for the woman to show herself. She did not. After the establishment closed he wandered around Savannah for the rest of the evening exploring the river, exploring hidden squares, discovering the night sky with Resurrected eyes. Questions of his existence, of anyone’s existence, began moving through him, salted by the chagrin realization that quite possibly everything he had known about life and what happens after life was a lie. Clayton made the attempt at touching things, anything. Statues, flowers,
trees, gates, iron.....He could feel nothing with his hands. That evening was painful for him, for the realization of being alone was enough to condemn him into sadness.

*Where is this woman?*

The next morning, he returned to the Gallery Espresso, waiting again for the woman to show. More hours passed and more hours exposed a heavy obsession pummeling his thoughts.

*Where is this woman? Jesus fucking Christ, how do I fucking FIND this woman? What am I going to do? Jesus, what am I going to do??? You have to be here. You can’t have left already. Where are you? Why can’t you just BE here?*

Meagerly, in a dimmer shadow of that trendy café he admitted disastrous defeat. He was alone. No one could help him. No one understood his demise. No one could summarize, as much as he might let on with the expression in his eyes, just how destroyed the unloved man was. The Resurrected one bowed his head and considered his next move.

Slowly, there was the unmistakable need to look up again, but to look up with caution, his spirit warned him, for there on the other side of the café was a young man with some very big eyes watching him. Throughout the day, many people had taken notice of Clayton for his condition asked of it. His appalling deceasement had yet to be blanketed by the subterfuge and illusion that the Ghores had enlisted.

Living eyes were watching him, though, and they looked at him differently than they had before his Resurrection. However, as many in the café noticed him for his displacement, his smell, his shadowed gray skin, this new pair of large eyes on the other side of the café looked at him with a sense of welcome. The young man’s eyes were nonjudgmental, were patient, and looked upon Clayton with a peculiar sense of understanding. Clayton attempted to look away, but was drawn to them, for something about those eyes said,
"I know...I know."
Suddenly the young man stood and approached Clayton. Clayton, apprehensive, gave all the signs of a man wishing to be left be.

"Hey. I’m Taylor. Taylor Holt."
Clayton, unwilling to look at him, kept his head bowed as he offered his own name in response, “Clayton Strickland.” And offered a simple glance. I don’t want any company.

“Seems like you’ve been here as long as I have. Thought I’d just come over and say hey.”

“Hey.”
“Are you waiting for someone? Or just passing time?”
“A little bit of both.”

“Kinda the same here.” Taylor sighed, and Clayton took a brief look at the man. He looked at everything around Taylor, but not at the eyes, for his eyes appeared as though they were trying to read him, to see something in Clayton that he was not willing to expose just yet.

Taylor wore much the same contemporary uniform as Clayton. Ball cap, jeans, white t-shirt. Taylor was much different in physical appearance, though. He was a thin man, shorter than Clayton, with reddish hair and freckled skin. “Funny you should say your name is Strickland. I’ve got Stricklands in my family.” But, in this part of Georgia, who doesn’t? Clayton was waiting for the next question, or the next comment, something about the way he looked, whether it be profoundly handsome, or like shit. Taylor said no such thing. “I’m from St. Simon’s. You from Savannah?”

With a slight glimmer Clayton said, “No, I’m from Brunswick.” Should the reader need a simple lesson in Georgian geography, St. Simon’s is a small island off the coast of Georgia, but to be more precise, a small island off the coast of the mainland port city of Brunswick.

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“Very cool. Same family name and from the same area. We could be kin.”
Throughout the time Taylor spoke, he mentioned nothing of Clayton’s physical anything.
“Savannah’s beautiful, isn’t it, Clay?”
“It’s a pretty cool town.”
“Have you ever been to witches square?”
“What?”
“The one over at the far end of the river walk.”
“Never heard of it.”
“I go for stuff like that. Fuck tour guides. Someone showed it to me once. Freaked me out for days.”
“What is it?”
“There’s a spot you can stand on, where they use to hang the slaves they couldn’t auction. If you stand in that spot and talk, your voice comes back at you in all kinds of other different echoes.”
“Really?”
“Yeah. That’s the sort of the thing I get into.” He flashed his eyes at Clayton and Clayton could see warmth. “Savannah has unusual energy flows. Its one of those cities where this life and the one beyond mingle, I think.”
Clayton lowered his head. *How little you know, Taylor.*
“By the way, man,” asked Taylor, “are you alright?”
That was it, that was the moment Clayton had waited for. This guy was able to see his defect, his dead body unrotting, but stinking and looking one day shy of worm ridden.
“How?” Clayton’s tone was aggressive. “Don’t I look alright?”
“No, you don’t.....You look sad.” Again, no mention of Clayton’s state, but a hint at an emotion he was attempting to hide to no avail.
*I know....*, said Taylor’s eyes when he looked at Clayton
from beneath the brim of his ball cap. I know.

The extent of the conversation that followed cannot be contained in paragraphs by this author’s pen. They are the sort that last for hours, and could have lasted for days, had not one or the either recognized the amount of time that had passed by. They spoke of nothing of importance on occasion, then would leap into moments of comforting similarity. The two of them had shared very similar life experiences, had wept at the same moments in their own histories, had sprung to action on various occasions when their own memories warranted it. Through the better course of some many hours they discovered that they laughed at the same things, held dear the same things, were suspicious of the same things.

Clayton made an attempt to hide some moments of his life with total strangers, yet a comfort in Taylor allowed him to reveal in nearly as much detail as his death’s remembrance would allow him, gray areas of his life that were moved along by sadness. The more he talked with Taylor, the more many memories were brought to the surface, much quicker than the Period of Remembrance usually allows. But, again, emotions are catalogues for moments, and Clayton had been a very emotionally driven man the days before his death. All of his worst memories about life were at the forefront of his thoughts the days before he died.

Clayton was soiled with so many painful emotions, so many feelings of anger and unwant, so many desires that were left thwarted, and so many essential dreams being robbed from him.

Like hunger. The times he went without food did not exceed the times he went without respect. These recalled emotions, these Periods of Remembrance, are not to be taken lightly for they fuel your ambition as a member of the dead regime. They make you want to excel, to claim a place, a rank amongst all others who cannot feel, cannot see clearly, cannot hear the somber softness of a tragic heart. Yes, these Periods of Remembrance make you want more,
they make the greed within strengthen. Alas, he without a House, he without a refuge away from the claims of the grave.... what does he do? What will these emotions, these fueling emotions, do?

You desire nothing more than to sit still, to stop, to watch without looking, to lean back and let the eyes grow heavy. You want nothing more than to stare forward and watch whatever may happen in the brain transpire. The images as they transpire in the dead brain remain nothing but pictures. And to translate into words what they are, what they mean, would be a miracle. So you prefer to simply sit and watch, stare, as I said before, stare at what happens in the cranium.

When a Phantom Ghore remembers something, you will see a somber, bitter, moroseness flow through him with torrential rapidity. It is the same moroseness the rich man feels when he one day recalls his early days in the ghetto. The same moroseness a murderer that escaped conviction feels when some sound recalls the moment of his victim’s execution. The same moroseness a famous person hears when they remember the days when they were nameless.

Clayton could not be held without exception. No, the same moroseness swallowed him whole when he remembered at some point that he no longer had to strive to survive. He would remember something like hunger...and all the days when he was still a thing that breathed, how hungry he had been as a child. Clayton and his mother had been so poor they would eat whatever grew on the lot that bordered the rickety trailer. Sometimes they had potatoes.... but it was only potatoes. For weeks it would be potato salad, potato soup, potato pancakes. The same held true for tomatoes in the summer. If they had no money, if they were hungry, they would look to see if the tomatoes had bloomed bright and bloody red. And if they had not, then they looked for weeds. There was a bitter weed with a sweet aftertaste that Clayton remembered chewing as a
boy to strangle the hunger that crept through. He would hold himself as he ate that weed, and would remind himself hunger would not last forever.

Clayton was fueled by some anger and hatred, for at that moment it was all that he could remember from life. What saddens this situation is that if those emotions of anger and hurt had been expressed while alive, then they would not have been so powerful once he was dead.

As Clayton revealed an unhappy childhood, the miserable memories of a mother who kept him in poverty, and the need to be loved, Taylor only listened, never made judgments and spoke only in the softest tones.

“I’m sorry, I’ve been just carryin’ on.”
“Don’t worry about it, Clay. We’re just two people sharing memories of our lives, man. The whole of our lives, not just the good stuff, but all of it.”

Clayton felt warm in Taylor’s presence...and noticed that he had called him ‘Clay.’ I like that, he thought. A new name for a new existence.

“Are you waiting for a anyone in particular? Or just anybody that’ll come along?” Taylor snickered.

Clayton realized he had forgotten completely about finding the Lady Pearl. For all he knew she had wandered into that café and had sat directly next to him. He was so focused on the friendship being developed, on the understanding being explored, on the focus only of Taylor Holt.

“You going back to St. Simons?” Asked Clayton.
“Yeah....”
“You think you might wanna drop me off in Brunswick?”
“Sure, man!”

Maybe Clayton didn’t even need to find the elusive Lady Pearl in order to accept or understand his new existence. Perhaps all
he needed was the comforting of someone who simply knew him, from the deepest parts of his soul onward into the heavens where only the spirit goes.

_I know....said those brown eyes calmly._

We shall have to return to the friendship developing between Clayton and Taylor shortly. For now, I wish to divulge in what was happening in Berlin.

The House of Berlin was preparing for _Gruftnacht_. I am sure you remember reading in the House Rules right along side Clayton, that Gruftnacht was a most important night of the year for all Phantom Ghores scattered throughout Europe. Every House showed their most magnificent, most impressive ability to dress and To Parade. This year would prove to be most interesting, considering the developments of late.

The other Houses had responded to Uwe’s coup with systematic boycott, claiming the House of Berlin did not exist. However, as was customary, the House of Berlin sent out its invitations and RSVP’s to all three Phantom Ghore Houses still in existence.

You can imagine the surprise the Mothers and Fathers of Houses Paris and London felt when receiving the beautifully scripted invitation in the post. “That man! He’s insane! To think we would justify his existence with _Gruftnacht_! Oh, what audacity!”

Then they stopped to think for a slight moment. Yes, what audacity, what perfect Phantom Ghore arrogance, to spit at you then invite you to a party celebrating your failure! And yet, the Mothers and Fathers of the Houses London and Paris could not
help but resist the temptation, the thought of years past when Gruftnacht was a splendid affair, when all five Houses were blossoming and burgeoning with brilliant Acquisitions, when their lords and ladies danced, pranced, and indulged themselves in their own reflections.

Ah, yes! The old days of the Gruftnacht, the great ball of the dead, when they communicated, when they interacted as one singular body after such a long year of separation; homecoming.... This brought another thought to challenge them. What on earth could Uwe possibly hope to prove with Gruftnacht? Was it symbolic for him? Did it mean that he and only he was the Father of Fathers? It was all a mystery, for how and what would Gruftnacht be now that everything had changed, now that Marinus was gone, the Lady Pearl gone, and not to mention the entire dissection of the House of Vienna just three or four months before? Murder and betrayal had been committed. Could they overlook that for the sake of their own self-absorbing celebration?

London sent the first RSVP. They would attend with the concession that they had Uwe’s word that no harm would come to them. Their entire House would venture as far as Berlin, but only with the solemn promise that no harm would come to any of its members.

Paris responded with an annotation all their own: to have Gruftnacht on their terrain, away from the German deception that Uwe had made so famous.

Uwe disagreed, claiming, “Tradition is Phantom Ghore prominence. We shall have Gruftnacht in Berlin, as has been done traditionally for decades past. Paris will not suffice. Besides, Paris is not nearly as brilliant as Berlin, I am sure you will agree! If Paris were that grand, then all Ghores would be French....”

Venice did not respond so quickly. As you will recall, Lydia had disappeared and those around the House of Venice were certain
of her demise. Constantly they thought of the quiet dissection that might have ensued at the hands of Uwe. The newly alleged Father of the House of Berlin had sent someone, if he had not come himself, to shred apart Lydia, his only real rival.

And let’s speak on this for a moment or two if we may. The House of London was never a match for Uwe. Their leader was one of distance. London was too far to make quick political or retaliatory decisions. Most of the news reported was so old anyway that if the Father and Mother of the House of London had decided to do anything, their rebuttal would have been behind. Furthermore, they were a small House that found it difficult to acquire new Acquisitions despite their metropolitan location, and did not number the amount of Ghores needed to carry out any threat against Uwe. (England is known for its pomposity, everyone in England tends to feel they are of some higher class than his brother).

Paris was equally dismal, but only because the Mother and Father of that House were so irritantly French they could never side with anyone too long before changing their minds. What came from the French House more times than not was, “Well, perhaps the man does have something new to add to this old House System.” Only retracting moments later with, “Dear God! What an imbecile! What a wreck! We’re all doomed under his leadership! Yes, we will join the boycott!” Then, of course, in true French fashion, they would declare days later that maybe Uwe, if he had the intelligence and ambition to overthrow the current leadership, also had the intelligence and brilliance to lead the new House System....

Only Venice, at the helm of the very strong, very deliberate, very opinionated Lydia could be of any threat to Uwe. So, when the Italian Ghores received the invitation to attend Gruftnacht they panicked. Lydia was nowhere to be found. Therefore, a decision
that required the forthright thought of a true leader could not be
made. Christian, the dismal Father of Fathers of that House who
had quietly relinquished his reigns over to Lydia, was now in a
position of power and was more confused than ever. The House of
Venice did not RSVP. They waited for Mirko to make another call
inquiring if any news had been heard about Lydia.

“Mirko Mirko Mirko! You can’t imagine how happy we are
that you have called! Why won’t you give me your number in case
things like this happen again?” Christian asked frankly.

“Its too dangerous to give you this number. What’s
happened? Have you heard about Lydia? Is she ok?”

“Oh, its worse worse worse than that! We’ve received an
invitation to Gruftnacht!”

Now, a defining measure of Christian’s verbiage is an
unusual stuttering habit. He will find a word, any word
subconsciously that suits him, and for dramatic event allow it to
ring on in echoes throughout the sentence. This trait surfaces more
prominently when he is under very much duress.

Mirko was at first crestfallen to hear that no news had been
heard from Lydia.... but in a flash, a quick moment of pride, he
gathered his momentum.

“You received an invitation to Gruftnacht? Do all the other
Houses have one?”

“Oh, yes yes yes! Uwe says he wants to make it better than
all the other ones in years years past!”

It was decided immediately that Mirko should come to
Venice at once.

At his side would be Jason, for Mele would stay in Berlin
just in case Gabby was able to call, or visit. Besides, the trek for the
blind woman would have slowed them to some degree, and speed
was of utmost importance.

If only to see the sight of those men on the train on route to
Venice! What gothic romance would have been concluded! Jason concealed his face with something similar to a surgeon’s mask, however, it was black, and made of velvet. A wide brimmed hat concealed the upper portion of his grotesque scarring and when you should peek at him, only those brilliant bright eyes, unscathed by his own self inflicted madness, shined through. As the train rocked back and forth, Mirko and Jason discussed and plotted the most sinister display of brazen assassination they could muster.

It was their intention to tag along with the House of Venice and join Grufinacht and destroy the House of Berlin. Alas, both Jason and Mirko would have been too easily recognizable. Neither one would dare enter the House of Berlin. It was too dangerous.

If I have not mentioned before, for I am not so apt to make aesthetics especially important these days, Mirko was a stunning, good-looking man. The Germanic Aryans around the world would have been pleased with the genetic offspring they had produced with Mirko. He was astoundingly pure looking, complete with a blond top and a blue-eyed tan. Mirko at Grufinacht would have been noticed, his beauty would have thrust him forward into the center of the room to be displayed, to be looked at. Not to mention, Uwe was quite familiar with the likes of Mirko and the sight of him. Mirko was one of the first Resurrected, as you recall, and despite how heavily disguised Mirko could have been, he would have been noticed by the clever Uwe. The rough cut of a shredded Jason would have been, too, considering his own historical dealings with Uwe and the House of Berlin. Thus, part of their plan insisted they use a number of men and women from the House of Venice.

Once in Italy, Mirko and Jason were treated warmly, their reception into the House of Venice resembling a foreign dignitary’s arrival. Christian, unaware of the importance of the war that was brewing, continued to act as host, providing the two Phantom Rogues with private dressing rooms, assistance to help clothe them,
and little manuals they had prepared of the Italian customs of the living so they would not be perfectly out of place.

Jason scoffed vocally at the whole scene. “Are you crazy? This is no picnic! No wonder Lydia wanted total control!”

You could easily say that Christian was a wonderful Phantom Ghore. He was apt to please and pamper, was able to quickly socialize with anyone who walked within his reach. But, the times had changed, and Mirko was quick to point out that Christian and all his methods and manners would eventually be dissected if he did not accept the drastic situation at hand with some severity.

“What do you mean? That they would harm me? Me??? No, I refuse refuse refuse to think that! You don’t really think Uwe would travel all this way to dissect me? It’s not possible! Oh, please please please Mirko! We’ve done nothing nothing NOTHING wrong! Everyone knows I’m not the real Father of the House! I have no real power! Even Uwe knows! I’m just here to look good!”

“Let me explain it to you this way.... You love having your parties?”

“Oh, yes yes yes.”

“And you enjoy the conquest of having new Acquisitions in your House? New faces, new playthings?”

“Oh, most most most certainly.”

“It could end tomorrow.”

Now Jason chimed in. “You have to look at it two ways. If Uwe dissected Lydia—”

“Don’t even even even say that!”

“Well, if he did.... then it’s just a question of time before the rest of you are sent to your own minced graves. He did it once before. Remember what he did to the House of Vienna?”

“Oh, dear dear dear.... Why can’t things stay as they are?”

“If Uwe was not responsible for Lydia’s disappearance,
then he still feels that Venice is a threat. And do you know why?”
“Because Venice is a very strong House, Christian. Lydia-”
“Both you and Lydia,” interrupted Mirko.
“Yes, both you and Lydia have helped to make this a very important House...and Uwe feels threatened by it. He won’t knock on the door; he won’t expect you to treat him nicely. He’ll send a band of dirty diggers to come in through the windows, through the back door, slice all of you up when you least expect it.”
“So why on earth should I go to Gruftnacht? Won’t he just dissect us all there?”
“No....it doesn’t seem likely. You can’t have power unless you have someone to lord it over. He doesn’t want to dissect everyone, for there would be no one left to control. Uwe only wants the rebellious ones gone.”
Christian paced for a bit, made some attempt at biting his nails before remembering how foul a move that could be. The nails don’t grow back. “I’ve never been good at this, you know. That’s why Lydia took care of everything everything everything. Oh, she should be here now! I don’t know what to do do do! I mean, why should we even go to Gruftnacht ?”
“He wants to see you submit to him. He wants to see you adore him and offer allegiance. And by accepting the invitation that’s what you’ll be doing.”
“So you don’t think he’ll dissect us?”
“No.”
“You don’t mean to start a coup of your own, do you? Why, Mirko! Two men couldn’t possibly possibly possibly pull off such a stunt!”
Mirko and Jason looked to each other, then looked to Christian. “Yes, well.... I’m glad you brought that up. We’ve come to Venice to ask for your help.”
Now, all of this Gruftnacht confusion did raise some interesting questions. What was Uwe’s intention behind throwing the most important and respected social event of the year? Was it, as Christian suggested, to have all Ghores within his proximity shattered? Dissected? Or was it as Mirko suggested, to have them all bow before him? To have them all “submit to him” and admit that he was, indeed, the Father of Fathers?

The truth would be muttered about the House of Berlin the weeks before the grand ball. Uwe made comments to nearly anyone who was in earshot: “My desire is quite simple. Restore order to the torn House System, bring us back into tradition, make us one Family again.... and yes, to make certain that all other Houses recognize me as the Father of Fathers.”

In private his announcements were subtler, tinged a bit with some hope at self-confidence: “They will mark me as the Father who lead them into the next century, into the next chapter of our History.”

Gabby could not help but feel the foundations shaky, and yet, she was still after so many days and nights, unable to send any word to Mirko, nor to anyone at all outside the House of Berlin of her whereabouts. She could only hope that from some distance Mirko was watching her, knowing she was safe, knowing she was still standing next to Uwe.

Gabby, throughout the days leading up to Gruftnacht, assured herself constantly that if some coup attempt could be made, if something were to be done about Uwe, then it would be done at Gruftnacht. All Ghores would be present, all Phantoms chatting, laughing, lounging, and unaware some Rogues were out to destroy them.

Gabby did an awful lot of wandering through this time. She had no Acquisition to impress so her days were spent strolling, looking gorgeous, stepping up and down the grand avenues of Berlin.
(and yes, quite aware she was being followed). Then when the streets she toiled became tedious and tiresome, she took to the little streets. They, too, in time grew uninteresting.... She had seen it all, done it.... and now? Now, death had become boring. Perhaps things would be different if she overcame her shortcomings and made an attempt at bringing an Acquisition into the House....

That thought lasted less than briefly. She did not dare bring another Ghore into the world. The ones that were in existence were too many already. And the way they bitched and carried on and fought with each other was enough to drive someone insane. This whole House War situation was too much. Even the notion of it, the thought of it, had lingered for too long. It was time for it all to end. In one fashion or another, they must all stop this insane charade of politics and back stabbing and return to normalcy...

We may now return to the coastal swamps of Georgia and rendezvous with Taylor Holt and Clayton Strickland who quietly rambled on in a gurgling truck as it strolled peacefully down the coastal highway.

Again, they spoke of everything and nothing, simplicities and complexities, happiness and sorrow. Often they didn’t speak at all, but enjoyed the quiet sound of comfort. It is unusual on occasion, and this author will take the moment to say that is is rare, to find synchronicity working in your favor, that you should happen to meet just the right person at the right time at the right place. Those meetings are always left to chance, and when they materialize out of the astral plane, they offer us decisions. Carry on? Or break free with this newness and go forward into new terrain, one handled distinctly by destiny.....
“Hey, Clay...”
“Yes, Taylor.”
“I’ve been a little worried about my grandmother. You in a rush to get back to Brunswick?”
“Nah, not really. I’m in no rush to go anywhere right now.”
“You wanna tag along with me over to St. Simons so I can check on her first? Then maybe we’ll get a bite to eat and I’ll take you home.”
“Sure. Sounds good.”
Taylor looked to Clayton who was smiling, then turned to look out over the softly moving marshes as the wind licked their grassy stems with the gentle caress of tenderness. “It shouldn’t take long,” he said quietly. “Shouldn’t take long at all....”
Onto the causeway, then finally onto St. Simons Island, the rising bridge over the intra-coastal revealing a view of extreme beauty, even with Clayton’s dead eyes. The marshes rolled on in tempos that are suited better for dreams, as they reached the sea to hand over their cadence’s ceasing.
The truck stumbled onto the island, made its way through some twisting round of roads where the marshes met the sea, and finally arrived at a simple home far from the road perched with comfort next to the marshes. Clayton spotted a fig tree and recalled preserves with his grandmother suddenly. One good memory setting him at ease.
As Taylor got out of the truck, Clayton sat where he was, rolling down the window to say, “I’ll just wait for you here.”
“Are you kidding me? Hell no, get out of that truck,” said Taylor laughing. “It would be rude, man! Come on!”
Clayton complied slightly annoyed, not wanting to meet with people, not wanting them to look at him and question, to smell him, to notice his skin devoid of the moistness of life.
But he complied and strutted quietly through the back door
of the house with head bowed. The house was simple and not at all decorated. No paintings on the wall, no furniture anywhere, no curtains. As they moved from the kitchen into the living room, Clayton could hear Taylor already speaking to a woman in a room at the end of the hall to the left. Her voice was angered, though he couldn’t make out what she said.

“Clay,” said Taylor suddenly. “I’m back here.”

Clayton curious walked down the hall and into a bedroom. There stood a very simple woman not much older than Taylor, wearing a blue oxford button up shirt, khaki trousers, with red hair tied in a whispy bun. She took notice of Clayton immediately, scared eyes scanning the dead man.

“Taylor! What is the meaning of this? Taylor, I asked you not to do this!” She screamed, still her eyes on Clayton. Clayton feared his death state had repulsed her, had scared her into panic. She pulled a small blade swiftly from out of her back pocket and held it tightly at her side. Never once did she blink, nor shift sight off Clayton.

Trepid, Clayton took steps back, trying to turn around, but heard Taylor say, “He’s not one of them.”

“You don’t know that!”

“I do, granny. I do.”

With confusion and destiny all deciding they required dramatic parts in this scene, Clayton turned to Taylor quickly.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ve heard you for the past two days. I could hear you, Clay. Never have I been able to do that before. Never. But, I could hear you, some stranger I’ve never met calling out.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

I know, said the brown eyes. I know....

The woman screamed, “Taylor, I don’t like this! Taylor get him out of here! I insisted you not do this! I will shred him if you
Gabby was plotting her own escape in the event that Mirko were to ambush *Grufnacht*. It was certainly the most important moment he had to conjure whatever coup he could and damage the House of Berlin for good. Although she had not heard from him, she was certain he was planning something, and if he were not, then she would be forced to do something reckless on that special evening all on her own: an assassination maybe? Yes, dear Gabby was ready to sacrifice everything to make some attempt at dissecting, immobilizing, and disabling Uwe.

Mirko, unbeknownst to Gabby, had enlisted the aid of the House of Venice. Every member of that House was in full preparation, spending the days leading up to *Grufnacht* in plans of attack, from where they would enter, how they would slash and gash the House of Berlin, and how they would escape. Don’t forget that shortly after Uwe’s coup, Lydia had been teaching her own Italian darlings a thing or two about the art of dissection in case they needed it for reasons of defense.

Gaining the Italian support was quite easy, for the House of Venice pledged allegiance to the real Father of Fathers, the departed Marinus Halasz-Ghore and no one else. They despised Uwe and put their faith and hope in the guidance of Mirko.

The rest of the Ghores in Houses Berlin, London, and Paris
were busy with their own anxious wonderings. The House of Paris was busy trying to outdo the other Houses and look the best. Considering their location one cannot be surprised at their desire too exceed the heights of fashion. The House of Paris and all its French Ghores are famous for the thorough and outlandish, if not the most impeccable of fashion statements.

London was doing what it could to bring out the aristocracy of the Ghore regime, studying and practicing all the didactics of the House Rules, and even some rules never once uttered in writing, but forever used in the Ghore style. They walked about with books balanced on their heads, with sneers and arched brows, exploring in lurid, stylish detail what arrogance means when personified.

Berlin never to be outdone by anyone considerably foreign, was busy on the surface mastering what the new era of Phantom Ghore lineage would mean and busied themselves with ideas of how they could shock the stuffy old clones in Paris and London. Style victims, The French and English Ghores were called, Ghores who followed the House Rules to such specifics that they were stoic and boring. If you could master the three Houses into a metaphor of sisters, you would find Paris to be the snobbish darling, the favorite daughter; London to be the old matronly one with a book firmly pressed to her sharp noise; Berlin the vampy harlot with nothing better to do than seduce.

The weakness of being a Ghore came back to cloud their good judgments. You see, the arrogance of being in this dead race, the ambition to succeed and to be perfect, ruled all thought. They all, without considering what danger may be awaiting them, saw an opportunity to be the best at what they do, to compete, to look better, sound better, and act better than anyone at all. Blind egotism. Pure and simple.
After some time, Taylor was able to convince his grandmother that Clayton was no threat. Even Clayton rebutted on his own behalf on occasion to the very perturbed and dismissive Lady Pearl. “Quiet! I’ll speak to you when I’m good and ready. I don’t trust you, yet.”

Taylor eventually persuaded the Lady Pearl that Clayton could not be one of the Ghores sent to hunt her down, dissect her and claim the manuscript. The knife was tossed to a nearby night stand and the Lady Pearl asked Clayton quite bluntly, but still without any sense of diplomacy, “When did you die?”

“About a week ago, maybe two weeks. I don’t know exactly.”

“Who killed you?”

“I don’t know his name. He looked rough, not like the other one’s. He had a mustache and a cigar-”

“The Digger. Where were you when you died?”

“At a party. I had run out of the party because I saw Justine there. I didn’t know anything about you people. I didn’t know you were dead.”

“Why are you looking for me?”

Honesty claims a moment for itself. “I’m alone. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to live.”

“Terrible choice of words, because you’re hardly alive.”

“I know they can smell me.” He looked at Taylor. “I know they can see I’m not like them.”

“What’s the matter? They didn’t give you a copy of the House Rules?”

“I read the House Rules.”

She screamed at Taylor while pointing at Clayton, “You
see? He is one of them! They’d never let an outsider read the *House Rules.*”

“The Ghores didn’t give it to me to read. Mirko did.”

The Lady Pearl stopped quickly as a sullen expression of longing fell across her simple dead face. “Mirko?”

“Yes. He’s the one who Resurrected me.”

The Lady Pearl looked out a nearby window, clasping her hands in twisted thought, then looked to Clayton again with only the frail tip of trust to guide her through his eyes, through his expressions.

She thought, *I hope to God you’re telling the truth.*

Clayton didn’t hear it, but Taylor did. “He’s telling the truth, granny.”

“Taylor? Clayton and I are going to go outback for a talk....a very private talk, if that’s alright?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

They wandered slowly out the back door of the house. That is to say, the Lady Pearl showed Clayton the way and walked behind him, still careful not to keep her back to him.

Out at the back edge of the yard were two chairs with a view of the marshes. “Have a seat,” she said. “So Mirko Resurrected you.”

“So that I could come back to Savannah and find you.”

“You are looking for me then?”

“No...well, yes....It’s not why you think. He and Gabby,” he noticed the Lady Pearl close her eyes with soft memory when hearing Gabby’s name, “wanted me to come back and find you for the book. But, I don’t give two shits about that book. That’s not why I was looking for you.”

“I should have given it to Mirko when I had the chance.”

“They wanted to find you before Uwe does.”

“Ah, yes. *That* one. God, help us from *that* one.”
It was remarkable how simple she was. This was the grand dame of a dead regime, a worshipped icon in her time.....now so simple, nothing extravagant, nothing incredibly out of the ordinary.

She continued with her own interrogation. “Uwe’s looking for me?”

“Yes. They all are.”

“It makes sense that they would look for me in Savannah. That’s why I’m on St. Simons. I can fit in quietly here and not be found. I’m glad to hear that Mirko and Gabby are well. I only hope that Lydia is, too.”

“Gabby was very good to me. I didn’t get to know Mirko very well,” recalling how he had fought off Mirko before leaving Berlin.

“I do miss them so,” she said staring into the marshes. After some minutes of silence she said, “I didn’t want a view of the ocean to spend my exile in....However long that may be. With these eyes the ocean would look like nothing but mud coming in, creeping in on me day after day....but, this Clayton, this is so much better. Look at all the browns, all the beige, the subtle bronze touch here and there...its just like it was when your eyes were alive. Do you see?”

He could see what she meant. There was the same sharpness in color, the color of the marshes looked very much as they had when he was alive. The color of the marshes had not changed with dead eyes.

“The color of the marsh is the same color we see in, so it looks the same...one of the few things that still looks the same. And if you squint your eyes slightly.... its almost like being alive again.”

An egret fluttered by in long strides, and the slow wave of the tide caused the quiet ripple of movement along the marshy grasses.

“Oh, its beautiful isn’t it?”

The sun was climbing down to rest, hitting the horizon,
hitting the marshes, causing all in the sight to glow golden.... yes, just like in life. All having gone golden....

“You will find, young man, that the sunset is deplorable when dead. Its drab, you know. But here on the marshes its almost as it was when you were alive. Taylor sits out here often and watches the marshes with me. He’s like me in that respect. He truly loves the marshes.”

“Has he always known about you?”

“Oh, no. He only found out when I came back. His mother had just died when I found him. I hunted down the first ancestor I could find and hated her, who she was, what she was like. I watched her from afar and realized telling her anything about who and what I was would be disastrous. Then I found Taylor, watched him from afar, too. I spied on him through his windows at night, watched what he read, what he did with his time. I discovered he was an awful lot like me. So, I finally approached him, confided in him, asked him for his help. I was alone, you see. I had no one. No House, no Family, no money. Nothing. Taylor is one of those unusual individuals that doesn’t believe in reality, anyway. The mysteries of the Universe make much more sense to him than cars, automobiles and people do.”

“I think I feel the same way.”

“He obviously thinks very highly of you.”

“I just met him today.”

“And it seems like you’ve known him an awfully long time, though, doesn’t it?”

Clayton nodded.

“There’s something to be said for that, Clayton. You have a valuable friend in my grandson. He’s done very well by me. Taylor’s been comforting, understanding, supportive....I don’t know how I could have gotten along without him.”

She took his hand in hers. Of course, there was nothing to
feel, but now, more than anything, it was the gesture that took center stage. Symbolism, dear reader, is more important to these creatures than perhaps you can ever know.

“So I trust him, Clayton. If he feels an instant connection to you, then you’re alright by me. I think you should stay here with us. I’ll help you get acquainted with trying to mobilize yourself, and how to function properly around the living. It’s much easier than you think. Most of them don’t pay attention to what’s happening around them anyway.”

Taylor made his way out of the back of the house around 10 in the evening, the heavy, humid air of late summer clinging to him instantly. His grandmother sat in her bedroom attempting to move through old family photos, photos of a family she had never known, the living family she had left behind when she went to Berlin. Amongst them were pictures of a daughter she never knew, and inklings of Taylor as a young boy growing up quickly. Over each of them she sat trying visualize how life for them may had been different had she not died, how things may have changed had she never met Marinus. But life moves as it should, and on occasion she held a picture of her daughter, or Taylor, or Robert or any number of unnamed relatives she had never met to her breast and imagined them deep in her heart.

Clayton had dismissed himself hours before. Taylor and the Lady Pearl had gotten so caught up into talking about their own family history, about the offspring she had never met and what had happened to them, that Clayton felt the need to let them be. He simply said, “I’m going outside for a while.”

Some hours later Taylor was out in the night, the sound of
the ocean far in the distance, the smell of the marshes holding a simple, wet earthiness in the air. Towards the marshes he marched quietly, but determined, and laid upon the grass, his feet just near the gradual reach of the darkened, bronze weeds that found their home in the wetland’s coming and going tide.

On his back he laid both hands behind his head, the eyes opened wide to claim whatever the night sky may offer him, whatever blessing the Universe and all its infinite brilliance may show him.

“What are you doing,” asked the voice with a smile.

Taylor sat up and turned around to find Clayton on the roof of the house.

“Clay? What are you doing up there?”
“I was looking at the stars.”
“Me, too.”
“Would you like some company?”
Taylor smiled. “Would you like me to come up there? Or would you like to come down here?”
“I’ll come down there.”

Clayton climbed off the roof and moved through the muggy air to meet Taylor, who had already repositioned himself with back flat to the earth. “I like to pretend I’m looking out, not up.”
“Exactly.” Clayton did the same.
“Can you still see them? The stars?”
“Not as many as I used to, but at least the important ones.”

Backs to the earth and side to side, the two of them stared up at the heavens...I beg your pardon, they stared out at the heavens and the Universe before them.

“That one,” said Taylor, “that one’s just beautiful.”
“That’s actually a planet. It’s Venus. She’s always been my favorite. When I was a kid, I’d stare up at the sky from my bed next to the window and dream.”
“What did you dream about?”
“Just about stories....I’d make up stories.”
“What kind?”
“All kinds of stories...Anything and everything to make me forget about who and where I was.”
“I’m sorry things weren’t so good for you before.”
Clayton said nothing. It are those moments of silence with someone that you can refresh, or remember just how important the other one’s presence is in your life. Should you need them to do a song and dance number constantly to keep you entertained, chances are you are ill suited for them. But, to be reminded of them in silence, where there is no speech, no movement, no emotion even, you can claim with some diligent authority that their absolute being is what draws you to them and nothing more.
“Thank you, Taylor.”
“For what?”
“For being here.”
Knowing that Clayton could not feel, Taylor still reached over to grab Clayton’s hand laying in the grass by his side. The coldness? Taylor didn’t even think of it. The roughness of the moistless, dead skin? Taylor barely even made mention of it in his mind. The moment was about connecting in silence with Clayton. The moment was about truth and deeper understanding. He squeezed his hand tightly, though Clayton couldn’t feel it, though Clayton made no motion nor mention that he had felt Taylor hold onto him.
“You say you could hear me?” Clayton asked.
“Yeah. I just heard someone calling out. I’ve never heard that before. Its not like I’m psychic or anything, I can’t see the future. I just hear stuff usually, but just simple stuff. People reciting their grocery lists. Stuff like that. When I heard you, though, I heard someone calling out purposely...then I heard my grandmother’s
name. So I had to find you. I had to.”

“I’m glad you answered.”

And with his thoughts Clayton said, *I feel loved.*

Taylor said vocally, with quiet, soft whisper that blended well with the hush of the evening, “I do, too.”

Taylor squeezed Clayton’s hand tighter, as the two of them stared out into the Universe, each of them hoping to find the answers that they needed from the stars.

This connection became a ritual with the two. The mornings would begin with Clayton and Taylor walking through the woods, Clayton telling Taylor about what his grandmother was teaching him about assimilating with the living. “She says I’m trying to find ways of actually being alive, instead of just trying to blend in. Your grandmother thinks I’m trying to deny being ...you know....”

“Wow. If you have a hard time even saying it, maybe she’s right.”

“She wants me to admit to it, instead of denying it.”

“Hey, man. If you have to lie for a while until the time is right, then do it. Hide all parts of who you are from everyone around you until you feel it’s time to be yourself. I see no harm in that. As long as you don’t lie to yourself. I mean, what do you hope to accomplish by being around the living?”

Clayton had no definite answer.

“Ok, then, let me ask it this way. Dead or not, what do you want to do next?”

Clayton laughed and said, “This! This is all I’ve ever wanted. Just to walk in the woods and be around nature. Look at the sky at night, watch the sunrise in the morning, enjoy the quiet. Get the fuck away from people.”

Taylor (subjected to the labor and strains of being alive) would leave for the day to a job, to an actual life that encompassed the toils of formulas to which all who breathe are apt to adhere to.
You work to feed yourself, to shelter yourself, to clothe yourself....you do not work to feel a sense of prosperity.

Then in the evenings, after the sun had fallen, after darkness had consumed whatever she would for the night, Clayton and Taylor would rendezvous again at the edge of the marshes, speaking of this and of that, enjoying the fact that destiny had offered them a blessing, that they had found each other, as they “shared the wholeness of each other,” as Taylor once said.

Clayton considered the thought of going back to Berlin. The more he thought of it, the more he thought of the consequences, the more he thought of his own subtle good nature and all the lessons being human and being simple that his life had tried to teach him. He began to feel a need to help the Lady Pearl. He thought of Gabby, who had helped him, who had sacrificed so much to make sure all plans stayed on track, that all things destined should remain destined. Clayton could not help but think his role in this whole situation of coups, and Houses, societies and manners, was greater than he had realized, especially since meeting Taylor, whose very meeting reminded him that our purpose is often not what we design for ourselves, but how the Universe has designed us for someone else’s needs.

“They need you, dear,” said the Lady Pearl, she staring helplessly into the marshes as the sun fell softly on the land beyond her new exiled home. “We all need you, badly....”

“But, I don’t know if I can do that.”

“Take the manuscript back to Berlin for me and give it to Gabby. That would be enough. Just give it to her then come back. If Uwe is determined to come to Savannah then he’ll eventually find
me. If he’s not already on his way.”

She stopped and smiled brightly before continuing. “But, if someone other than the Ghores have it…. if Gabby has it, or if Mirko has it, then the Ghores just might shred each other to pieces trying to find it. That is one thought that helps me rest, this idea of seeing the Ghores scramble, going crazy, never knowing what may have happened to that book.”

“But, didn’t you inspire them? You brought them back. You started the Ghores.”

“No, Clayton. Marinus and I started an idea, a philosophy....and it was ravaged and capitalized on....and ruined.”

“I don’t like the idea of going back there.”

Taylor was sitting off to the side saying nothing, but looking at Clayton the whole while with an empathetic look, fearing for Clayton’s safety should he venture back to Berlin.

“You are that link I need to get that book back to Berlin and in Mirko’s hands. You know where Mirko is! And I won’t have to exist in exile. You can get the book to Mirko, help destroy Uwe,” and she thought for a moment on how to pull on his male daring, so curiously strong in southern men, “and you could avenge your death.”

Oh, yes that interest did spark inside him. She continued, “You could help to put an end to their kind, do you understand me?”

That comment alone was enough to keep him interested. “You could help abolish the Phantom Ghores, Clayton. For what they did to you, you could help to annihilate every single one of them.”

“How did you get to the States?”

“Marinus had been doodling designs of a steamer trunk that locked from the inside. I handed the design to a man who built one crudely and quickly for me. Then I had myself shipped to the
address I had when I was alive some...goodness....60 years ago.”

Obviously Uwe had come across the designs, as well.

“What happens once I give them the book?”

“Does this mean you will do it?”

“I haven’t decided.”

“Take the book back to Mirko, wherever he is, and then return home. After that you are free from this whole mess once and for good. I promise you.....But, Clayton, once you do come back, I would be honored if you were to keep close contact with me. I don’t recommend being in this death state alone. Taylor would do what he could for you, but he doesn’t quite understand what this existence is like. He could be your senses, your confidant and your companion, but he wouldn’t ever quite now how this process works.”

She paused for a moment and took notice of her grandson who was more interested in what Clayton would do with the Lady Pearl’s request. “Taylor has always been intuitive, but after reading Marinus’s manuscript his ability has strengthened.”

“I transcribed it for her so there would be more than one copy,” said Taylor from a distance.

“Apparently his ability has turned from intuition to talent.....Now, imagine what may happen if someone as repulsive as Uwe got their hands on that knowledge.”

For some time they all sat watching the sun disappear totally from the sky, the golden hue of the marshes curdling into simple mud. The whole while the Lady Pearl gripped tight Clayton’s hand with fond gesture as they stared into the disseminating view that only these two could enjoy. In her mind was the conniving desire to find some aspect of this situation that would appeal to Clayton and convince him to return to Berlin with the manuscript. In his mind was the continual echo of questioning. If life had a purpose, then does life after death have a purpose? If
God and the Devil are all perfectly real, then to whom do you belong once you are dead? Does a soul last forever? And if it does, then when does forever begin? With so many questions burning to be answered, Clayton finally found one that required vocalizing.

“Why did you want Justine to go to Berlin?” Clayton finally asked.

She let go of his hand and turned to him confused, the slow ripple of the marshlands moving so slowly back and forth before them. “Who is this Justine? You’ve spoken of her more than once.”

“My fiancé. Justine. The girl you met in Savannah.”

“I never met anyone in Savannah.”

“That’s all anyone talks about! Because you met her they’re all in a hurry to go to Savannah to find you. It’s the reason they killed me, for God’s sake! To find you in Savannah!”

“I don’t know how to follow you, Clayton! I have no idea what you are talking about! I don’t know anyone named Justine! Why on Earth would I go to Savannah? I’m in hiding, for God’s sake! I’m not about to go running around announcing myself on the streets of Savannah! Especially to an outsider! You’d better explain to me what you’re talking about, Clayton!”

For the rest of the evening Clayton not only told the Lady Pearl about the rendezvous she allegedly had with Justine, but also how severe that meeting had meant to everyone involved. Because Justine had met the Lady Pearl in Savannah, all Ghores were pointing their sights squarely on Savannah and nowhere else. All dead members of the Ghore regime were readily searching for their Lady Pearl in that one particular southern city.

Furthermore, Clayton had his own definite grievances about the chance meeting between Justine and the Lady Pearl, he said. Because of their meeting Justine had followed the advice and influence of the Lady Pearl and had run off to Berlin, consequently meeting the Ghores, then being murdered, consequently causing
Clayton to follow the dead girl to Europe if only to bury her, then being murdered himself…. and all because Justine had insisted she and the Lady Pearl had sipped coffee at the Gallery Espresso.

The scenario angered the Lady Pearl and she was agitated that someone should foil her attempts at self-imposed exile. “How dare someone impersonate me! How dare they! And who is this person anyway? Well, I won’t stand for it, I tell you! I will go to Savannah, find out who the hell this is parading as me and slice them to bits, do you hear me? SLICE THEM TO BITS!!”

The trees, skies, cool breezes, and scenes of an untouched forest are precious things to the living. The senses touch upon the natural pull of harmony, of the human interaction with all things green. To the dead these things become a sad moment of pain and abhorrence, for the colors of blue that shade through the sky are now bled with the bitter tint of an oppressive muteness, something akin to brown. The rough touch of bark the living hand lends upon when stumbling through brush is now nothing but a vacant assistance to the dead. The dead stumble on their own with no one and nothing to comfort them. The green beaming of nature’s life, it’s reality, it’s truth becomes a dark tone of gritty sepia to the dead eyes. The leaves of every tree, the blade of every grass, the singular bug riveted to a twig all become a lifeless speckle of blotches not unlike a bleeding ink.

Taylor took notice of all this as the two took to the woods one afternoon. The hike proved a failure for Clayton, whose face was twisted into watching the beauty of what he once coveted now become a sickly reminder that life was gone….For all time possible.

As they stepped Clayton would stagger, unaware of the
brush beneath his feet; would reach for a limb to hopefully feel its long, thin roughness, only to let go with a gaze towards the dirt that soiled his shirt, a shirt that hid the wound of his truth.

_The Death Scar. Your invitation into a higher class...._

“This wasn’t what you thought it would be, is it?” Taylor asked.

“I can’t tell what color anything is. All I ever wanted in life was this....This. Just....THIS. To sit in the woods, watch the birds, listen to the wind....and they fucking took it from me, Taylor.”

“I’m sorry, Clay.”

Clayton moved to the ground slowly, his hands running through the soil, saying, “I can’t even feel it anymore. I can’t even feel dirt anymore.”

“Why did you want to come to the woods?”

“I wanted to get away from everything. Find some peace.”

“Do you think that its just colors and the feel of earth that give you that? You don’t think you can have that peace just by being here?”

Taylor went to a magnolia tree guarding nearby and pulled off one of its broad, slippery leaves.

“Clay, you can have peace whenever you want it. You don’t need your senses, man. You don’t. The Ghores may have taken away your sight, your touch....but what makes you one of them is when they take away your perception of life. That’s when they win, Clayton. When your perception of life becomes dead.” He handed the leaf to Clayton. “Take it as a promise....Life is still everywhere around you...and as long as you value it, life will abound around you. And when life abounds, so does love, man. As long as I’m alive, as long as these trees are rooted here, you’ll know you’re loved. Take it.”

Clayton took the leaf quietly from his friend, placing it in the palm of his hand, its brown shade dissipating for a moment.
slightly, so quickly, so briefly Clayton recalled the color of deep emerald green.

Clayton could look in Taylor’s eyes and see life. Taylor gazing back could see someone who desperately needed validation. Clayton hungered for it. He was emotional, but never spoke of his emotions. He was far too guarded to reveal how he could feel, for fear of being hurt once more.

The conversations the two held were the sort that relied upon the most natural sense of emotion a man or woman can muster, for they relied upon opinion and ideas, and the more Clayton pressed, the more of a brave sort of soul he found hiding beneath Taylor’s ball cap and ruffian white t-shirt. His character was warm and unyielding, un tarnished, would forever remain pure and good natured. People mattered, and pain mattered, but helping people in pain mattered even more to Taylor. You could sense it.

Clayton had discovered that love in his death state would be different, not built on the same principles conjured while alive. Without the senses to guide him, the touch and feel of someone was no longer credible. Passion would rest in emotions.

And when all is said and done, and all the events in this story are placed in some Phantom Ghore historical archive, let it be known, that it was Taylor, of all people, who finally convinced Clayton to return to Berlin.

To say how and why is unknown, surely. However, one would suggest that the plummeting dawn of Clayton’s desire to return to Berlin and hand over the manuscript came with one solid little speech from Taylor with no fuss and no fanfare. It was simply calm.

“It’s probably the first time in your life, so you probably don’t even recognize it....but you’re needed, man....in a bad way. They need you. Not someone like you, but you distinctly.... Clayton Strickland from Brunswick, Georgia...Don’t ever forget
that. God puts everybody on this beautiful earth for a reason….and yours is to be needed. By different people for different reasons. As long as the Ghores are looking for that book there will never be any peace.”

Without hesitating Clayton asked, “Will you go to Berlin with me?”

Secretly and quietly in the heart you can hear the affections of people who no longer rest their attractions to senses, but to the sudden emotions that come with the charge of connection. And to those emotions we find the indescribable desire to never sever our attachments. Here is where you find love between humans, not men, not women, not racial separatism, not cultural divides. You find people who are anxious to connect and move beyond the labels we ascribe to lovers, brothers, neighbors and strangers.

You find people connecting through the spirit.
Not the senses.

Within a day or two Clayton was prepared to leave for Berlin with Taylor in tow. The Lady Pearl at first objected, fearing the safety of her grandson, but soon she secretly began to feel that Taylor’s intuition may also help them should anything go wrong.

The Lady Pearl dropped off Clayton and Taylor at the airport, but did not return to St. Simons right away. She stayed in Savannah to do some hunting. This illusive impersonator that had been stealing her identity in radical fashion needed to be found and dissected.

She began on Bull Street at City Hall and simply walked south passing square after square, walking slowly, drawing no
attention to herself and behaving as a tourist. Her eyes scanned, darted here and peering there into any style she might find on the passersby that resembled anything remotely the chosen decade of the Ghores.

At Chippewa Square she stumbled upon The Gallery Espresso, a team of unruly ones all arrogant and boisterous, dangerously aloof and full of self-absorption, crowded around outside.

Although this pack of demons strutted pompously around the outside tables of the café, their clothing was different. Instead of the distinct 1930’s style so akin to our fellow dead, these prancing things sported the most horrid of clothing. Both male and female alike were stinted into skinny jeans and second hand clothing. Their hair was ratted and unkept, their skin looked unwashed. Despite their atrocious look it was still a look, a uniform, everyone of them piling in line to look quite like the other. *They must be Ghores*, thought the Lady Pearl, for even though the clothing had changed, the arrogance and need to be seen was distinctly still the same.

The Lady Pearl had her sites on one of the weaker ones; weaker because she wasn’t in the midst of the group, but at the edge of it looking in, desperate to belong.....Just like your run of the mill Acquisition. You simply could not miss her, for her glances begged for validation. This weaker one kept eyeing about to see if someone was spying her fashionable pout and sense of disdain.

The girl was dressed in mimicking detail to the rest of the young women around the Gallery Espresso: white baby-doll dress, black tights, dirty cowboy boots. Her hair was tasseled into an unkept disarray and died black; the red nail polish on her fingers was peeling, chipped, and broken.

Despite the atrociousness in which she was dress, there was something about this girl that irritated the Lady Pearl: the girl wore a strand of fake pearls tied into a knot near her bosom.
“Hello, dear, what is your name?”

The girls arrogance exuded too much for the Lady Pearl to find enchanting, nor endearing. If anything, it was disrespectful.

“Brianna. Why? Who are you?” Oh, that touch of sneer, that snorted nose spouting the most perverse of ill social behavior continued to enrage the Lady Pearl.

“No, what is your name?” There, you could hear it! That Phantom growl that is a slim note shy of frightening.

“What the fuck,” blurted the girl now confused and slightly afraid.

“Tell me, dear, do you know anyone named the Lady Pearl?”

“Sounds like the name of that drag queen at Club One. Do you need directions to it?” The girl folded her arms and stared down the Lady Pearl....as if the girl were (don’t say it, don’t....) superior.

“Drag queen? Are you insane? It does not sound like a drag queen’s name! It’s a regal name!”

“Well, I’ve never heard of her....it is a her, isn’t it?”

The Lady Pearl reached for the girl’s fake pearls and undid the knot at the bosom rather quickly, much to the dismay of Brianna.

“What are you doing? Oh, my god! You’re FUCKING CRAZY!”

The Lady Pearl then retied them at a lower point near the navel. “If you insist on wearing these awful fakes, then at least wear them correctly! They should be tied lower! Near your navel! If I were half the woman I used to be I wouldn’t even let you dig graves, much less let you walk the streets with fakes as bad as these!”

“You can’t talk to me like that! My father is a-”

“To hell with your Father!” The Lady Pearl was thinking in terms of Fathers of Houses, not Fathers of Imbeciles and Bitches.

“You can’t talk to me like that! I’m a SCAD student!”
To those of you not in the know, SCAD refers to the Savannah College of Art and Design.

“HA!” Shouted the Lady Pearl. “You couldn’t possibly be an artist, not with hair like that. Now out of my sight, you boring girl!”

There was no need for a hotel. Once Clayton and Taylor arrived in Berlin they immediately headed for Kreuzberg. Now, the memory of a dead man’s previous life can be rusty and skittish, however, his current memory, those things he remembers from after his death, those things are impeccably clean and crisp visions he can call upon often. A Phantom Ghore is not apt to forget a moment, a thing, or a name. They do not have the same degenerative process that leads to being feeble like you do. Consequently, Clayton was able to retrace his steps precisely to the spot where he had remained for a few days just after his Resurrection.

Within a short time they had arrived at their station of choice and emerged from the U-Bahn with hesitation. Or at least, Taylor did. “Jesus, this place doesn’t look safe.”

At first glance Kreuzberg is a dismal place. To be perfectly frank, in those days even further study of Kreuzberg would have left a very sour sort of tint on the eyes of anyone looking for precious aesthetics. Not to mention by now it was near about night, and the shrieking sound of a frowning little fear kept close to Taylor.

Alas, Clayton urged Taylor on with the conviction an expert in this area could utilize to his advantage. “It’s just up here and to the right. It’ll be fine. We’re almost done.”

Up and to the right they went, passing some shattered
windows, passing some frail creatures huddled in doorways, passing littered and torn cement streets that reeked of gray dismay.

To the old apartment building he made his bold stride resound, pulling open the front door and stepping inside. Some soft, barely lit bulb hung close enough for Clayton to see only the first landing.

“Taylor...I need your help. I can’t see anything. Could you go first?”

Taylor said under his breath while catching the banister, “Where am I going anyway?”

“Up to the third floor. You’ll have to reach back and get my hand, cause I can’t feel if I’ve got hold of you or not.”

Many of the former apartments they passed looked dismissed by current tenants. They were either bordered up, or broken-in dwellings for homeless, vagrant, criminal squatters waiting for the young and adventurous to pass them by.....murdering them, snagging what cash could be found on their person. Taylor spied a pair of eyes at one moment, but perhaps it was the broad size of Clayton that kept the onlooker far deep into the dark and at bay.

By the second landing, the humble glow of the dying bulb flickering below was of almost no use and even Taylor was having trouble seeing. A rat squeaked close by, perhaps on the banister, perhaps moving near his hand....He let go abruptly. Now he guided himself with one hand along a damp and sticky wall.

“What floor are we going to?”

“Third.”

Upon reaching the third floor Taylor could see at the end of the landing a door with a dull light spilling out from the threshold.

“Someone’s home.”

Closer they crept to the apartment door. Clayton would be brief, he thought, he would tell Mirko that the Lady Pearl was fine and sends her love. He would then hand over the manuscript all

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Ghores sought out, and he and Taylor would be on their way.

Standing silently for a moment, they heard no sound from within the apartment. No sound at all, save the rat squeaking again at the bottom of the landing.

A knock was made three times at the door.
There was no answer.
Again Clayton knocked.
No answer.
“Are you sure this is the right one?”
“Yeah. I wouldn’t forget.”

And Clayton knocked again.... this time, the door slowly opened of its own accord, the hinges so loose, so worn away with age, that it simply creaked open to reveal the room.

Silhouettes on the wall revealed candles flickering, or at least that’s what Taylor told Clayton.

Clayton slowly stepped within the apartment, Taylor tepidly following.

A far window beheld the eerie sight of Mele. As before, she was seated before an open window, wearing the sunglasses to hide her deformity, listening closely to the world outside, not knowing that an intruder was behind her. That is, until one perfect step on Clayton’s part lead to such a loud creak that Mele spun around, gasping and shrieking.

She screamed in German, “Who is this? Who are you? Name yourself!”

“It’s Clayton. Clayton Strickland.”

“Oh, my God! It’s you! The American! What are you doing here? Why have you come back?”

Taylor was breathing heavy, the fear and adrenaline in his quick breath making him noticed.

“You have someone with you. Someone living. I can hear their breathing.”
“It’s ok, it’s ok. He is a friend.”
“There are no friends.” She raised her chin as if defiant in her conviction.
“This is Taylor. The Lady Pearl sent him with me.”
“The Lady Pearl?”
“Yes. Do you know her?”
“Yes, of course, don’t be stupid! I know the Lady Pearl! I don’t believe she sent you or this one, your friend.”
“Can you tell me where I can find Mirko?”
“I don’t tell such things to people I do not know.”
“Please. I’ve come to give him something.”
“Where did you find the Lady Pearl?”
A most unusual question. Now, if he were to answer Savannah, would that simply confirm the rumor? Or, if he answered St. Simons, would that reveal not only the truth, but too much of the truth that no one should hear?
“In Georgia.” Yes, that answer was safe enough.
He could see she was not easily moved.
“What is it that you want to give Mirko?”
“I can only give it to Mirko or Gabby. Where are they?”
“No. You must go.”
A voice in English from the hallways caught their attention.
“Just a moment, please....”
Spinning round quickly, Clayton found a smaller framed woman dressed as a Ghore, slowly stepping towards them. Taylor noticed her bright red hair.
“I hope you have the answers,” she said, “to all the right questions. If you do, then we have no choice but to know you’ve been sent by the Lady Pearl. If you do not, then please do not be offended if I find it necessary to dissect you….whoever you are.”
“God dammit, you people murder me because you people need me, then decide you can’t trust me?”
“Oh, we can’t trust anyone! Not even each other! We have to keep secrets from each other, that’s how bad it is. Do you understand? This situation is so terrible now we’re afraid of either incriminating each other or giving up information to a spy. I gather you are the famous American that everyone was talking about. But, who is this with you?”

“I’m not here to answer questions.”

“Oh, is that so? Awfully cocky, Clayton. You’re outnumbered, you know? You’re in our territory now. This is a far cry from your America.” She stepped closer. “I imagine we both need questions answered. Before I can answer any of them, I need to know who he is.”

“This is Taylor. He was sent by the Lady Pearl.”

Not wanting to reveal the lineage, Taylor said, “I’m her assistant.”

“Oh, she needs an assistant these days? Doesn’t sound like her. A very independent woman, you know? So, where is she? Where is the Lady Pearl? And don’t look at me like you don’t know how to give the right answer. I assure you, I do know the right answer. So, if you answer wrong, it will be the last time you use your lips to speak with.”

“She’s in Georgia.”

“Where exactly?”

“I don’t know if I can say. I don’t want to give away her hiding place.”

“I didn’t think you could.”

“She’s not in Savannah, if that helps.”

“But, they said she was. Even the American girl, your fiancé I believe, confirmed the rumor. She is in Savannah.”

“I know for a fact that it’s not true. The woman Justine met was not the Lady Pearl. She was an impostor. The Lady Pearl is not in Savannah.”
The woman smiled at Clayton. “That is correct.”
She motioned for them to sit down. Lydia then told Mele in German that the boy was genuine and had seen the real Lady Pearl.
“I know you are telling the truth, Clayton. I also know that the woman Justine met in Savannah was not the Lady Pearl.”
“How?”
“Because the woman Justine met in Savannah was me. My name is Lydia.”
Now, why on earth would Lydia have traveled so far, so deeply risking her existence as a member of the dead to pretend to be The Lady Pearl? Why would she announce herself on the streets of that old Southern town as the great empress of the dead? To behave as a decoy, dear reader, to anyone at all who might be looking for the real Lady Pearl. And what better way to deceive all in search of her than To Parade through Savannah, find the first monstrous girl with such a mouth on her she could find, and fill her head with the prospects of her authenticity.
Oh, yes, it’s all quite clever.
Lydia, knowing very well that the House of Berlin would be quick on the trail of the Lady Pearl, made herself disappear. This is why Mirko, when argumentative with the House of Venice, could get no answer of Lydia’s whereabouts. They simply did not know where Lydia was. She left to run an errand and never came back. She told no one that she had boxed herself up in and old steamer trunk and had mailed herself abroad, just as the Lady Pearl had done. Once in Savannah, Lydia went on a search for any woman, or man, whose overt sense of arrogance was enough to work with.
Justine was quite the talker and Lydia was aware of how willing the American girl was to tell the Ghores in Berlin that she had met the eccentric woman named “Lady Pearl” in Savannah. This in turn would send the House of Berlin searching in the wrong place entirely. With any luck, no one would know of the real Lady Pearl’s
whereabouts ever.

Lydia had just reshipped herself back to Berlin and had momentarily just arrived; she had decided to stop at the Rogue rendezvous in Kreuzberg before returning to her House in Venice.

“It seems to have worked. They all think they have found her....They will send Justine back to Savannah....And will spend all time possible looking in the wrong place.”

Even Mele was stunned, sitting back down with hand over her mouth.

It is precisely as Lydia had said when she first entered the room. Even those who opposed the ruling coup of Uwe were unable to trust each other. This rebellion was so fresh and so fragile that the Rogues could not divulge the deepest of their plans to one another.

“Not even Mirko knows,” she said.

“Ja! He’s been so worried about you! He’s afraid you’ve been cut up! You should have said something!” Mele was quick to give a disapproval of the whole scenario and yet, Lydia could not have seemed concerned too much with the opinions of a woman she still did not feel terribly safe about. Mele was new, not only to the Phantom Rogues, but to the Phantom Ghores, as well. She had not left the House of her own accord, but had been asked to leave. In darker moments Lydia questioned that if the House of Berlin were to openly ask Mele back into their little clique, would she rush back in? Was Mele more apt to belong to those who belong, rather than to those who don’t? Did it matter to Mele, principles, morals, and such? Or were her allegiances to the better group, the more powerful? Lydia was not so sure...and told Mirko often to be careful of the blind woman.

Lydia asked, “Did you bring the manuscript? Do you have it?”

Clayton looked to Taylor, as if seeking his approval in
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answering truthfully.

“Well, either you do or you don’t,” said Lydia. “A lot of people have gone through hell to get that book. I just want to know if it’s even real.”

“Yes, its real. I have it.”

Lydia stood, eyes growing wide, mouth agape. “Its real. And you have it? Oh, my....”

“I have no interest in it. I don’t care about any of this. I just want to give it to Mirko or Gabby then go home.”

“Mirko is at the Gruftnacht,” Said Mele.

Lydia shouted, “Tonight? It can’t be tonight!”

“Yes! It is! Uwe is having Gruftnacht!”

Lydia’s eyes were all wide with the apprehensions of what might happen.

“Well, Mirko can’t have been invited!”

We now embark on the part of this tale that I have been desperate to tell you of: the events that transpired at Gruftnacht.

Of course, all Houses that were to attend behaved with serious apprehension days prior. Not only were their egos chillingly beset with the idea of Uwe trapping them, they were also equally wound up from the usual madness that does come with the most highly anticipated formal Ghore event: Gruftnacht.

As was customary the House of Paris did arrive all nicely attired in 1930’s fashions more cutting edge than anyone else there. Certain cuts and fabrics gave them the austere privileges of being seen by everyone in attendance. The hats worn by the female Phantoms as they stepped through the grand hall at the House in
Wannsee were high, were decorative, were works of immeasurable art. Keeping in true Ghore fashion, everyone and everything was complete in black and white. Strange derivatives into the neighborhood of gray were frowned upon and not seen by this shady clique. Feathers, if not found on any dead black bird, were died to match the garments, or bleached into pure white.

Furthermore, the French Ghores would not be outdone when it came to the art of haberdashery. The men took great prides in the hats they had contrived. Although the top hat is traditional for the men at Grufnacht, the House of Paris went through enormous lengths to make sure the men would be seen in equal artistic measure as their female counterparts. Some of the top hats were slender and high, and others were short and stout. Some were silk, others satin, and then there were one or two that were engraved, and yet another was done up in all sorts of grand, black filigreed patterns, another was paisley perhaps, and another even more flamboyant than that.

The House of Paris immediately wandered in to receive whatever praise they could claim from the other Houses. This is a sordid bit of scandal they fall prey to every year. You see, trying to be fashionable has its price. The French Ghores attempt to be “fashionably” late, the very last House to arrive at Grufnacht, so that everyone else will see them enter. Alas, all other Houses showing some shadiness of their own will arrive much later than what the House of Paris will, just to spite the French Ghores. Therefore, the House of Paris is always the first House at Grufnacht, claiming only snickers from the host home of the House of Berlin and all its dirty little boys and girls.

Now, the notorious House of Berlin never fashions themselves with the prettiness of being dead. Of course not. The House of Berlin is famous for its desire to find the secrecy, the kinkiness, the unclaimed sexuality within the Ghore chores of death and murder. Their 1930’s clothing resembles something either latex
or leather, but still very much in line with their adored decades. If the women of the House of Berlin decided to prim themselves in cottons or silks, they showed much more bosom than was necessary, completing their look with makeup that stank of some deep and seedy bar or brothel. “We belong to old Berlin,” they say, “the only real Berlin there is.”

The House of Paris entered to find the House of Berlin waiting and sneering, chuckling, and even some applauding at the brazen arrogance of how divine the French had attempted to dress. “If you weren’t dead before you put that dress on, you’d kill yourself to get out of it,” one hussy in the House of Berlin had said to her companion.

Eventually the House of London did arrive, and as is habitual nearly every year for the decades the event has been in full swing, The House of London is treated roughly the minute they enter. You see, The House of London will enter with doors thrown wide, with poses plentiful, entering with the twirl of the Ghore style and perception. The English Ghores enter regal and they enter strong, with hips swaying, attempting To Parade on occasion, dropping, stopping, kneeling to pose and be looked at. The other Houses will howl and snicker, give heckling remarks, all for the sake of trying to demean the darlings from England. But, deep down, they all know how masterful the English Ghores are at the snobbery of being elite, they all know that the arrogance and egotism, the perfection to mannerism is all studied harshly at the House of London. A few of the women enter quickly, turning poses to the left and right, flaunting the cheek bones, lighting cigarettes, and forming a line for the next round, the men. They enter dapper and suave, reeking of that finesse that is needed for any person in the upper-class to remain there and stay there long enough to garnish the stares of anyone who has a short attention. Yes, they worked that environment for all it could be had, and although they were not the
best dressed, and although they were not the most scandalous scoundrels at the formal affair, they were by far the most impressively mannered group of arrogant monsters to ever step the confines of that House.

This is the beauty of Grufinacht: each House has its own rewards, each House has its own depiction of the distinctness of being Ghore. London was manners and actions, methods of behavior; Berlin was scandal and sex, the treachery of murder, the deceitfulness of it, the darkness and gloom that attracts many; the House of Paris was the fashionable end of why they can be seen in the middle of the day, or in the middle of the night, and garner more glances than your most famous living prima donnas....and had Vienna not been shredded, they would have arrived the personification of the Ghore history, its regal and imperial lineage....and had the House of Venice attended with full numbers they would have represented the Ghore idea of art and culture, the music, the social life of the Ghores, bringing the House of Ghore to its totality, each House distinct, each House part of a grander scheme.....

Alas, that House deep in Italy was minimal in its performance as they entered the grand hall. They simply walked in, barely announced, dressed as well as they wished with no great spectacle, scarcely even noticed by the other Houses in attendance.

Despite everyone’s clothes, despite the House of London’s manners, and despite Berlin’s desire to be seen as the more adventurous of any of them, the best dressed and most looked at by far was Gabby dapper in a man’s tuxedo. Gabby’s dark tresses were pulled back, slicked to the rear and hidden beneath a top hat. Her make-up was severe and smoky, accentuating rather than hiding the shades in her dead complexion.

Upon her entry she lit a cigarette and commenced to mingle with the rest of the Ghores, now no longer swarming in their own
House packs, but intercepting one another with egotistical jabs, derogatory comments, and flighty bits of unyielding bad taste. “Oh, my, you look so.....oh, so......so.....Well, you look and I guess that’s what’s important.”

“Dear, where did you get that blouse? Off the Acquisition you murdered? It looks like its been through hell!”

“I know they did! I just know they had irons back in the 1930’s, didn’t they?”

“Where have you been? Oh, its been forever! Did it really take you all that time to put on your make up? Well, you should give yourself another round upstairs, you look a fright!”

“You’re a little fat to be pulling so much attitude, don’t you think?”

You see, if they did not behave badly towards another, they would not be perfect Phantom Ghores. You must never forget their entire enterprise is based on treating everyone else as though they were beneath them. In the presence of one another this sort of attempt at bad manners and tasteless banter is seen as practice, and no hard feelings are ever felt. One Ghore does not pout when another approaches with a snide comment. It is regarded as flattery in there circles, as a challenge to respond with something even more snide. And all answers, no matter how pretentious, are kept close with pride, catalogued for when they can use them on the living.

Drunken Edgar did his best to keep in step with the mood. Edgar has never known the true secret behind the Ghore clique, and even if he did he would be unable to comprehend it, knowing how much alcohol he consumes. He plays the dreadful piano every year on Gruftnacht, sweating, smiling wide, drunk beyond comprehension, all Ghores waiting for the moment when the notes finally make the anticipated, “DUNK!” of Edgar passing out, head on the ivories.

Gabby stepped about the grand hall, watching this Ghore
and that, remembering old days, waiting for new days, her eyes as bad as they were, peering around the room. She could see the slight sense of dread and fear in the House of Venice, what few there were at Gruftnacht.

The banter we just discussed never happened with Gabby. Truth be told, the other Houses found her unapproachable due to her status. The oldest Ghore left after Uwe’s coup and all who thought twice about it wondered where did her allegiances lie? With the old guard? Or with Uwe? Forever at his side, she seemed afraid to be there....seemed bothered by it.

Then he entered, stealing whatever show any of the Ghores seemed to exploit. Yes, the self appointed Father of Fathers descended from the grand staircase with first a clearing of the throat, then a slow pace downward that accentuated his stately build, the thin frame, the classic profile, the hair brilcremed wet with a plastic shine, and a dim, heavy-eyed expression of arrogance taking notice of everyone around him. Step after step the applause grew louder, from the House of Berlin who cheered him on, then the House of Paris who did not want to feel out of the clique, then the House of London who had no choice.... to not applaud would have been repulsory, would have been ill mannered. After all, the House of London was there to express the manners of the Phantom Ghores.

Uwe’s crooked sneer, sometimes called a smile, flashed when it desired to his fledglings below, to his inferiors down there. Those in the House of Berlin patted their chest and rolled their fawning eyes with delight at seeing the Father of their House, the Father of all Houses showing his own elegance in entry, his steadiness, his one hand in pocket, his other twirling a cigarette between the index finger and thumb.

Cameras gleamed, clicked and spilled unnatural flashes at the star of the Gruftnacht, as he slightly posed and reveled in his own glory.
Thank you, he mouthed his lips in English, danke, merci...then looked to the Italian Ghores.....batted his eyes and mouthed the words, whatever.

He then began to stroll through the grand ball talking with all the Ghores that would approach him, everyone vying for the attention of the Father of Fathers, all wanting to be on his best terms. You see? The war that had been rumored was never going to show itself! All it took was a slight bit of true Ghore persuasion to keep all other Houses from boycotting and overthrowing him. Ghores are not a complex group of people. They must be adored, they must have their egos stroked constantly, and they must always, always belong to the group. And, oh yes, that banter we discussed before? You do not dare approach the Father of Fathers with such pretentiousness. As far as they are concerned the utmost in Ghores does not need to practice.

One may wonder why Uwe did not stop to speak, why the crowd below was not addressed as would be typical for a tyrant to do. It would be too typical. It is not customary for the Father of Fathers to give a speech at Gruftnacht, or at least, not at the start of the evening. There is far too much that must be done in the early hours of the grand ball. They will move To Parade, banter, take stations before mirrors and continually primp and preen themselves, they will wager challenges, discuss their best (and worst) Acquisitions, will converse in trade secrets (what methods of seduction work and which ones do not), they will laugh, shout, holler, and snicker. There is no time for a speech from the Father of Fathers this early in the night.

Now, as Gabby was left dismally alone she had time to study everyone, had time to look clearly at the House of Venice and their dwindled members. The House of Venice kept an impressive distance, to say the least. They did not mingle as much, although there were some who did. A member of the French group would
approach with sneer and the House of Venice member would smile, say something too polite as if to dismiss the French Ghore, and send them on their way.

Gabby found all this somber and subdued behavior rather interesting and kept a watchful eye on them. Furthermore, she kept a close glance on Uwe and all other members of the House of Berlin for that matter. She did not trust the idea that Uwe would summon all Houses under one room for the symbolism. No, she feared the worst, feared a mass annihilation of all the other remaining Houses with one fail swoop.

And yet, it was not until she moved further into the parlor near the fireplace that her hopes began to surface. You see, there near the ambient fire were a row of four very large windows, stretching from ceiling to floor and as wide as three door frames. There, deep into the night, and with her very dead receptive eyes, she could see the gritty and sepia hued form of a man or two hiding in the bushes. She was certain no one else could see them, for the need to be seen was running quite rampant in the grand hall. No Ghore at Gruftnacht paid any attention at all to anything other than themselves.

Gabby was certain it was Mirko, but what was he planning there in the trees, beneath the eves of the old House, quiet in the dark? And who was it with him? Must have been Jason, surely.... But, were they only watching? Or were they waiting for something?

For quite some time Gabby stood there, perhaps for more than three quarters of the evening, waiting and wondering. She did what she could to keep her eye on the silhouettes outside.

Once or twice a Ghore would come up and whisper some sort of adoring comment. “Oh, Gabby, I think you are marvelous. I hope to be the Ghore you are one day!”

“How you, really?”

“Why, yes, yes I do!”
“Then start by redoing your make-up. It looks like some mortician caked it on. Move along....”

“Oh, what banter! You’re marvelous, Gabby, simply elegant!”

She just simply could not be bothered. She was intrigued, too intrigued to be annoyed by some scoundrel!

*Oh, what are they doing out there?*

“Madam et Monsieur! May I have your attention, please!” Freddy rushed to the center of the grand hall and bowed rather fast, retracting just as quickly to an upright position. “Would all Ghores, domestic and foreign, surround the bottom of the staircase.”

All Ghores did as were asked and took to the bottom of the staircase. This was most definitely the moment of the speech and all Ghore eyes rose to see Uwe standing at the top landing.

Freddy gave his introduction. “Ladies and Gentlemen, I give to you Uwe Krieg-Ghore, the Father of the House of Berlin, and the Father of Fathers over all Phantom Ghores!”

The applause came as a roar, as a multitude of dead hands fervidly pounded in clapping. The House of Berlin clapped very loud and The House of Paris, not to be outdone, clapped even louder. And, we all know how the English feel about the French, so the House of London clapped even louder than that! Only the House of Venice kept stoic faces, applauding to the equivalent of a bad carnival act.

Once the cheers finally subsided, Uwe gave his speech.

“It has been quite a year, has it not?” There were some “*Ja Ja Ja’s*” from down below. “Yet, in that time we have held together tightly like the family that we are. We have not wavered from the blessed ideas of our great Marinus, the very first and most adored Father of Fathers.” With his name came an overwhelming orchestra of howls and clapping. His is a most respected name among the Phantom Ghores, never would that cease, despite whatever coup,
despite whom may be in power. “We owe our timeless existence to him… and yet, with his passing, we have discovered that we are no longer timeless. We are as perishable as the living, which is a thought that bothers me greatly. It has always been the foundation of our pride to know that we are better than the living, that we are superior to them on all accounts. So, simply knowing that we have a limited existence has kept me pacing for days on end. There will come a time when each of us in this room crumbles into ash. None of us knows when that day will be. It could be years or it could be centuries. None of us knows, for none of us knows how old Marinus even was, or even how long he had been Resurrected before he disintegrated. And that is why it is vitally important for us to find the manuscript he wrote, that is why we must find those pages, absorb the words, and study those passages until we know for certain how long each of us has on this earth. Within those pages, we are also told that there are detailed instructions on how to utilize our dead states to even greater power. That is why there should be no war. For each House must strive together to find the Lady Pearl and to find the manuscript! And that that search begins TONIGHT!”

More exclamatory applause as Miss Justine Sizemore-Ghore, complete with an entourage, entered the grand ball room. Three men pushed an enormous steamer trunk behind her. Miss Justine took center stage before the party revelers and curtsied to them with winning smile as antique camera’s rushed to her; flashing giant bulbs blinding all dead eyes.

Uwe said from above, “Miss Justine Sizemore-Ghore will be leaving for Savannah, Georgia in but a few moments, concealed within the confines of that very steamer trunk, setting out to find the Lady Pearl. Our hopes rest with her. Everyone, please applaud our newest and most important Acquisition!”

Everyone was eager to applaud the new Acquisitioned
American, some smiling at her, some perplexed at her impending destination. Savannah? Savannah, where? Why on earth there?

Uwe continued, “Let us not forget that finding that manuscript is of the utmost importance to all Ghores, and that only together, as one family, will we be able to accomplish that task!”

If only you might have seen Miss Justine! She looked like some Hollywood starlet! The dear was all dolled up, smiling left and right, waving to the crowd that surrounded her, posing quickly for pictures with the steamer trunk, even tossing her hair somewhat. But, that smile of hers! That deplorable smile mixed with her constant chatting! “Thank you all! Thank you, I can’t wait to be back in Savannah! But I can’t wait to come home to Berlin! I promise not to let you down, my Family! I promise, I promise!”

Then, from a distance came the surprising scream, “NOW!”

Suddenly Mirko and Jason came crashing through those parlor windows accompanied by 9 Italian Ghores, each of them armed with sharp bladed weaponry. The sounds of screams were mixed with the sound of shattering glass as the assassins rushed into Gruftnacht.

The moment Mirko, Jason, and the other 9 forced their way in through the parlor windows, the limited members of the House of Venice already in attendance pulled from their tuxedos various knives, daggers, and shanks. Mirko picked up Gabby and tossed her out the broken window and into the bushes, telling her to leave quickly before she was dissected. Stunned and surprised at the quick speed in which these Rogues made their deadly way into the grand ball, Gabby simply sat there crouched in the bushes and watched this horrific scene take place.

The Ghores were surrounded on all sides by the quick slices and dissecting swipes of the Rogues. The House of Venice was more brutal than anyone might have imagined. They were savage in their shredding, taking no mercy on anyone, slicing up, beheading,
amputating whatever Ghore was in their midst. Within just a few short minutes, much of the House of Paris was already wounded beyond repair. Legs, cut from the body moved violently on the floor all their own, arms sliced from the torso grasped for the feet of the assassins nearby, heads severed screamed and pleaded, “Stop! For God’s sake! STOP!”

Gabby’s mouth dropped and her eyes went so wide they seemed cut alive, as she screamed when seeing her family of Ghores being cut into bits and pieces.

Mirko’s eyes darted about the grand ball room searching for Uwe, who had fled long since, leaving his subjects below to suffer under the tyrannical misfortune of this terrorism. And then, his eyes beset upon him a most disturbing view: the members of the House of Berlin had weapons of their own! The House of Berlin would have shred the entire *Grufinacht* anyway! Yes, all those assumptions to bring all opposing Houses under one roof for a mass dissection were correct! And if the Rogues had not entered with their wild knives flailing, within time the House of Berlin would have begun its own shredding event!

This is when the lunacy of the evening took some prestige, for there were the Rogues alongside the House of Venice against the House of Berlin in an uncultivated fight of daggers and swords.

As screams filled the air, the eerie sound of Ghores being cut up and minced was interrupted by the sudden sound of a chains being revved. All eyes, on both sides of the fighting, took to the direction from the gruesome noise of a murdering motor stuttering in anticipation. It was Lydia at the front door, staring at them all, watching the House of Berlin begin to grow afraid, watching Mirko’s maniacal grin as salvation arrived. *And she charged*, with no apprehension, moving quickly into the center of the conflict, twirling about, slicing everything with insane effect in her path. Oh, to watch her move was beautiful, her spinning, twirling, tilting,
shifts as one by one the House of Berlin went down, cut in half, their intestines and insides spilling to the floor, their bodies twitching, their mouths spilling forth profane attempts at a curse!

Lydia’s movements were nothing short of graceful engagements that made her look as though she were out To Parade, the same left foot before the right, the hip shifted to hold the body’s weight, the chain saw held high up in the air, then brought down again as she spun on the sole of her high heel.

Back at the flat in Kreuzberg she had been debriefed by Mele on all of Mirko’s intentions at Gruftnacht, had been told about the House of Venice being brought into the assassination attempt, had been told that at just the right moment Mirko and his band of Rogues would penetrate the Gruftnacht, violently slashing away at whatever Ghore was in their path.

While Lydia was inside twirling about the ballroom with the chain saw, Clayton and Taylor were just outside the front door on the front steps watching the madness proceed. Taylor stood terrified, petrified, his living eyes unable to calibrate the sight of slaughter.

Clayton however, was feeling that anger fueling his desire to join the assassination attempt. Yes, that need to avenge his own death was causing the fist to tighten. There was Mirko, grit teeth, claws clenched about a sword swooshing the air before it hit its intended Ghore, slicing them open, leaving them imperfect, crippled. The sight of Mirko’s determination and bravery, his willingness to dice and destroy for the sake of a certain freedom compelled Clayton to take action. And Lydia, so beautiful in her strength, in her own constant striving towards the redemption and justice that was necessary for order to be brought back to the House, her hands bound about the chain saw as it went left then right, shredding some Ghores, and sending other’s fleeing, also caused Clayton to feel compelled to fight alongside them.
Countless other Ghores from Venice made their way into the fighting, some having fallen, others holding on to their own personal sacrifices. They fought for the sake of Marinus, for the sake of his memory. Clayton could feel that, could feel for the first time in a long while the inspiring desire to stand and fight, fight to the end for something you held true and dear. Oh, and in this mad society of imperfect priorities, perfection was all that people would stand for! Perfection! Something as twisted and as subjective as perfect! And tonight? Tonight the perfect were being slaughtered one by one by the very tribe they had cast aside as imperfect! Justice was being done; justice was being delivered in murderous slashing vulgarity!

Clayton summoned the will to move directly into the fighting. Taylor screamed after him, but Clayton swiftly picked up this Ghor or that and threw them against a wall, cold cocking with bare fists others, fighting like a man who is still alive. Then he realized that the rules had changed, death was different, that mighty brawn of his would never work on those who cannot feel pain. He rushed up behind a Berliner, clutched both sides of his head, and twisted the neck, rotating the head around until the German Ghor was staring him directly in the face.

“You fucking American!” The German Ghor shrieked as he dropped his long sword to Clayton’s feet.

Clayton picked it up immediately, the Ghor trying to walk one way while looking the other, the head wobbling unnaturally about, the most disturbing grimace adorning his expressions as confusion kept him from walking a straight line forward….or backward?

Clayton immediately went swooping about the grand ballroom, the mighty sword lifted high then falling down again as one by one he took vengeance on those that had robbed him of everything from life and grieving. Oh, such mighty courage finally exposed itself in the infantry-like maneuvering he made throughout
that room. Foreign Ghores feared him, this unknown American, this dirty looking imperfection that showed no mercy as he slashed and gashed Ghores to his left and to his right.

As he made his way through the room his eyes suddenly befell something he had hoped would never occur. There stood Justine frozen with fear against her steamer trunk. Her hands held tight the mink stole about her neck and her eyes darted about at the insane shredding around her. Then she caught a glimpse of Clayton as he stood motionless, eyes penetrating her....and even in that gritty quality that is so familiar with the dead, she looked beautiful. It was as if all madness about them stood suddenly still and there was no one else. Only he looking at she feeling a myriad of emotions...and she looking at he, feeling what?

“Wait a minute,” she said. “You’re the rude one! The rude one from my Birth Party! I know you!” And disappointment and frustration fell across her face. “I know you....You’re....oh, my God! CLAYTON STRICKLAND?? No, no, no! I won’t have it! I don’t want you here! GET OUT! I don’t want to look at you! I HATE you!”

He said nothing, the brow falling, the eyes sharpening. Anger, yes darling, anger will come to fuel your need to seek vengeance! And if music could have been played to accompany that miraculous boy’s expressions, it would have been the frightening shrill of a cello’s ascending screeching! That Period of Remembrance beckoning once more to pull from whatever frightful place in emotion it could all the tired memories of how she treated him badly, how she had played him, had tortured him with infidelity and hatefulness! And not only that, but how blind he had been to it all! Seeing her made him feel like a fool exposed before the laughter of everyone!

“Clayton Strickland! You sonofabitch! How dare you show up here! How dare you ruin my night...AGAIN! I hate you,
Clayton! I hate you!”

Yes, memory was charging itself. That Period of Remembrance was exposing itself. She suddenly remembered Clayton….and suddenly remembered how she had used him, how she had despised him, how he had so disappointed her with his white trash nothingness and nameless heritage. “I hate you, white trash! I hate you, you rotten pauper! You’re a…no, please, no!”

He was lunging towards her, sword lifted high, ready to cut the woman in half, ready to spend the rest of the evening dicing her! Yes, his own memory was charging itself. All of that unrequited nonsense was tossed aside, allowing that need for vengeance to take hold.

Now this moment, this moment here shall require an awful lot of your attention, for the sudden movement on everyone’s part in this debacle was so sudden nothing could have been done to save anyone. However, I shall attempt to slow it down for the sake of description.

A Ghore far to the left saw Clayton headed for Justine. Unwilling to let the awful American dissect their chance of retrieving the book from Savannah, he rushed to intervene. Now, back at the front door, Taylor saw the Ghore approaching Clayton, as well. And yet, Clayton was unaware that someone was charging towards him with a machete anchored at just the right degree to cause a beheading. In one instant, Taylor rushed for the Ghore, as the Ghore rushed for Clayton, as Clayton rushed for Justine. This triad of intent suddenly came to a screeching halt with the sound of a most unusual scream.

It was not the like the scream of a Ghore, but was more the tune of unbearable physical pain, a scream that only one of the living could make. Everyone in the room stood curiously to see from where this living shriek could have occurred. There on the floor, at Clayton’s feet, was Taylor having taken the swing of the Ghore’s
blade across his chest, his blood spilling about quickly from his body, his face turning white.

“NO!” Clayton screamed. “Nooooooooo!!!!!!!”

Clayton dropped to Taylor’s side as his eyes met that sight that all of them would one day recall, the moment the eyes are brightened with the merriment of angels. “Please, no, please, Taylor, no!” Taylor clutched Clayton’s hand, feeling the coldness of it, unable to speak, unable to breathe, unable to now see.

With the sputtering gurgle of blood flooding past his tongue, Taylor said simply, “What happened...I must have hit my head.” He was now chocking on his own death as he looked wildly at Clayton, shock succumbing Taylor into a blank-eyed loss of thought and memory.

Taylor was then dead. There was no final word of emotional wisdom, no spoken truth to reveal kindness or affection in the world. Taylor was dead.

While Clayton sat crouched with Taylor on the floor of the grand hall, the Ghore that had intended to behead Clayton shoved Justine inside the trunk, motioned for another Ghore to assist him, and the trunk with Justine inside was gone, taken to the Phantom Rolls Royce, where they then sped away quickly.

Gabby appeared from back through the broken window to assist the young American and his dead companion as the fighting around them started again. She rushed to Clayton’s side screaming, “Pick him up! Pick him up! Take him outside. Go!” Clayton did so as the fighting reached such intense peaks.

Within seconds they were outside, rushing down the great steps and across the lawn.

“Take him into the park across the street, Clayton! Into the park!” Clayton was unable to think, unable to rationalize anything at all, and if Gabby had not come to assist him he would still have been sitting in the grand ballroom when the next morbid movement
in this story occurred.

Jason noticed a liquid softly pouring its way across the floor into the grand ballroom, seeping from behind the threshold of all doors bordering the grand ball room...and Freddy on the landing of that staircase holding a lit match.

“Gasoline....It’s FUCKING GASOLINE!” Jason grabbed Lydia quickly, “Get out now!” He shouted while reaching for Mirko, “GO, GO, GO! Get out now!” Jason, Mirko and Lydia motioned to the Italian Ghores that still remained to leave quickly and out the broken parlor window they quickly fled.

Freddy then lit a cigarette, then dropped the discarded lit match down below, causing such a flame to erupt, such a flash of fire through the ballroom that no one had a second chance to flee.

Clayton placed Taylor’s body on the ground as he looked behind to see the House suddenly ignite into a raging inferno. And Gabby, hand over mouth screamed at the sight of Ghores running from the House with hats on fire, their skin melting, their screaming surviving the blaze as their bodies incinerated quickly.

The Ghores dropped one by one as they fled from the House on fire, dropping just outside, arms and legs flailing, burning up quickly with no hope for survival. The dead are like kindling for a fire. The is no living water, no wetness to the skin, nothing that is remotely alive, so the dead tissue catches fire quickly, so quickly the Ghores that were burned up barely even knew of the misfortune. Souls were set into limbo that night, souls with no body to call a home, moving through the air, unable to ever express or feel emotion again, unable to return to heaven, unable to mingle with this plane. Vagrant souls that would linger until the end of time.

Jason, Mirko, and Lydia all managed to escape the blaze, spotting Gabby as they ran from the fire, shouting to her, “Meet us back in Kreuzberg!”

Yet, could she have even heard them? Her sight was
transfixed with the burning House and all its Ghores being sent to ash with it. “I can’t stand this insanity,” she said under her breathe. “I can’t stand it anymore...”

Clayton fell atop Taylor’s body, holding onto it with the passion of a man who has lost a loved one.

Death had taken far too much from Clayton Strickland, far too much indeed. As arrogant conqueror, death now smiled at Clayton again. This death, this unexpected company that had come to be by Clayton’s side for all his days to come had proven to be a most ungallant opponent, robbing from this humble boy all things in the world he cared for, or desired.

To fight death was unfair, he had seen. For if those who die should remain dead, then those left behind arrive at a place so morbid and sound with darkness that the weeping they bring only reminds one of how unreasonable death is. And those unfortunate ones brought forth from the grave? Like the Ghores? They remember day to day and year to year as they watch their dead cells slowly shed away, how unfair it is to be so near perfect, so without disease and need to rest, and yet, so tainted by the inability to breathe, see properly, or even to feel. Yes, how terribly unfair any battle against death can be. No one opposing fate will ever win.

Clayton was left alone with death again, left to look at death squarely and directly and remember for all time possible that death, with all its smell and sorrow, was to be his only companion.

This was where the desire to shut down tight the emotions set in. He wasn’t ready for this, wasn’t ready at all. There had been too much in the past few days, in the past few weeks to keep him perfectly sane and he was ready to shut it all down, close tight the desire to feel anything for anyone. And “if only” breached the security of comfort....

Yes, this was death again, cheating him on all accounts. Cheating him for all time possible. Catch phrases like that slipped
about in his subconscious as he tightened his fist and simply screamed to let out the hurt.

Screaming was all that he could do, screaming so hard the trees shook, screaming so loud and so violently that his dead heart might have reacted once more, if for just one more beat of blood into his lifeless body, if for just one single teardrop! Alas, nothing...

His strong arms were wrapped around Taylor’s small frame, holding his wound close to his chest, his somber sound breaking the air with unnatural cadence, like a rhythm...like a chant, or even a song. That southern tone of his, that lilting airy drawl turned into an attempt to cry, as he let out the pain. With its highs and lows, and dirge like anthem, his moaning, sobbing, attempt at crying sounded too much like a song....Yes, it sounded too much like a song.

Gabby took notice, terrified at what that sound could do. “Clayton, be careful. Clayton, don’t grieve too long for him…”

He was not listening, or appeared as though he wasn’t listening, and kept Taylor’s body closer still to his own, sobbing into his ear, the blood from Taylor’s corpse caking onto Clayton’s dead skin, clinging to it.

“Clayton, I beg of you, be careful! You don’t know what you’re doing!”

That wailing, that painful lamenting began shifting into deeper rhythms, into the deeper archives of Clayton’s emotions: the mother that had neglected him, nearly abandoning him because he was a bastard, society shunning him for being poor, Justine using him for her own social scandal, and now Taylor, the one with whom Clayton had built a loving attachment, now taken from him by the manipulations of some greater scheme. Pain was coming out in song, in a screaming, rhythmic song.

Taylor’s body twitched, shifted into convulsion suddenly, as Clayton held tighter still the writhing body before him. “Clayton, NO!” Shouted Gabby! “Don’t do it, Clayton!”
“It’s not fair,” he said with the eyes of a madman. “It’s not fair! I have to save him!”

“You’re not saving him! You’re hurting him! Look at the pain of being dead to ALL OF US! Do you want him to experience that?!”

“I have to be with him,” he said sobbing as Taylor’s body began to expel living liquids.

Alas, Gabby’s attempts at thwarting the Resurrection were futile. Taylor was returning now with a shriek synonymous with angels pleading! His eyes were leaned aside as blood spilled from them, saliva and vomit shot from out of his mouth; fecal matter, urine and sweat all splashing from the body as the soul forced a return to this plane, away from eternal salvation and into constant condemnation.

Clayton crawled away from the body, watching with mesmerizing severity his first witness to a Resurrection, watching the unnatural wonder of it, the insane jerking movement of the body as it accepts the soul back into physical form. Taylor’s coughing, spitting, muttering were all kept into a feverous pitch until suddenly it all stopped. It was all done. He had returned from heaven against the will of God and all His angels.

Gabby was screaming at Clayton. “How dare you! HOW COULD YOU! You’re not any different from them!”

“I know what I’m doing. I’m not going to let them win. I’m not going to let them WIN! I’ll do whatever it takes! I’ll sacrifice whatever!” Oh, that grit anger in his teeth was so tight it could have broken the jaw of any living man attempting to replicate it.

“It’s over, Clayton! They’ve won! Do you know who was at the Grufinacht tonight? NOBODY! All of the real members of the House of Berlin are at the Linientreu right now! They have been all night! Every Berlin Ghore at that party tonight had been Acquisition in the last 3 weeks! They were NOBODY! They had
been killed and Resurrected just for tonight! So they could be
sacrificed! Mirko did nothing to damage the House of Berlin
tonight! He just helped Uwe eliminate Paris, London, and France,
that’s all!"

Clayton grabbed Gabby by the shoulders forcing her
attention. “YOU CAN STILL WIN!”

He lifted his t-shirt, soiled from the expulsion of Taylor’s
body fluids and exposed a tight scar across the abdomen. “I have it,”
he said.

“Have what?” Uninterested her eyes went back to the fire,
and by now all Ghores within the vicinity of that blaze had long
since been incinerated.

“I have the book.”

Gabby’s famous eyes, so clear and clean and broad as
though she were still alive went wide.

“The Lady Pearl sent us here to give it to you. He’s her
grandson,” pointing at Taylor. “You can still win.”

“Her grandson....” There was an ethereal whisper to her
voice as she looked again back at the fire, then back at Clayton with
hope and assuredness.

With his fingers he began to pull away at the stitches, the
gash in his gut opening with a dry smile. He then reached into his
own torso and removed the small handcrafted manuscript the
Ghores had been fighting and dissecting for. He then handed it to
Gabby, who could only stare at it with sorrow and joy overlapping
into manifold movements of heart felt melancholy.

“After so long,” she said holding the book in her hands,
“after so many gone...” The book looked journalistic, wrapped in
leather, and tied with a strap. She unwrapped the straps and opened
the book to its first page and there was the remarkable penmanship
that was uniquely Marinus: fluid, elegant, classic penmanship that
swirled and curved gracefully on the page. It said simply, “The
Exegesis of Our Being and its Possible Outcome, by Marinus Halasz-Ghore.”

“I wish I could cry,” she said. “I truly wish I could cry.”
The book was closed and retied swiftly, then held close to her bosom. “I will give it to Mirko promptly. Thank you, Clayton, thank you so much! You have no idea what this means to us!”
Her eyes instantly went to Taylor’s newly Resurrected body fighting to remain dead, as his soul whipped through every cell that once carried life.

“Listen to me carefully,” Gabby commanded. “There is a public restroom on the other side of the park. Take his body there and wash it. Wait a few hours, he should be able to walk again, talk again. You should be able to travel back to America as soon as possible. He will not know what happened to him, he will not know what to think and he will question everything. He will know that he is dead, but he will not know why, nor how it can be that he is still functioning. But, wrap his wound with something, dress him, then get back on your plane and go home...GO HOME....And don’t ever come back!” She threw her arms around Clayton. “Thank you again! I know you can’t feel this! I can’t either! But, I need to hug you! You have done the impossible! Now, please! Please, leave Berlin for good! I beg of you!”
Gabby pulled away from Clayton quickly and darted for the Subway station. “I shall not forget you, Clayton! None of us will!” Within minutes, she would be gone, speeding towards Wittenbergplatz on the U-Bahn.
Clayton sat with Taylor for a few moments before picking him up and taking him to the restroom Gabby had directed him to. Clayton turned on the crude faucet, laying Taylor’s body carefully against the tile floor. A number of wadded paper towels were wet as Clayton sat on the floor, laying Taylor’s body across his lap as he slowly washed away the mess of Taylor’s once beautiful life.
Tenderly he washed away the filth from Taylor’s cheeks, his forehead, his neck, then his lips as Taylor attempted to speak. But Clayton kissed them softly instead, whispering, “I know....I know.”

Clayton began formulating quick plans in his head, ideas on how to explain to the Lady Pearl what had happened, how the three of them could live as exiles on St. Simons and be left alone from the world.

At just the moment Clayton began to consider an existence of exile in the woods his eyes went blind, as the rough coarseness of German voice screamed around him. He senses his body being pulled, though he could not feel it, as he began to scream, “WHO ARE YOU! WHAT ARE YOU DOING???”

“SHUT UP YOUR FUCKING ENGLISH!!!!” Came the hoarse, smokey voice. There was then a command in German and suddenly Clayton could no longer speak, the words coming from his lips nothing but a muffled muteness barely the hint of a whisper. He could hear the continual whimper of the newly Resurrected Taylor growing distant, as German laughter and the sound of night grew prominence, grew louder and wild....then all sound suddenly ceasing into total silence.

Gabby did not head for Kreuzberg. Instead, she went directly to the Linientreu where the House of Berlin’s senior members were all in a wild parade of celebration and excitement. News had already spread of the assassination attempt, of the gruesome slashing that had occurred, of the enormous House Fire. These diminutive Phantom Rogues had felt they had scoured out the blistering moment in their history of coups and betrayal.
“Amateurs....,” you could hear the House of Berlin laugh. Howling and toasting sounded as the undulating music, the rhythmic, pulsating music of the discotheque applauded their ingenuity and their existence.

Gabby wandered in, the young ones watching her strut with sincere pomposity across the dance floor, through their Parade, her tuxedo, her style, her saunter so inspiring that all stopped in quick pose to frame her steps. The scene seemed as a mirage of mannequins caught in adoration of Gabby as the lights in the disco coyly caught her cheekbones, her heavy lids, her one hand on the hip, her other hand holding the manuscript, slowly creeping through the crowds, the tails of the tuxedo swaying side to side, the sound of her heels clicking on the dance floor as an applause to her own private glory. And where, oh where did our darling have her sights set on? On Uwe sitting at a very long chaise lounge, smiling at her, smiling at the remarkable way this one woman says nothing ever, rarely socializes with the other Ghores ever, and in one breaking slice of time can manage to grab each of their attentive needs to adore something.

When she finally reached Uwe, his grin was so wide that those wild eyes of his, dark and devilish, were completely hidden.

“When did you get here?” She asked him.

“Just a few moments ago. I wanted to stay long enough to witness the...,” he laughs a little, “tragedy. What is that your book your holding?”

She handed it to him and he grabbed it without hesitation, but before she let go she leaned forward with a tonality that can only be summoned by the most admirable of monarchs and said, “Don’t you ever question me again. Don’t ever question my motives, my intentions, or the way I decide to carry out my plans. I thought I had taught you everything. But, you came across as paranoid and ill planned. You acted ill suited for the role of Father
of Fathers. You failed your final exam, Uwe. You still have far too much to learn from me. You didn’t come across as a true leader. More mistakes like the ones you made throughout this test and I would have had to dissect you. Do I make myself clear? I did this not for you, but for me. I am a legend….for a reason. Here,” she relinquished hold of the manuscript. “I’m much better at deception than you’ll ever be. So learn from a real Ghore, *dawwwling.*”

“Yes, Gabby, you are indeed a legend.” Then he pulled the book into his lap, unwrapped the leather straps, read the title and stood howling, screaming, demanding that they stop the music at once. Towards the center of the dance floor he rushed, motioning for the Ghores about him to stop still and listen for a moment.

“Ladies and Gentlemen! Brothers and sisters! We have it! We have it!” He stood screaming, gleefully screaming of their prized accomplishment. “We have it! YES! WE HAVE IT!” Uwe held the book up high above his head, the leather straps dripping down around his wrist. “The book is ours! OURS! Yes, my wonderful Family, it is ours!”

The entire discotheque, even those who were alive, strangers off the street just there to dance gave some applause, the enthusiasm and celebration of the Ghores so alluring that one could not help but urge them on in their contagious victory.

When the audience leveled their applause to an audible tolerance Uwe continued. “And who do we have to thank for this? Just whom, do you ask? Our own dear Gabby Kreitzler-Ghore! How she managed to accomplish such a mission is beyond our knowledge. But, I will remind my House of Berlin the great ones never divulge their secrets to anyone!” All dead eyes turned to Gabby, all dead lips slipped into whisper at how artfully she had crafted a betrayal, how she had risked dissection all those times for the sake of finding the book on her own terms, in secrecy, how the master had been testing the pupil all this time, from the formulation
of the coup to deceiving the Rogues. The Ghores applauded more, louder, greater than ever before as Gabby sat back, those eyes still classic in heavy seduction, the smile creeping up ever so slightly at the corner to touch the long lashes that fell before the porcelain sharp cheek bones. She even slowly removed the top hat and bowed to the cheering Ghores.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” Uwe stole the attention back if just for one final moment. “I am stepping aside as your Father of Fathers so that I may give you Gabby Kreitzler-Ghore…THE MOTHER OF THE HOUSE OF BERLIN!!!!” Oh, no one in the room could contain their joyous noise. Screams, happy howls and clapping claws all sent the city street above to shudder.

And Gabby loved it, lapped it up and feasted on it. To see her sitting there, legs crossed, nonchalantly accepting the victory, as the big antique bulbs began flashing photographs for documentary purposes. No other creature ever possessed exactly that indescribable feature that makes one a true Phantom Ghore… except for Gabby at that moment on that evening. Yes, she was the epitome of what that race represents. She personified the beautiful dead to such a degree that the pose and poise of her at that moment ought to have been captured for all time possible.

I told you not to trust them, did I not? I told you betrayal and deception were their specialty, and if they did not stab you in the back then they were not the perfect Phantom Ghore. Being perfect is vitally important to them. They will achieve perfection, damn you, no matter what the costs.

While Gabby was preciously accepting the praise from the crowd before her, Uwe sidestepped towards Freddy, motioning for the Digger.

“Go back to that little flat in Kreuzberg you followed the ‘alleged’ Clayton to. I suspect the menacing Mirko is there keeping company with some nasty little Rogues. Shred the fuckers.” But,
Uwe had just relinquished his title, he was no longer the one handing commands. So the Digger looked inquisitively at Gabby, who nodded in return her execution of the plan.

The ever feminine Freddy had a question for Gabby. “Let me ask this. Now that you have the book, and congratulations, I might add, what do you intend to do with the girl?”

“What girl?”

“The American girl! The noisy one.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s out in the Royce, patiently waiting to return to Savannah. She keeps asking where her steamer trunk is.”

“The Digger has the trunk. I had him take it to the flat on Carmer Strasse. There’s a prize in it.”

“Oh, really? What else have you been up to, dear Gabby?”

“You’ll see. I don’t care what you do with the girl, but get rid of her, dissect her. How, when, where, I don’t care. But, start with the throat and tongue. I’m so tired of listening to her.”

“Yes, she does think she is of some importance.”

“I can’t stand that girl!”

It is only by the grace of destiny that Lydia and Jason survived the dissection of the Digger and whatever band of madmen accompanied him to the flat in Kreuzberg. They knew exactly where the Rogues were, having followed the “alleged” Clayton Strickland there the day he was supposed to have checked out of his hotel and boarded the plane for Savannah. Surely you remember the ruse. But a few minutes before the Digger’s arrival, Lydia said her congratulations and good-bye’s to Mirko and Mele, claiming she was desperate to get back to Venice and restore the House that had
just been slaughtered. Mirko assured her only a few brave members of her House had ventured to Gruftnacht, only a small hand full had perished for Just Cause. Jason was willing to go with her, to rebuild a new existence for himself in Italy. “They wear a lot of masks at Carnival. I could hide my face. Besides, I think the Italians and their artfulness will help me with my writing.” Lydia was grateful to have him tag along, and even suggested it was time for Christian to abdicate his position of Father of the House of Venice. “After everything that has happened,” she told Jason, “I would be elated to have someone like you in that position.”

As Jason and Lydia were boarding the train for Italy their colleagues were being torn to shreds. That is to say, Mirko perished whilst Mele was forced to listen to him scream. The Digger and his group entered quickly, made no conversation, made way for Mirko, twelve or so from the House of Berlin on top of him, slicing him up, dissecting him to such degree that there was nothing left but minced pieces. The great rebel leader’s inch size remains were scattered out every possible window, in very possible direction of that horrid little headquarters in Kreuzberg.

Then they went for Mele. They were truly unkind to her. She pleaded, screamed for a second chance in the new House of Berlin. Alas, her tongue was cut from her mouth and tossed to the side. There they left her. Unable to see, unable to feel, unable to speak. It is rumored she waited there for weeks hoping Gabby would arrive, not knowing that Gabby had betrayed them. And in a moment of severe and total depression, flung herself from the window. The drop broke every bone in her body, and having fallen face first, her identity was indefinable. She played dead for whatever authorities found her, was autopsied, and cremated.

Justine, sitting in the back of the Rolls waiting for her departure, was suddenly escorted by two men who sat on either side of her. The doors to the Rolls were opened, and both dapper
dressed men took to either side of her with smiles.

“Are we going now? Are you going to take me? I can’t seem to find the steamer trunk, but after all the craziness at the House, I have no idea what’s going on anyway. But if I had my way-”

She was quickly beheaded by the Ghore on her left, her head falling into the lap of the Ghore on her right. With her head still chatting away, this Ghore pulled out the tongue of the American girl swiftly and brutally, as the other Ghore quickly sliced apart the body that remained. The pieces of Justine, still clambering for attention, still wriggling about, were placed into a trash bag, carried to the nearest U-Bahn station and thrown beneath the speed of an oncoming subway train.

She was finally silent.

Gabby entered the luxurious Carmer Strasse flat with Uwe’s former entourage now her own, clicking flashes of the camera, and sub level Ghores vying for her attention.

“Leave us, please,” she demanded quietly.
She and Uwe entered the parlor where the steamer trunk lay.
“Is this my surprise,” asked Uwe playfully?
“It’s just a prize, a catch. Something we need more than that book.”

Gabby lifted the lid to reveal Taylor bound and gagged, the eyes blindfolded.
Uwe looked inquisitively and slightly disappointed. “Who the hell is that?”
“That....,” Gabby laughed, “that is the Lady Pearl’s grandson.”
“Oh, my, you have been working hard, haven’t you?” Uwe leaned into Taylor who remained silent, motionless. “He’s been Resurrected.”
“Yes...Not my doing. The other one did it, the other American.”
“Clayton?”
“Yes.”
Uwe looked around the room. “And what box do you have him in?”
“He’s not in a box. I had the Digger bury him for the time being.”
“Where?”
“Beneath some remote piece of dirt near the northern part of the city.”
“Why not just dissect him.”
“Because I don’t think he’s invaluable yet. We still have to find her, you know. Clayton is my back up plan, in case her grandson proves useless.” She then started laughing. “Grandson...Can you just imagine? The Lady Pearl with a grandson?”

The two of them began laughing hysterically at the notion of it. “Does that mean he’s Marinus’ grandson, too?”
“I have noooo idea....But, wouldn’t that be funny?”

That is as much as I can report at this time. Though we have come to the end of this narrative, we have in no way come to the end of this story. It is as far as I can retell, for these are the last moments that anyone involved can recount at this time. So fresh are these events that I hesitate to use punctuation for fear something more may happen soon, very soon, and this period of mine shall revert to comma.

And one may question, who are you narrator; how is it that you know all that has happened? Reader, I am not ready to reveal myself just yet, for I am a Phantom Ghore, and being a Phantom
Ghore does warrant some desire to betray. However, my betrayal is one that does require some anonymity for now. My betrayal is this: exposure of the Phantom Ghores to the living _en masse_ with this document. Such a betrayal is weighty and I am not yet prepared for the repercussions. After so many years of secret charnel practice, everyone is likely to know their secret. Surely, the Ghores will want a piece of me....or _pieces_ of me, rather.

You know who they are, you know what they do, you know how to spot one, and if you should spot one be sure to turn and walk the other way. It is possible that at some point, possibly after the publication of this narrative, that the Phantom Ghores would cease wearing their trademark garments, knowing how easily they would be spotted by the living world at large. They could easily decide to dress entirely different, walk, talk, _be_ entirely different. But, just be cautious. I would be very wary of any group of people that dresses, sounds, or even acts the same with very little flair for individuality. When meeting any such swarm of clones, individuals are annihilated and scorned. There is no tolerance for authenticity, no need and no concern for those who desire to be different. You are imperfect, you will be outcast and shunned.

However, those of you who are willing to face assimilation, those of you who are willing to forfeit your personality for the sake of the right car, the right clothes, the right address, and the right name, those of you who desire fashionable trends, chic cafés, and tastes that are dictated by your peers, those of you who are willing to lie, cheat, steal and betray for the sake of aesthetic perfection .......you belong.
END