

An Entirely True Tale

Roland

The ghost

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Roland the Ghost

This is a completely true story of a ghost named Roland. I'm going to use fake names throughout, except for my own to protect the anonymity of the people mentioned although anyone reading this who knows us at all will quickly be able to decipher who is who.

Let me start by saying this story begins ten years ago. I live and work on the family's farm in Connecticut. The farm has been in my father's family for generations, and we still use the three-hundred-year-old barn although it's in such a state of disrepair we'll soon have to tear it down and replace it.

My husband and I plan to preserve the wall inside on which every family member since this became our farm has carved their names. I added my name at age twelve. My father handed me an assortment of tools and bade me look for a clear space, the rule being you can't carve over anyone else's name or writings. (Pop, my grandfather, used to carve helpful sayings from time-to-time.) But I digress. I mention this past so you can see my family has been in this spot a long time. So I'm familiar with the area in a way someone new to it couldn't be.

Our farm sits on a steep hillside overlooking the Housatonic River. We've built our homes on a road that cuts through the farm, separating the woods from the pastures at the top of the hill, affording us a great view of the water and flatter fields where the cows roam. The bottom of the hill had at one time been thick sandbanks that during the civil war were used to store and test ordinance.

When my father was a boy, he would find spent shells and rusty cannonballs and add them to his arrowhead collection. He had an assortment of buttons from coats and wires and whatnot all retrieved from the firing range. Small brick huts had been built beneath the sand to store ammunition. Ships would travel up the Housatonic to deliver men and weapons for testing, and a semi-permanent camp had grown up there. He'd even found 'live' unexploded shells that the local bomb squad would come and remove. The local squad at that time was in New York, so you can imagine the excitement this generated.

But that all happened years ago. By the time I was born and old enough to range freely on the farm, my father forbade playing in what we called the witches huts because he was afraid in their decayed state they would tumble in and smother us beneath a ton of sand and broken bricks. He warned of the dangers of playing with any ordinance we might find. (We never found any.)

My sister and I, of course, thought these small huts most fun and would occasionally disobey although we kept our excursions to the one hut that remained mostly intact, I think because it stuck out of the sand while the rest were mostly buried, some so much that the doors couldn't be reached.

When my father was a child, he too had played in the forbidden huts despite being warned, so knew to question us closely and would glower at our guilty faces and warn again. But seeing the lure of the tiny houses, which we as children could walk up-right in while adults must stoop, would prove too much enticement, he began the process of removing these huts. The one that stuck from the sand he saved for last and before he destroyed it he let us enter with flashlights and shovels, and we happily dug and laughed but found nothing.

Meanwhile, my father retold of how in the twenties smugglers traveled the river and used these huts to store liquor in barrels and crates for later delivery in the nearby city of New Haven. I can see my father clearly, grinning and leaning on his shovel, so proud of his Pop who'd outsmarted these city fellows who thought them country bumpkins. Pop had chased them away, and not with the law or threats, but with the simple device of penning the bulls in that field, which was a pain in the ass for him

as that field grew sparse grass and thick brush because of its sandy nature, so he had to deliver food and water daily. But the smugglers desisted and moved elsewhere, and the huts remained empty except for the one time my father found a thief had hidden over five thousand dollars in stolen fur coats inside.

So, my sister and I watched sadly as the last hut was destroyed. We'd loved them and their stories. They reeked of our family history. We still called that spot the witches hut when informing our mother of where we were going to play for the day. We were allowed to go where we wished but had to inform one parent where we planned to be, so had named all corners of the farm with fanciful names from the secret forest— a short stretch of woods that bordered the brook below the barn— to kissing rock— a tallish cliff that neighboring teenagers would visit to make-out and drink as the curve of the land made walking to the top of the cliff easy from the small neighborhood road that bordered our farm.

By the time I myself was a teenager my father had begun selling the sandbank that had once housed the witches' huts. In its place, on the newly flattened hill, he built a cider mill and it's in this mill I worked and Roland first appeared.

To support ourselves, (basically, this just pays the taxes on the land), our family opens a seasonal garden stand. Over the years what we've offered for sale has changed but the building itself hasn't changed since nineteen eighty-six. The building is metal with no insulation or heat. If facing the building from the street, two ninety-foot plastic greenhouses attach to the right side in which we plant vegetables and flowers every spring to sell to the locals. To the left is the cider mill, while the middle houses the showroom floor that we rearrange as the seasons change.

Every fall we make pies and at one time cider. Since my father passed, we've sold the milling equipment and now use that room for our bakery. It being just my mother and I, my sister lives in Italy now with her family, we've expanded the bakery and quit making cider. So, now, the mill room has a big walk-in freezer, a few smaller chest freezers— in which we store our fresh peaches we prepare in August to use in pies— and shelves that hold our supplies like pie-tins and paper goods, things of that nature. It also holds two refrigerators that store eggs and milk and batters because our kitchen is too small to hold them, not being built with them in mind because when the cider mill closed we added pie flavors and began making cookies, so needed more storage.

The back of the building is divided into two rooms. One, the kitchen where we do our baking, and the other, a cooler in which the apples for cider used to be stored but now hold two field crates of apples at a time instead of the twenty or thirty they once did. The sides of the cooler are now lined with shelves, old bakery cases that we've used over the years and saved because those things are heavy and hard as hell to load up to take to the dump, and they also make very good storage when we get a bigger order that can't fit in our small sales room.

Almost every wall has a garage door in it. The back one allows a forklift to move the field crates of apples into the cooler. The front one, in the sales room, we open if the weather is nice. When it isn't nice, we have two double doors beside it we use instead. If it's very cold we'll slide the door to the empty greenhouse open to allow the heat from there to warm our sales room. This only works if the day itself is sunny. If the day is snowy or rainy we have to keep water on the boil to heat the room at all. A pot sits on that burner year-round just waiting to be used for heat. As you can imagine, this barely warms the sales room. Luckily for us, it usually doesn't get very cold around here until after Christmas, and we close Thanksgiving Day.

On Thanksgiving we make a thousand pies and use every inch of storage. We'll spread out empty field crates and stack pies in and over them. Generally, our small sales room is big enough to store the pies we make daily. A long wooden counter abuts a glass pastry case on which old-fashioned, glass, cookie jars sit. Every day in the fall I rise at five-thirty and am hard at work by six-thirty, baking the pies and cookies for the day. Our farm is famous in the area and well known for the quality of our food. We make everything from scratch and use no canned fillings.

So now, you can picture this big drafty building and will understand why it took a while for me to notice anything really odd. When a door opened as you approached, it was easy to say to oneself, *it's just a draft*. When a pen rolled to your hand or a paper bag gusted away, you would laugh and shrug and rub your arms and maybe peer to the door to see if someone had opened one in back. If you open the back, garage door, it creates a vacuum that's powerful enough to make the interior doors swing.

Two swinging doors that open to the sales room separate that room from the mill room. To pass through them while carrying a full tray of pies, or if your hands are otherwise encumbered with eggs or milk or whatnot, you kick the bottom of the door lightly, which makes it bounce open a hair, then you use your foot to pry it open while using the elbow of your other arm to nudge the other door open. The doors are light and easy to manipulate. So, you can imagine, I didn't notice at once that every time I approached this door with my hands full, which I did at least twenty times a day, that the door opened without me doing a thing. When it finally dawned on me this was slightly odd, I laughed it off. But, gradually I began searching for an answer as I never felt a breeze.

I would've brushed it off forever. I do not believe in ghosts. I don't want to believe in ghosts. I've been outspoken in my disbelief of ghosts. When the Warrens— a famous ghost hunting team— investigated a house down the road from me, I laughed because I knew everything they said about that house was false. They completely made up the history. All of us who had lived there knew it hadn't even been a house but had been built to be a stop on the pony express, and then it had become a tavern before finally being turned into a home.

The actual story of the home and its caretakers is much more interesting than the fictional one. The neighbors all knew the residents then spent their evenings sitting on their roof and getting stoned. We called that house the Boo House in mocking tones. To this day, despite my own experiences, I'm sure everything reported there was a lie and a hoax, which makes my tale all the more hypocritical because I swear it's true.

So here I am, becoming a hair bit uneasy. Well, uneasy might be too strong a word. I began noticing the oddity of a door that only opened for me. But like I said, I would've never considered an actual ghost, but one day, as I passed through the door that opened when I approached, the counter help, I forget who as we change counter help frequently, said something to the effect of, 'that's really odd. Do we have a ghost or something?' And I laughed and said, "Yeah, a friendly ghost that likes me."

When I returned to the kitchen, the girl was inside laughing and joking with the kitchen help about our ghost. I joined in the laughter. The kitchen help left, it being eight o'clock, and the counter help returned to the sales room, leaving me alone in the kitchen. At eleven o'clock I took over the counter as all pies and cookies were done, and the girl on the counter went home. You can see by these awful hours why we went through counter help so much I can't recall who worked then. It's very difficult to find people who are willing to work for a few hours a day for a few months. Especially people you can trust with a cash register.

I spent the day as usual, selling the pies and cookies I'd made that morning. At four o'clock, Mandy returned. She works at the bakery every day from six to eight a.m. and then returns after her regular job and works full days at the bakery on her days off from her regular job. One might think this is odd, and it is, but our work is so seasonal, just a few months a year. She has worked there for twenty years, first part-time, then full, then part-time again as her family grew and needed more supervision. She's like family to me. We've raised our children together. In fact, I'm closer to her than my own sister. It's just she and I in the kitchen most days with her oldest daughter, Mary, who at the time this took place was just a teenager and worked there weekends washing dishes and sometimes helped after school to peel apples for the pies.

So, on this day. Mike, Mandy's husband, accompanied her on her return in the afternoon as was his custom. He began setting up the apple peeler in the mill room to begin peeling the bushels of apples we

needed for the next day, a Saturday. Saturdays and Sundays are always the busiest days for our bakery as families seem to enjoy visiting the farm for a fresh pie and will spend time talking with us and visiting.

While Mike cleaned the already clean machine, Mandy and I cleaned the kitchen. She washed the floors, and I did any last-minute dishes, mostly trays that had held the pies and cleaned the counters. There are two counters in the kitchen, the front one Mandy uses, and the back one that is my domain. Back then, a small chalkboard hung on the wall above the back counter. It was the cheap type small children play with, with bright letters along the outer rim. I used it to make notes to myself, anything from the word apple with checkmarks beside it indicating how many had been or needed to be made, to don't forget to buy milk.

On that day, there were no messages to be saved, so I used the Clorox cleaning spray to wipe it too. While I was doing this Mike entered the kitchen, and Mandy laughingly told him we have a ghost.

"He's a friendly ghost," I chimed in. "He always opens the door for me." While I said this, I'm laughing and mostly disbelieving, but a tiny part of me is feeling a slight chill because the door *did* open and just for me.

"I'd like to thank him," I went on, "but who knows what his name is." I was remembering this land's rich history from Indians, to civil war soldiers, to smugglers, but I said nothing of this.

Jokingly, Mike said, "If he can open doors, surely he can write his name." And he removed a piece of chalk from the carton and placed it on the clean counter beneath the blank chalkboard. We laughed and left, peeled our apples, and went home.

PART 2

The next day was Saturday, so Mary, Mandy, and I were in the kitchen. I still can't remember who worked the counter at this time, but someone was there. The three of us entered together, dropped our coats in the tiny office, and headed to the kitchen shivering. The building was cold but would warm soon once we got the three big ovens going. I'd forgotten all about the 'ghost.' Saturdays are busy with no time for fooling, but I was forcefully reminded when I grabbed a piece of chalk and turned to my board to enter the days' count.

My once clean chalkboard was now covered with chalk dust, and in the dust, barely legible, was a name. A name it took all three of us to make out. But once we 'saw' it, it suddenly became clear and unmistakable like those hidden picture things that you turn and glare at until they suddenly become a flower or whatever.

Roland was spelled out on my board as if written, not in chalk, but traced in the dust by a finger. We laughed and joked, but I could tell we were uneasy. I could also tell we all thought the other might be behind this practical joke.

So, there we were, laughing and not really believing. We continued to joke on and off about this until I removed the first tray of hot pies from the oven. It being Saturday, we had many orders, so I took those pies to the cooler so we could begin boxing sooner.

"Thank you, Roland!" I said loudly when the swinging door opened when I approached.

I heard them laughing in the kitchen and grinned. My grin froze on my face when the next door opened. The door to the cooler is latched with a heavy latch, but it popped open, and I stood in the doorway of the dark cooler. Now, I expected either Mandy or Mary had gone around through the back door, but the light flipped on all by itself a second later, and no one was inside.

Dazed, and still not really believing we had a ghost, I entered. *Something else must have opened the door and turned on the light*, I told myself as I placed the pies on the rack to cool, but I'll admit, it shook me.

When I returned to the kitchen, I laughingly told my enthralled audience. We were standing together behind the counter opposite the sink. Above, to the left of the sink, is a wire rack that holds big pots used to boil water and their covers. We never use these pots. At one time, we'd made applesauce

and boiled the apples to make the skins fall off easier when we ran them through the masher, but that was years ago. Those pots sit there untouched.

"Weird," Mandy said.

She was busily making apple pie.

"I know, right? Wonder what it could've been. I better get someone in to look at the lights. What if we have a short or something?"

Mandy agreed. "Must be that," she said. "There's no such thing as ghosts."

The words had no sooner left her lips when a pot lid sailed from that shelf and crashed into the wall behind us. It hadn't fallen down but flown *across* the room. We stopped and stared in stunned amazement. It took a moment or two before nervous laughter erupted.

"What the hell?" I said, or something to that effect. I grabbed the lid and replaced it still laughing and shaking my head. They too were laughing, but there was unease in it now.

We jokingly called out for Roland to manifest. We were both terrified and thrilled, caught between denial and the evidence of our eyes. Nothing happened. We sort of wished it would because we were left feeling confused by these events, and we resumed our work feeling almost let down. I was heading to my back counter, and Mary had grabbed a tray of fresh pie to put in the front case.

She was passing her mother when she said, "Everyone knows there's no such thing as ghosts."

Mary said this derisively as if she hadn't a doubt in the world and we were crazy for even considering this. She rolled her eyes at her elders. She could tell we were on the verge of belief there. She hadn't time to take one step forward before one of the glass cookie jars hurled itself off the counter in the empty salesroom.

Now we were stunned and slightly scared. I was afraid both of the ghost and that my help would run screaming, leaving me to make a hundred pies by myself.

So I pasted a smile on my face and said cheerfully as if having a manifestation was the most normal thing in the world, "Relax, Roland is friendly. Respect him, and he'll stop throwing things."

They sort of looked at me like I was crazy but went about cooking and cleaning. We were no longer joking about this ghost. It was indisputable that he was there. We thanked him when doors opened, and lights went on, but we didn't laugh except for quick, nervous titters. And we told no one. We were freaked out and trying not to notice that when reaching for a pen or piece of chalk it rolled to your hand. We went about our business.

The season came to an end a month later. When the storefront opened again in the spring, Roland was gone. The doors no longer opened, the lights stayed off until we flipped the switch. We breathed an internal sigh of relief but never spoke of him.

Years passed. Gradually, we began to reminisce and joke about our ghost. It became funny again, and we laughed uproariously when we retold our stories.

Now the year is two thousand and sixteen. Mandy's son John works for me now. He comes in weekdays and helps make pie crust and waits on the counter before heading to his real job. He's too young to remember Roland. The day is Halloween, and I'm at my back counter preparing candy apples. The radio is on. A station Mary likes. She's left for the day with her mom already. I'm alone, waiting for John to show up.

The radio doesn't belong to me. It belongs to Mandy's youngest daughter who is now my dishwasher on weekends and apple peeler. She comes every day after work to peel apples and close the store. I don't love Mary's station but listen without complaint. I prefer AM talk shows and will change the station as I do daily once they leave.

John tolerates my choice in listening. He has his own radio at the sales desk, and if we're both in the kitchen, I generally let him choose the station.

So, anyway, it's Halloween, and I've finished my apples and am wrapping them at the front counter. Because I've been busy, I haven't changed the station. I can't really hear it at the back counter but at the

front one I can. A Halloween special is playing, ghost stories being told, and tapes played backward, that sort of thing.

John enters and laughs. "I was listening to that on my way here. Man, those people. So gullible."

"Yeah," I agree and grin at him. "Who would believe all that bull. They must be crazy."

The radio falls from the shelf. We both stare at it in surprise. A fission of unease runs up my spine. John retrieves the radio and places it back in its spot.

We stare at it as the DJ recaps the show. It's almost nine a.m. In closing, the DJ snickers over the advice given before the show to say a blessing to prevent being haunted or possessed while listening to the recordings. Advice I never heard, and to be honest I would've rolled my eyes if I had. I don't believe in ghosts.

I tell myself this firmly but say nothing. I'm not stupid and don't want to piss Roland off.

"What a crock of shit," John repeats and laughs as he gathers the clean trays to begin filling the front case for the day.

I wince, almost expecting the freshly filled cookie jars that sit on the counter to assault him. Instead, he leaves the room. The screen door between us closes, and the paper towels on the wall unravel. I stare mesmerized as the paper towels spill across the floor. This isn't one or two sheets unfolding, but the entire roll unspools and trails across the room from front to back.

"Holy shit!" I exclaim. I'm certain now Roland is back.

John runs in, and I point.

"What?" he says, looking confused.

"That!" I say and step away from the unraveled towels.

He gives me a confused are you nuts look and begins to gather them.

"Roland's back," I say.

He stops and laughs. He's heard the occasional story, but to him, these are events that happened a million years ago. These are stories his elders tell not expecting to be believed. We act as though we don't believe them ourselves even though we were there, and it happened to us.

"There's no such thing as ghosts," he says, and I cringe.

I'm not surprised when the radio hurls itself to the floor so hard every seam breaks and the knobs pop off. I begin to laugh. John's face is priceless. My laughter is tinged with hysteria and I'm standing there not sure what to do or say. I not only don't want to scare my help away, I love them, they are my family, but my mother, if she heard, would be beyond horrified.

She's convinced her church and beliefs are the only way to Heaven. Even speaking of such would damn me to Hell in her eyes, and she'd be beyond devastated. She'd view such talk as dealing with the occult. (Which is why I never told her of this ghost as more than a joke or that I have had dreams since childhood that came true. That is an entirely different story though, and I won't get into it except as an explanation of why I want this to not be happening or true.)

John gathers the broken radio and begins to reassemble it. Neither of us comments much on what has just transpired. I'll admit I performed the 'blessing' the crackpot on the radio suggested as soon as John left the room, and I felt incredibly foolish doing so.

The next day, Mandy comes in.

"Roland's back?" she asks. She's laughing, but unease lines her voice.

"Seems like it."

Neither of us really say anything. Neither of us wishes to joke and anger Roland although we pretend to each other we're just kidding and don't really believe, but I know we do. How could we not?

Mary enters. "You guys and your ghost," she says and laughs.

Laughter that stops as a new roll of paper towels begins to unspool, spinning so fast it makes a loud whir.

The season progresses and ends. We ignore all manifestations. Well, I do. I'm not sure if they notice the doors opening for me or the lights. We pretend all is normal. The papers that fly about the room when Mary disparages Roland we treat as a joke or blame on the fan in the window.

Yesterday, I'm at home speaking with my daughter who is sitting on the living room couch. If you remember from my introduction, I live on the farm. My husband and I have raised our children in the same house my father grew up in. He built my mom a much bigger home right next door. From the corner of my eye, I spy a figure cross our yard, heading to the back door.

"Who's that?" I ask.

I know it is neither my husband or son as both wear brown barn coats and neither wears a hat. Whoever this was is wearing a dark-blue hoody. Not navy-blue but more royal-blue, a color you never really see except in fancy clothes.

"Who's who?" My daughter sits straighter and peers out the window. A window she'd been half facing as she spoke to me in the doorway. "No one is here," she says.

I approach and lean over the back of the couch to stare out the picture window. Not a mark mars the fresh snow. No one and nothing has walked by, and yet, I saw it. At work, everyone heard and saw the same thing. Yet here, only I saw this. On reflection, I can't be sure whatever I saw wore a hoody just that something royal-blue covered their head and draped over their shoulders.

I seriously blame that damn radio station. But I can just imagine the lawsuit. No one would believe this tale despite the witnesses. I'm the boss. It would be argued my witnesses lied or humored me. And, of course, I would never sue. Word would get around, and I don't wish to be thought of as the crazy lady who thinks she's haunted.

I hope to God I don't see another thing. I don't want to believe in ghosts.

So, you've read my tale, and I'm sure formed an opinion. I'm either a liar, a deluded crazy person—or maybe you believe me. I feel the hugest hypocrite because I wouldn't believe you despite my experiences. I have no idea what to do about all this....