

## These Living Ghosts

6 November 2022

**Characters**

Jerome

Alonso

The Old Man

Marvin

**Setting**

The parking lot of a suburban grocery store.

**Time**

Around 9pm at night. This is the graveyard shift. The world is black around its characters.

**Notes**

Alonso is a ghost too. Jerome is on his way.

*Scene 1*

*Jerome and Alonso hover near stage left, playing with two spare shopping carts as they wait out their evening shifts. Both wear yellow reflective vests and a book butts out of Alonso's pocket. Stage right represents the entrance to the store. Either a group of people—preferably no more than three—or Marvin alone passes by, hurrying to head inside.*

JEROME

And....there! (Pointing at Marvin) That's him again.

ALONSO

You mean a customer?

JEROME

A regular. (Marvin glances back at them) See! He's the one with the mournful eyes.

ALONSO

Ahhhh, an adequate descriptor, Jerome. "If equal affection cannot be/ Let the more loving one be me." Am I right? You should be a poet someday.

JEROME

I'm serious. I've worked a shift every night this week, and every night he's come in. The same time. The same way. He shops, doesn't buy anything, then leaves. It's insane.

ALONSO (Leaning in conspiratorially)

You think he's scoping us out? Plotting his grand heist?

JEROME (Pulling away)

I *think* it's strange. It would almost be better if he were a criminal.

ALONSO

My my, what's pricked your petty temper this evening?

*Jerome reaches into his pocket and produces an envelope. He hands it to Alonso. Alonso reads.*

ALONSO

And...what? You just keep this in your pocket all day long?

JEROME

It's an important document. Important documents should be kept in familiar places. Just like strange men should stay away from society.

ALONSO

And I assume you would be the authority on social rules? (Alonso holds the letter up) Mr. Ivy League admittee?

JEROME

As a matter of fact, I would. Responsible members of a community should set an example for those who take it for granted. I know his kind. He probably can't afford to shop because he's never worked a day in his life. I, on the other hand, have this job. I have my grades. I keep my head down now because I know it will pay off later. A good career. A wife. Maybe kids.

ALONSO

A bed of boredom to tuck them in.

JEROME

Watch it. You're not much better off, Mr. High-School dropout.

ALONSO

Yet still my mouth can match my wit. (Staring ahead) He's all yours.

*An old man hobbles over to the pair. He reaches for a cart but strains his back and Jerome grabs it for him. The man thanks him and grips its handle, but Jerome doesn't let go.*

JEROME

Sir, before you shop, please just allow me the honor of saying thank you. Thank you for your years on this planet, for your wisdom, and for your contributions.

ALONSO

Not to mention your taxes.

JEROME (Ignoring Alonso)

From the bottom of a young man's heart, thank you. Your age is a testament to your character.

OLD MAN

Why thank you son, it's always good to see young stars like you shining so brightly in this fading world. You'll inherit the earth one day, you know? (Spreading arms for effect) One day, this will all be yours.

*Jerome thanks the man again and he hobbles back off. There is only one shopping cart between himself and Alonso now, the latter leaning on its side.*

ALONSO

You know, I took you for a prude.

JEROME

What do you mean?

ALONSO

Well, for a virgin, you sure know a lot about kissing ass.

JEROME

Don't be disgusting.

ALONSO

Don't be flattering. Though I suppose we can leave all this nonsense about strange strangers in the dust, now that you've befriended our kind octogenarian over there?

JEROME

It is wiser to live in optimistic moments, as opposed to depressing observations.

ALONSO

Is that how you got into Dartmouth?

JEROME

That and a flawless ACT.

ALONSO

Is that a fact?

JEROME

Call it an optimistic observation.

ALONSO (Cackling)

Ha! Not bad, pretty boy. Not bad.

MARVIN

Excuse me?

*The pair jump. Distracted by their wordplay, neither Jerome nor Alonso noticed him approach. Marvin tilts his head at the shopping cart between them, but no one moves.*

MARVIN

Sorry, it's just...they, um, ran out of shopping carts inside. Do you mind?

ALONSO

Careful, friend. He's very attached to that shopping cart, you know. Very possessed.

*Jerome grips the shopping cart. Marvin steps back.*

JEROME

And what, good friend, if I allowed you to take this shopping cart, would you intend to use it for?

MARVIN

Uh...shopping?

JEROME

Shopping? Hmmm. Very interesting.

*Marvin reaches forward but Jerome tugs the cart an inch back. Alonso cackles, sits on the ground, and pulls out a book.*

MARVIN

Um...is there a problem here?

JEROME

Not presently. Why, do you believe there should be?

MARVIN

I...don't know. I don't think so. You're acting strange.

*Alonso laughs from the ground.*

JEROME

I can assure you, good friend, that if one of us is acting *strange* it is not me. Now, once again, what do you intend to shop for?

MARVIN

That really doesn't seem like your business.

JEROME

Indulge me.

MARVIN

No.

*The two stand off. After a moment Jerome lowers his gaze from Marvin's and releases his hand from the cart.*

JEROME

Apologies, good friend. It's been a long day. The stress must have wound me tighter than I realized.

MARVIN

No need to worry. It happens to all of us.

*Marvin takes one long last look at Jerome.*

JEROME

Good luck with your...shopping, friend. I wish you well.

MARVIN

Yeah...thanks.

*Marvin leaves, steering the shopping cart towards stage right. Alonso lifts his gaze from his book and laughs.*

ALONSO

So THAT'S what Ivy league conviction looks like. Damn, kid, you folded faster than Pinocchio at a poker game.

JEROME

It behooves us members of higher society to act more maturely than our underlings. I may have abetted a potential criminal, but I did so respectfully. I maintain my dignity.

ALONSO

And what of your crime?

JEROME

Excuse me?

*Alonso stands equal to Jerome.*

ALONSO

Now I'm no deputy, but I'm pretty sure stalking is just as serious as robbery.

JEROME (Genuinely flustered)

Stalking? Now what gave you that idea? I was only watching him!

ALONSO

And how many other potential criminals began by 'only watching,' huh? That's how it starts. Someone sees something and they think they understand it. (Turns towards audience) I bet even now, somewhere on this planet, there are people watching other people live their lives, believing that they understand the world.

JEROME

Maybe they're right. (Pause) What is that?

ALONSO (Holding up his book)

A novel, Einstein.

JEROME

I know what it is! I was wondering which one.

ALONSO

*The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, by James Joyce.

JEROME

Huh. I haven't read that one.

ALONSO

I have.

*The two linger near stage left. Jerome sways uncomfortably on his balls of feet before turning his back to Alonso.*

JEROME

Yes, well, I suppose Shakespeare is the most important writer in the English language. That's what my senior English teacher, Mrs. Emerson, says. She went to Yale.

ALONSO

I couldn't care less. It just helps me pass the time.

JEROME

Do you struggle with that? Waiting for your shift to be over when it's dark like this? When it's night?

ALONSO

No more than any other time. Not many people shop around now though. It gives us time to think. Time to worry. Like this whole four-hour slot of work is just a waystation. We think of where we've been with longing, and we long for where we'll go. Sleep. Relaxation. The works.

JEROME

This whole job is just a waystation for me. One soon to be over, did you know that? It's my last night. That's how maturity works. You stay in the same place for so long, learn how to be a good person, and the world will take care of the rest. Then comes a salary.

ALONSO



Speaking of...

*The old man hobbles back with an empty cart. He rears it back and rolls it quickly over to Jerome, who nearly stumbles from the awkward impact. Then he yells something and leaves.*

ALONSO

A true gentleman.

JEROME

What did he say?

ALONSO

You have a nice smile.

JEROME

Oh. Well, yes, I'd agree I do. It's very important to be able to smile. The inability to smile is one of the surefire signs of a serial killer.

*Marvin slowly approaches from behind both Jerome and Alonso, their backs turned towards the store. Alonso tilts his head yet says nothing.*

ALONSO (Motioning to where the old man went and groaning)

Just be grateful for what you've had. A decent interaction with a conventional old man. A tolerable circumstance. Those are rare as you get older.

JEROME

Yes, well, some of us don't intend to age like skeletons.

ALONSO

Sorry, I forgot I was talking to earth's future valedictorian.

*Marvin comes a bit closer.*

JEROME

Don't get all spiteful on me now. What you're looking at is the high point of my life. After today I'll be free to reap the fruits I've sown. Metaphorically, of course. I've got the grades, the resume, the test scores, all of it. I've earned my place in the world, and soon all its people will come flocking into my life.

MARVIN

Excuse me?

*Jerome jumps. Alonso cackles and pulls out his book.*

MARVIN

Sorry! Er, again, I mean. I was just wondering, are you Mason Caldwell's little brother?

JEROME

What?

MARVIN

Sorry, it's just I used to know him. Mason and I graduated from high school together just a few years ago, right on down the road. I thought I noticed something earlier. You two look so much alike.

ALONSO (Peering down at his book)

The resemblance is uncanny.

JEROME

Oh...well. Thank you. I can appreciate meeting any one of Mason's friends, even if they are a bit...unknown to me.

*Jerome steps forward to take Marvin's cart but Marvin maintains his grip.*

MARVIN

It's just so strange, you know? How you still find traces of the past in the distant present?

ALONSO

Confounding, truly.

MARVIN

I mean, I come into the store almost every night and there's almost nothing. Just newly stocked shelves near unrecognizable strangers. It's nice to see a familiar face, or at least the resemblance to one.

JEROME

One of life's great pleasures.

*Jerome reaches for Marvin's cart again but stops when he sees it's empty.*

JEROME

Say, speaking of the strange, how is it that you've been in the store so long without anything to show for it? (Jerome shoots Alonso a look) Don't you find our prices competitive?

MARVIN

Hmm? Oh, er, yes. Of course. Sorry. Truth be told, I don't quite come here for the shopping.

*Jerome smiles like a wolf and darts over to Alonso, pulling his reluctant coworker up beside him to face Marvin.*

JEROME

Really? Do you hear that, Alonso? He's not here for the shopping. Then what, pray tell, do you do here, sir? Get your kicks by perving out over barely legal high school cashiers?!

MARVIN

What? Jesus, no! Nothing like that. It's just that...well, you know, I used to be in high school once too.

JEROME

And now you're not.

MARVIN

And now I'm not. But...look, life hasn't gone the way I planned, ok? I wanted to be out of here, away from where I grew up, but fate or poor fortune or whatever wasn't having it. I did everything right. Graduated valedictorian, aced my tests, and went to Princeton. Then mom got sick and I came back here and I got lost. I was a good student but I'd never been tested by the world before. Every horizon seemed dark, so I just took to wandering around.

JEROME

I'm sorry, did you say you went to Princeton?

MARVIN (Ignoring Jerome)

I couldn't find anyone. When I used to shop here, I'd run into friends and classmates and girls I had crushes on. Now they've all moved on. I still look for them, still chase the chance that someone's been left behind like me, but all I see are memories. Just flickers of the way things used to be, like ghosts. But they aren't ghosts, you know? They're still alive, just somewhere far from where I've settled.

*Marvin leans awkwardly on the cart. Jerome hesitates but slowly grips its sides.*

JEROME (Clearing his throat)

Yes, well...well, that's very insightful, sir.

MARVIN

Thank you. I appreciate the help.

*Marvin lets go of the cart and allows Jerome to take it. As soon as this is done he exits slowly through stage left. Alonso hangs his book by his side.*

ALONSO

What a no-good criminally-inclined scoundrel of a man.

JEROME

Give it a rest.

ALONSO

No, I mean it. I am flabbergasted, let me say it again, flabbergasted by his conduct. Feeling sad in the world nowadays. Who does he think he is?

JEROME

Did you know I used to love painting portraits?

ALONSO

What?

JEROME

No, really. I used to sit my family down and pull out a canvas and paint their portraits. It felt fun to reinvent them in new ways. I had to give it up to build my resume.

ALONSO

Now that's a damn shame.

JEROME

Yeah. You know, you're right.

*Now it's Jerome's turn to lean awkwardly on the shopping cart. Alonso props himself on the back of the other cart and wheels around stage. A bright white light illuminates upstage.*

ALONSO

Oh, don't be sad now, friend. Look up there, you see that? That's the moon that's shining down on you. Tomorrow it will be the sun.

JEROME

Yes. And your point?

ALONSO

The sun is eternal, until it dies. Whatever you've done, or whatever you've chosen not to do so you can do what you have done, it's finished. That sky is staying overhead. Welcome to the nature of your bright new life.

*Alonso cackles and continues rolling around stage. Jerome stands solemnly while lights fade.*  
*End of play.*