



# Ghost Walk

a story by Mickey Hess

For our wedding anniversary, you take me to a fondue restaurant called the Melting Pot. The name of this restaurant is both clever and not clever at all.

The name, although completely literal, brings to mind an image of all races, all creeds, flooding the parking lot in tired huddled masses, coming together to dip vegetables in melted cheese.

The literal is overtaking metaphor. Things are turning back into things.

We got married at 20, in an apartment we paid for with student loans. The man in our photographs, who gave us such a good deal on the ceremony, was not licensed to conduct weddings, the city of Louisville later discovered. We saw him on television in handcuffs, but the marriages stood. They still counted.

We considered renewing our vows this year for our tenth anniversary, but it seemed like so much ceremony to reaffirm something we already are. At five years, I took you to Europe. You snapped pictures of me at the end of each meal. There were photos of you beside London landmarks, in front of Reykjavik's rocky terrain, and me inside restaurants, paying for food.

You were proud of these photos, and I tried to share your excitement. But seeing so much sameness depressed me. The same poses, same faces of concentration no matter where I was in the world.

The Melting Pot is new in town, although there are others in other towns, and the people here are excited. "I want a new theme song," you tell me. When we were dating I walked into a fancy restaurant underdressed and the man at the piano shifted from Frank Sinatra to "Smells Like Teen Spirit." "So this is your theme song," you said.

I argue that your theme song shouldn't change, that it's like deciding to change your nickname. It should be chosen so carefully that it fits you no matter what.

"Why shouldn't my theme song change? I've changed."

What I want to tell you is that I don't believe people ever change, really. What I want to tell you is that I need renewal, but I don't know where to begin. What I say is this: my whole life I've been terrified of drowning. I never learned to swim because I can't make myself go all the way underwater. But I've been baptized twice, once at age ten and again at thirteen. Both times I worried about it for weeks. The preacher practiced with me in a dry baptismal so I wouldn't hyperventilate in front of the church. Close your eyes. Hold your breath. You're being reborn. I liked the feeling. It was worth the hydrophobia. But it didn't stick.

You snap a picture of me paying the bill, scooping our leftovers into a Styro-foam container. "Let me take you to Mexico. I can teach you to swim."

For our wedding anniversary, you take me on something called a ghost walk. We become tourists in our own city. I pay a man in a top hat and cape twenty dollars to lead us through the lobbies of historic hotels now operated by international corporations who attach their name to the original name. The Seelbach has become the Seelbach Ramada. The Brown has become the Camberly Brown. I did this to your name when you married me.

We see hotels, historic theaters, and mansions tonight. Our ghost guide shows us an album of pictures he's taken. In each of them there is a small glare somewhere on the photograph. A reflection off a window, a glitch in the processing. These are orbs, he says. These are evidence of ghosts.

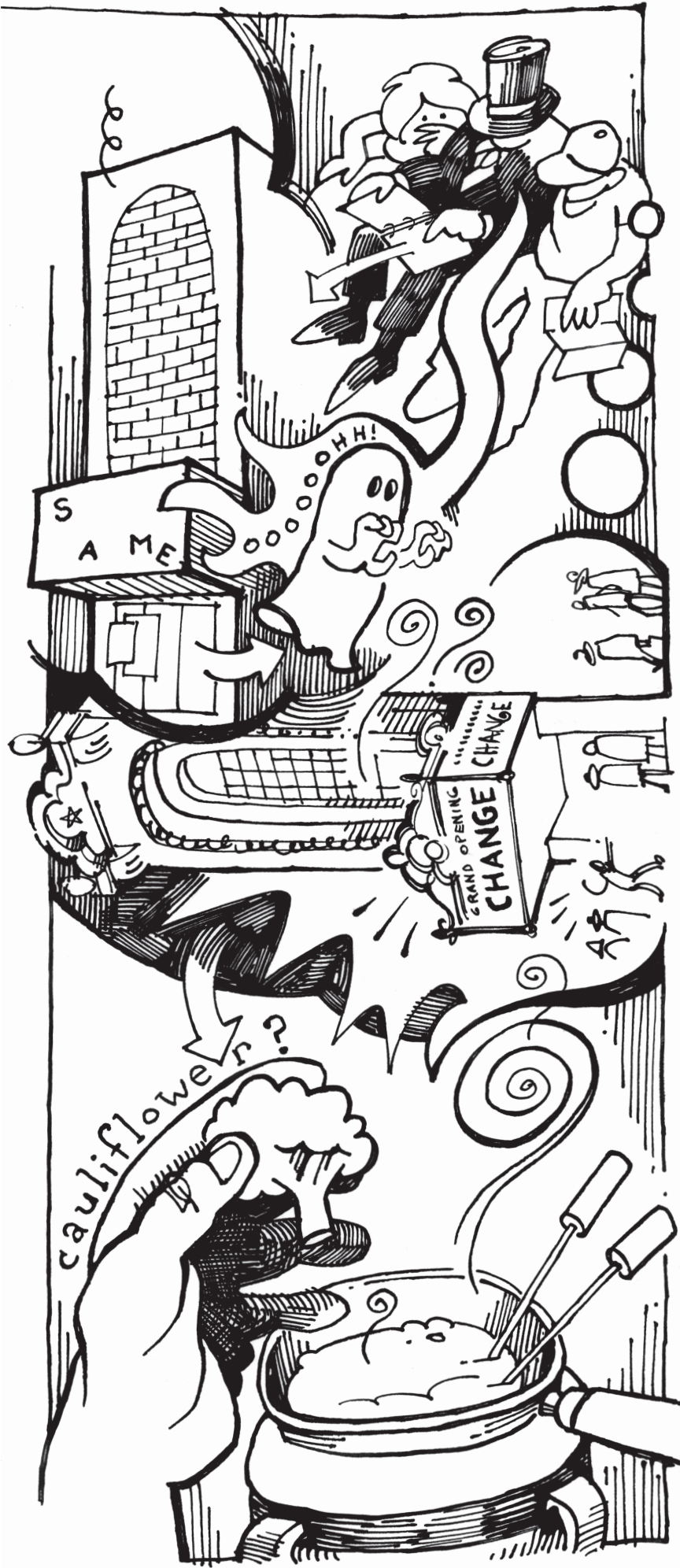
I feel like we are visiting a relative we don't like very much. He is sitting between us on a park bench, narrating his photographs. But instead of Grand Canyon vacations he is showing us orbs, describing the conditions under which he took the photographs (most involve dark nights spent alone) and the tingle that crept up his spine when he had them developed.

Do I believe in ghosts? You happened to take a picture of me on the phone at the exact moment I was informed of my grandmother's death. You were taking pictures of our cats, and when you developed them, there I was in the background. You told me about the picture, described the look on my face. "Why would you tell me that?" I asked, and you ripped the picture apart and threw it away.

I understand now that you described it to me because you felt you had documented somehow my love for my grandmother. And I both wish, and don't at all wish, that the picture still existed.

You have a tendency to destroy things. Our cat broke a dish your maternal grandmother had given you, that had belonged to your paternal grandmother, whom you never met, who died before you were born. I placed that dish on display on a wooden end table I put together from a \$10 kit. The first piece of furniture you and I bought. When the cat broke it, I tried to get you to blame me, and when that didn't work I transferred blame to the table. You took that tiny pressed wood table, the one with the legs I screwed into the top, and you smashed it outside by the dumpster. Thank God I didn't blame the cat. It made you feel better, but it made me feel worse, like I had betrayed that table, sentenced it to death for something that was in no way its fault. I preserved the shattered pieces of the serving dish in a box for you, and as much as I wanted to, I didn't preserve the broken pieces of the table for myself.

"The ghosts don't want us here," our tour guide is telling us in front of a 5th Street mansion. "In the 80s the city got it listed on the national registry and they started giving tours. But then things started breaking." A plate glass window upstairs shattered



while tourists were standing in front of it. Dishes shot out of cabinets downstairs. Lightbulbs spontaneously exploded.

"Can we go inside?" you ask.

"Well, I have some pictures of the inside."

Some things you can't return to what they were. Some things you can't salvage. And saving the pieces becomes ridiculous.

All hotels have their elevator shaft stories, our ghost guide tells us. Brides scorned in the honeymoon suites, hurling themselves 12 floors to the lobby. The thing with ghosts, he says, is that they never really leave a place.

We are exploring our own city this anniversary because we have just bought a house together, and to leave town this soon seems to both of us somehow to be cheating on it.

Our house is 100 years old. Old enough to be left by itself. Our neighborhood is run-down, but promising. There is renovation, houses being refurbished, factories turned into condos. New people in the old neighborhood. We met with these new people, and we made plans for improvement.

We organized a community cleanup.

We planted flowers at the park and the city mowed over them.

We got free, oversize T-shirts that said, Let's take back the community! But from whom?



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Our friends from the neighborhood, Meagan and John, who helped us plant those ill-fated flowers, are divorced now. Meagan, who likes to ask people questions, once asked us what was the hardest year of our marriage. We looked at each other and we didn't know what to say.

And now, a few months later, Meagan has divorced her husband. Did we mislead her? Should we have thought harder about the hardest year?

We were planting flowers, all of our hands in the dirt. The perimeter of that park now lined with chrysanthemums, John with his arm around Meagan. Her question haunted me—the hardest year. “I broke John out of his shell,” she told you, “got him active in the community.” You talked about us like we weren't there, working five feet away from you. You talked about making us better.

“I want to teach Mickey to swim, but he won't let me.”

Do you know how many people have tried to teach me to swim? Uncles, high school friends with pools in their backyards. My mom even paid for swimming lessons, but nothing works. I've made it 30 years without swimming, and I don't see it happening now.

Why am I afraid to call this difficult?

Tired and dirty, we watched television back at our new house, which was set on fire and abandoned, then rebuilt. The shell is the same, but the fixtures are different. They fall from the kitchen ceiling, breaking plates and cracking our table.



We could have hyphenated our names, but we agreed that we are not hyphen people. You suggested we trade last names, and I would have if yours had sounded better.

Even our cat gets my last name. The vet has labeled her carrier with a sticker that reads Blackie Hess. You remind people that her full name is Black Ulysses.

I have joked that we should rename the cat Destructo. We bought her a purple collar with a bell on it so we could hear her coming.

This cat hates to see me read or exercise, anything that might lead to self-improvement. Push-ups send her over to nose on my elbows. She walks across books, sits down in the middle of them in my lap “Stop this,” she pleads with her eyes.

Once I hit the cat with a pillow. When we had just bought that new bedframe and spent all night putting it together, she woke me up destroying it. She wanted to claw that bedframe and I wanted to sleep. I swung the pillow and it knocked her kind of sideways and I felt bad for doing it. I thought, man, that's like if somebody hit me with a mattress.



Destructo is not our only cat. Our other cat we named after a Greek politician. He carries a rope toy in his mouth, dragging its plastic handle across the floor at night, wailing. Like a ghost cat dragging his chains.

All these nicknames for our cats: Ghost Cat, Destructo, Penis Jenkins, Butthole Jones. I tell myself names don't matter, but I remember us both laughing at a friend who made up a new name for himself. Behind his back, we made fun of him for wanting people to call him Ratchett instead of Bill.

But was Ratchett a different person than Bill? Did he feel different about himself, or was Bill still there underneath? When Bill woke up in the morning, did he have to remind himself of the change? It's Ratchett now. Ratchett.

At a party I made a point to forget the change. I called him Bill all night, said his name far more than I would have normally. Hello there, Bill. Would you like more popcorn, Bill?

I am sorry, Bill. I should have called you whatever you wanted.



At the historic theater, two women on a ladder are replacing the old sign with a new one. The theater is recently renovated, and is haunted by the ghost of a projectionist who fell from his station in the top of the building. But the fall didn't kill him. He survived until the paramedics dropped his stretcher and he hit head-first on the sidewalk outside. He haunts the incompetent.

Our tour guide tells us that black people see ghosts more often than white people. “Now this is going to sound racist,” he says, leaning in close.

I am not enjoying myself on this ghost walk. Am I trying? This man tonight placed us into our roles immediately. You, the one who made the call to arrange the ghost walk, are the believer, and I, who frowned at the mention of 20 dollars, am the skeptic. He tries to bond with each of us, telling me he was a skeptic too, until he realized how many people have seen things they can't explain.

What does he do when he isn't going on ghost walks? I imagine he's no different at home, once he takes off his cape and the top hat.

I feel like I am here to entertain him. He has my 20 dollars, yet I'm the one working to act interested.

Now he is knocking on the window of a Metro Cab, trying to convey through hand gestures that he wants directions to the haunted prison.

I am sincerely thinking about ditching our ghost guide. Taking off when he suggests that we all shut our eyes so we can sense any spirits. We could do it. We could disappear and give him a new story to tell, because maybe *we* were ghosts.

I don't do it tonight. Five years ago I would have done it. Five years ago it would have seemed like the perfect idea.



What I meant about names is that I never knew what to call my parents after I outgrew calling them Mommy and Daddy. The transition to Mom and Dad was tough. I stopped calling my dad anything at all, just waited until he looked at me when I had something I wanted to say, stared at him till he caught my gaze.

Did I tell you this already? My friend Doug had parents who called each other Mom and Dad, like those were their names. “Can I make you some dinner, Dad?” “You're looking sexy, Mom.”

What I'm saying is that what we call things changes them. Your old friend, the one with the tattoos, the one who's in all those metal bands? He calls you Dani, which isn't that different, but it's different, still.

Dani had shorter hair—I've seen pictures—and it was Danielle I met and attached my name

to. When I met you, you were hanging halfway out a car window to throw rocks at another car.

Danielle will take me to Mexico. Before we arrive, hurricanes will wipe out one third of the resort, but they'll be rebuilding. You will teach me to swim. I trust you. I am willing to let go of who I am, of this nonswimming identity. I will go all the way underwater. Workers will cheer from the scaffolding. Through a bus window, you'll take a picture of a cellular phone tower ripped from the earth and snapped in two, Mayan ruins in the background.



The ghost walk ends in front of the home of an abortion doctor who spawned virtuoso children. If we close our eyes, we can sense him here. He lost his medical license in the 30s, but his seven grown children remained in this house, the one they were born in, until the last of them died. Two sisters played piano, and our guide claims that sometimes early in the morning people can still hear piano music. The sisters were famous. When they toured Europe, they traveled with their own pianos.

I am less interested in ghost stories than I am in the histories of these buildings. Not the people who lived here, but the buildings themselves. Their rise to prominence, their decline as people moved away from downtown to the suburbs. This hotel was constructed to be a hotel, but it became a warehouse, then a temporary office for the school board. Then it was threatened with demolition before its transformation back into what it once was. It could have just as easily been restored to a warehouse, or a temporary office for the school board, or an abandoned structure.

You're disappointed that our leftovers didn't survive the ghost walk, but fondue isn't known for its staying power.

What else do we have at home? Dried plums. We aren't calling them prunes anymore. Prunes remind us of old people.

“Dried plums rule!” says the orange and purple package. But you aren't convinced.



It was so crowded at the Melting Pot, all of us pressed together and hungry, the servers turned sideways to squeeze between tables. Fondue is making a comeback, you tell me, fondue and pressure cookers. We want to eat like our parents. We want to eat like our grandparents.

Last week you were happy to find an antique-style sugar container, one that I recognize would have matched your grandmother's serving dish. While I'm looking through cabinets tonight, the light fixture falls onto the table, smashing glass and sugar across our kitchen. You were standing so close that you thought you'd had an aneurysm. You thought it was your head exploding.

But it wasn't faulty workmanship that brought down that light fixture. It was a ghost. The abortion doctor, the projectionist. The famous piano-playing sisters. The you I first met, or the me from five years ago.

What are ghosts, really, but people who want things the way they were?



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THE2NDHAND FAQ:

# Ghosts in the Fondue\*

**Q: What is the best way to melt chocolate for dipping?**

**A:** Ghosts.

**Q: Where can I find more pictures of the chocolate fondue?**

**A:** There are a lot of photos out there that caught a spirit on film during weddings, birthdays, and other special events. Also, a child's—and especially a teenager's—emotional energy seems to attract spirits.

**Q: Can I use the fountain outdoors?**

**A:** Doesn't matter. Bright daytime? Nope. It doesn't matter. If there's a spirit present, it'll be there no matter what the time of day (or night) it is.

**Q: How does the chocolate get to the top of the fountain?**

**A:** There's not really an easy answer for that question. Some people perform exorcisms or some type of elaborate ceremony. Some believe you can politely ask the spirit. You can't really make them go anywhere if they don't want to is what I personally believe, even though I think it doesn't hurt to politely ask. Always have respect for something you can't see.

**Q: How long can the chocolate fountain run for before the chocolate solidifies?**

**A:** I get this question a lot! OK... one was getting colder and colder during the hours we were out there and there were kids playing pranks. For the most part, the average ghost/spirit seems to be harmless. It's a lot of walking around or being stationary, taking pictures and hoping for something to happen.

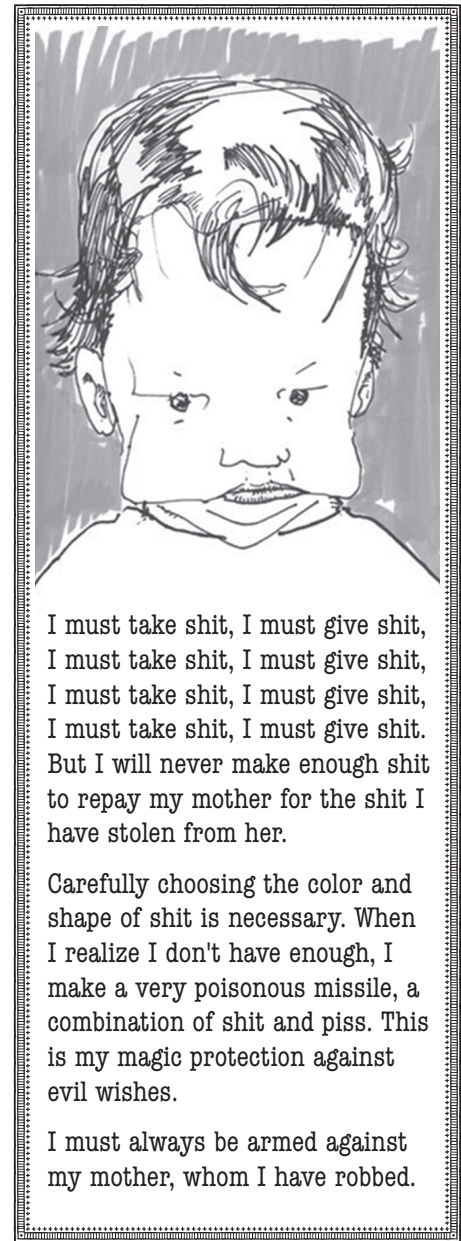
**Q: There are other companies hiring chocolate fountains. Why should we choose your company?**

**A:** To put it simply, a ghost hunter/investigator goes to a place and tries to get proof that a ghost might be, or is, there. For most of us it is sort of a pastime we enjoy very much, but we are pretty serious about it.

**Q: Do chocolate fountains break down and does fruit get stuck in the machine?**

**A:** I love skeptics because they keep you grounded. This isn't an exact science, so you're open to making errors. I tell people that they don't have to believe in ghosts at all, just the possibility of them.

\* Questions from the *Original Chocolate Fondue Fountain* FAQ. Answers from *D.C. Ghosts and Hauntings* FAQ.



FROM ANDREW DAVIS'S SERIES OF STAID IMPULSIONS TITLED "THE ANTIPURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE," APPEARING MONTHLY AT THE2NDHAND.COM/ANTIPURPOSE.