

GHOSTS OF THE PROJECTS

Patrick Jonathan

Everyone knows ding-dong-ditch: press the doorbell once, twice, run into the night. But we'd make sure to do it at the odd hours – 4 am, or at dinner time when everyone was down for a meal, on early Monday mornings when the families were just waking. How it'd get worse from there, Nacho and I, we didn't know.

A lot of the homes they didn't have ringers anyway. So we played the knock game. A few taps at first. Next time, maybe in the late late night a single, tough kick. Even a scratch. Then we'd run. Usually waiting in the bushes, or right around the corner of a home, we'd watch on silent and listen for the response. They'd sprint to the door trying to catch us, curse into the neighborhood air "don't fuck with my place!" But soon they started ignoring it.

Never liked being ignored.

I remember Nach one time scratching a door so hard. We went running off, and sitting in the bushes his nail was bleeding. It had broken halfway, the soft undernail creeping out blood. He just put it in his mouth and sucked on it until it stopped.

Next would be Nacho's move, the dead things. He'd go down to the pond for a fish, drag it home with him, the fish still on the line on the ground behind him, hook in mouth. It'd arrive a fresh, beat-up mess on the side lawn for Mr Eric, our new target, hook and a few feet of line tearing out its mouth, waiting to be found.

We'd sit around each day about the time Mr Eric would come home from work, see if he took note of the fish, gathering bugs on his lawn. After two days he noticed. He shoveled it up and put it in the big green garbage. Not such a nice way for that fishy to be buried, we thought.

We'd wait a while for the next one to come to us: a frog half run over, legs flattened but body still good. This one we'll put near his mailbox, we thought. Maybe he would put it together. It dried to dust under the sun. A croaking skeleton on the black street.

One time Nach found this baby bird a mom had dropped from the nest. A big fall. He did what he could to mend it. Found worms in the morning for it to feed, a little plastic ketchup cup for it to drink from. It didn't take though. "Another broken thing," Nach said.

"Then let's use it this time," I said.

"Okay, but only when she is dead."

We put this one on the ground under one of Mr Eric's front windows. She'd been dead now a couple days, but it took Nach a while to give her up.

"It don't need you anymore, Nach," I told him. He pinched it by the neck scruff and put it in a little hamburger carton, tiny feathers coming off onto his fingertip like eyelashes he could wish away. We tossed it at Mr Eric's shut window one late night. Barely even a sound as it hit the glass and sunk to the dirt, a marshmallow dropping to the floor.

We think he was confused when he found it a few days later. He'd go from looking at the ground, to the window, to the roof, and back to the ground. Like that, standing over little her for a few minutes, up and down curious like that until he picked that baby up with the shovel and threw it in the big green bin.

We looked on.

"I'm going to remember," Nach said, something welling up.

I shook my head, held his shoulder. "Something he doesn't suspect," I said.

The next one took planning, but we began to get it right. It was an easy enough start. The bulb to his porch light was always brighting up the street too much anyway. We unscrewed it just enough for it to flicker and flicker and shake and unscrew itself more until it went dark. A week long creep.

Doing the outside of the house was too easy. We needed to get in.

Nach said the best way was through the cellar window. It didn't lock, just needed a little kick-in, not too much to break it, and we could shimmy down and in.

I landed on top of the dryer machine. Hopped down. The basement was nothing but a mattress and an old light and the machines. Nach said he didn't care about nothing down there. We rigged our way in upstairs and toyed with the kitchen light first, then the living room, the bathroom, where Nach peed into the trash. Each light just a few degrees turn, it would be flickering and dark soon enough, inside and out.

We let two weeks pass. It was summer, a murder summer. Ten boys shot so far, all a block or two from our own. They told us the cops didn't come until someone had named the body dead. Three of the boys bled out that way, an hour or two in the street, shirts tied above the wounds, waiting for the red and blue lights that never came. Most guys survived the shots though. Walking around these streets with holes in them as if they'd come back from dead, ghosts of the projects.

We still spent most our days outside. Nach's old man didn't let him up into the main house anyway, kept him in the

basement most all of the day, but an easy enough away in and out of it down there. Long as he was around when the man got home for dinner he didn't ask a question, left Nach alone. To escape and roam.

I turned up with a new bike one day. That gave us something to do. We got a peg on the back and rode together down some hills, pushed it up some, took it off some jumps. Then one day this big trailer comes thundering down the crossroad just as we're heading towards. We could have stopped the bike easy, but this one was more fun: we hopped off and sent the wheels ghost-ride into the street. We didn't send it in time to get out in front of the trailer, but it went into the side and bailed underneath, picking up the weight of the back eight-tires of the truck as it went. That baby went flat and to pieces, one of the tires and the frame going twenty-thirty airborne. The seat flying off into someone's windshield. Wonderful disaster. We sprinted and yelled the whole way back home.

The days stayed hot and mean.

We went back to our project. Mr Eric had been keeping stranger hours now. Staying up nights, Nach noticed, put a new light on for the porch. Nach said the light thing wasn't playing good.

"We can do more," I said.

Found out the man liked his computer, liked to do work on it,
sit by it on the weekends scrolling or watching.

We got a plan.

I turned up with a new computer one day. We toyed around
with it a bunch, figured out a few tricks. One night we both
went into the basement while he was home, a night he was
doing some watching. We plugged in, punched some tricks into
the keys, got his screen onto our screen: He's got ladies on.

We pull up a text box onto our screen. He can see it too.

Nach puts into red font, bare across the screen:

Im sitting this one lighted house I will probably take it in

The cursor pulsing.

Just like that. We hear the chair scrape upstairs. Then quiet.

The text box closes. Quiet.

"Again," I whisper him.

Im this one lighted house I will probably take it in

this one lighted house I take in

The chair scrapes. We hear him in frantics above us. He switches on off lights.

"You don't belong in here! You are in the wrong home!" We hear him scream, thudding above us. "Leave here! Take your death and go!"

"You gotta get out," Nach says. "I face him."

"Good."

I take the computer stuff in my bag, get up on the dryer, push out through the window and let it fall in behind just as I hear the door click open for the basement.

It's a few days before I see Nach again.

"What you end up doing with all that computer junk?" He asks in August.

"Put it on the train tracks," I said. "I had music playing from it when the train flattened it." Nach is quiet for a moment, as if trying he's trying to remember. Remember hearing the song, the keys flying up under the slice of the train wheels. But the sounds move through us and out. A siren flying off some neighborhood down. The bark of guard dogs. Another car with half a muffler machine-gunning by. Children wandering wide-mouthed in the mix of it all.

"And what about you and the man?" I finally ask.

"He says we gotta move. Says the fucking house has haunts,"
he tells me, welling up again.

"Where you gonna go?"

"I donno, anywhere but home," he finishes.

