

Ernest and the Citizen Ghost

by

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Ernest Gunter was a careful and cautious man especially in financial matters. If a deal sounds too good to be true, it probably isn't true, he would say, but this went beyond that, it was a fantastic deal--a huge house, a mansion, fully furnished and on acreage for a price less than the land alone. Even if the house turned out to be a money pit, he could raze it and still make a handsome profit, but he didn't see how that could be. He had had the structure inspected from the tip of the roof to the basement -- it was in perfect condition. Yet suspicion nagged at him and right before he signed the contract, he asked, one more time, "What is wrong with the house?"

"Physically, nothing that I know of," the salesman hedged. "The last tenant complained about hearing noises at night."

"Noises? You mean like steps and creaking sounds? Is that why it's so cheap? I'm buying a haunted house?"

The salesman smiled weakly, shrugged and nodded.

"Let me sign those papers."

"You're still going to buy the house?"

"Of course, especially now that I know why it's so cheap." Ernest signed with confidence and took the key. "I'm moving in tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Yes, is there a problem?"

"Oh, no. It's just that it's Halloween."

"Cracked foundations, leaking roofs, flawed structures and broken pipes scare me, but ghosts don't, not even on Halloween. All old houses creak, the ghost part is an over active imagination."

Ernest ate late that evening. Before retiring he checked on his old basset hound, "Soft & Easy" on the porch in his fenced backyard. "Well, it looks like you've adjusted to your new home." The dog now, barely more than a pillow that ate, acknowledged Ernest's presence with an almost imperceptible raising of one eyebrow and then quickly returned to his sleep.

Ernest was tired but content. It was a fantastic deal; he would sleep like a baby.

No sooner had Ernest closed his eyes and eased off into a light slumber when he was startled by the loud clanging of pipes. "What the hell is that?" he asked himself and quickly bolted out of the bed. The clanging, loud and continuous, seemed to be coming from upstairs. Water must be running, Ernest thought, sometimes water running at a specific rate causes resonance, violently vibrating pipes, but he had never heard anything this loud. The clanging continued. He checked each faucet, one by one, opening and closing it to see if the change would stop the vibrations. Then as suddenly as it had started, it stopped. The silence was deafening.

Again, just as Ernest dozed off, he was awakened by a combination of banging and clanging sounds louder than those of the first episode. Again he investigated and again it stopped as suddenly as it had started. This sequence was repeated through the whole night, the noise and the duration increasing with each repetition.

Finally, in the wee hours of the morning, frustrated and completely exhausted, he yelled out, "What the hell do you want?"

"I thought you'd never assk," somebody or something hissed, ending the last word with a hard 'k' sound.

This totally surprised Ernest. He wasn't even sure why he asked the question, but he certainly didn't expect a response. He turned toward the voice and there, in the middle of the living room, he saw an elongated spinning mass. The top of the spinning mass suddenly stopped and a face came into sharp focus, a rather comical face with wide open eyes and a toothy smile cradled on a gigantic, yellow bow tie, almost like a clown, but not quite. The lower mass, the body, continued spinning but seemed to be winding down and it finally stopped and for a moment, Ernest could see both body and head clearly. The being was sporting a bright red sport coat, dark green shirt, a yellow bow tie and faded blue jeans. Then the head started to spin as if it were unwinding. As the head started to spin the being clasped it in his hands and stopped it. "Sorry," he said, "sometimes its hard to get steady after I get all wound up."

"Who the hell are you?"

"I'm Panfilo Pantross, Ernest Guntwyscheftler," the being said, raising one arm high above him, then sweeping it in an expansive bow.

"Ernest Gunter. It's been Gunter for two generations."

"It was Guntwyscheffter a lot longer." Panfilo Pantross snapped his head up from the bowed position and smiled.

"Be that as it may, Panfi-something Pan-something else..."

"Panfilo Pantross."

"What kind of name is that?"

"Unique," again, punctuating the word with a hard 'k' sound.

"Yes, whatever. But if you want something why don't you just say it?"

"It wouldn't be polite."

"It wouldn't be polite? You bang pipes, rattle chains, slam doors and make a racket like a demented poltergeist and you think it's impolite to speak up?"

"We have different rules on this side of the fence."

"Well, what do you want?"

"I want to vote."

"Vote? You can't vote."

"Why not? Here's my poll tax." Panfilo Pantross handed Ernest a yellowing piece of paper.

"This is for 1922! Besides, we haven't had a poll tax in -- hmmm, er, -- decades, but you still can't vote. The dead can't vote."

"We've been voting for years."

"Then what's the problem?"

"We're voting, but we're not making the choices. Just because we don't complain," Panfilo Pantross pointed in the general direction of the old cemetery several blocks away, "it doesn't mean we don't want to have an influence in our affairs. If you consider the sum total of all who have gone before you, we're the majority."

This certainly was a new definition for the silent majority. "Were you voted to represent the 'silent' majority?"

"We have different rules on this side of the fence."

"I can't believe I'm arguing with a ghost--an illusion. I can't believe I'm saying this out loud." Ernest flared his nostrils, shook his head and without uttering another sound, went to bed. The moment he closed his eyes, the illusion started to bang doors and slam chairs. If I ignore it, it will go away. It's just in my mind. This is not real. Ernest kept saying to himself. The noise grew in a crescendo until the whole house was vibrating.

"Okay, tomorrow, I'll get you an absentee ballot and we can discuss it, but right now I need some quiet so I can sleep."

Ernest slept, but it seemed like he had just closed his eyes when the alarm went off and he had to get up. He could've slept, if he had wanted to, but that wasn't his nature.

As the day wore on, Ernest became convinced that Panfi... something or other was a nightmare, a rather lively nightmare, but still just a nightmare. He simply ate too

much too late and you always pay a price when you do that. However, on the way home he did pick up an absentee ballot--just in case.

That evening Ernest ate lightly and soon after he settled and relaxed in front of the TV drowsiness crept upon him, drowsiness too sweet to ignore. Everything was quiet. Now he was convinced; it had been a nightmare, but he had to admit, an interesting one. So interesting, he'll have to write it down before the details fade away, and just as he closed his eyes he was jolted into consciousness by the incessant clamoring of an oversized cowbell.

"What the hell is this?" The clanging continued. "Okay, stop. Who is this?"

"It's me, Panfilo Pantross. No, I'm not the indigestible piece of meat you ate last night." Panfilo leaned forward coming within a foot of Ernest's face and gave his toothy smile.

"Back off," Ernest said. Panfilo straightened up. "Do you have to make so much noise?"

"If I didn't, I would never be asked to appear."

"Can't you just appear?"

"No. It wouldn't be polite. I have to be asked?"

Ernest got up, took the ballot out of his briefcase, slapped it on the desk and placed a pencil on it. "Fill it out and I'll mail it in the morning."

"I can't fill it out."

"Why? Can't you read?"

"I can read--I just can't write--I can't lift a pencil."

"You can clang pipes, slam doors, rattle chains and ring bells but you can't lift a pencil?"

"That's right. Those are special chains, pipes and bells."

"Okay," Ernest knew that if he were to get any sleep, he'd have to fill it out. He pulled out the chair at the desk and slammed himself on it. "How do you want me to mark this thing?"

Panfilo looked over the ballot. "I don't recognize any of these people." He read one of the referendums. "I know the words, but I don't know what it means." Ernest, though a mature man, was quite apolitical and knew absolutely nothing about the candidates. Panfilo waited a moment and noting that nothing was forth coming decided to follow a different tack. "What is his stand on prohibition?"

"Prohibition? Prohibition was repealed in the thirties! Where have you been for the last eighty years?"

"Where should I star... "

"Never mind," Ernest interrupted. "But let me assure you, prohibition is a dead issue."

Panfilo Pantross straighten up, looked at Ernest and raised an eyebrow.

"Wrong word, wrong word," Ernest corrected himself. "It's an irrelevant issue."

"Well, what are the relevant issues?"

Ernest had no idea. "Look, let me sleep tonight and tomorrow I'll have the information."

The next day, Ernest, true to his word, gathered information on the candidates and the issues. However, he was new at this and his first sources, the campaign headquarters of the candidates, turned out to be the least reliable, consisting mainly sound bites and slogans. Independent organizations like the *League of Women Voters* provided better information, but the best source was the newspaper, especially the back issues. Ernest was earnest in his study and by the end of the day he was well versed in the issues and the candidates. He actually looked forward to explaining them to Pan. It was at this very moment that Ernest experienced a very powerful urge to sit down. He just couldn't believe that he had spent the whole day boning up to pass information to a ghost, a citizen ghost, no less. He was losing it.

"Are you ready to go over the ballot?" Ernest said, sitting at his desk, not expecting a response. It was an illusion, he was sure.

"Yes," Panfilo Pantross slowly came into view, "I'm glad I didn't have to make noise to get your attention."

It is an illusion, a figment of my imagination. I'm going to change the color of the bow tie to purple. The bow tie remained yellow. I have to relax. I'll just play along and at the right moment I'll will him to disappear. He then proceeded to describe the candidates and explain the issues.

One by one, Panfilo made his choice, except for one. In this race, the ghost simply could not make up his mind. Finally, he blurted out, "What is his position on prohibition?"

"Prohibition? I already told you that's an irrelevant issue. Did you like to drink?"

"Never touched the stuff."

"Then why are you so concerned about it?"

"I think it's anti-spirit."

He got so involved in the discussions, he soon forgot his stratagem to have Panfilo disappear or perhaps he didn't want him to disappear. When he finished marking the ballot, Ernest folded it, placed it in an envelope. "I'll drop it off tomorrow." Of course, Panfilo Pantross could not sign the receipt so Ernest, after some hesitation, signed for him.

The next day, Ernest did not drop off the absentee ballot as he had promised, but tossed it in the trash instead. It wasn't simply that he was renegeing on a promise, but a moral issue. He may have been apolitical, but he wasn't amoral and his signature, like his word, was his bond. That was a bogus ballot and his signature said it was valid. He just couldn't do it.

When Ernest got home, he sensed something was wrong. He went from room to room but found nothing unusual. Everything was as he had left it. But he kept hearing a muted, thumping noise. When he went to the back, he found a dog running fast around the perimeter of his yard. Apparently, the dog had been running for quite some time because it had worn a path deep enough to be considered a trench. On the far

side you just see the tip of the tail above the trench. It couldn't possibly be "Soft and Easy," that dog had never run more than ten feet at one time, besides this dog had large, stiff ears spread out horizontally like wings. He squinted and adjusted his glasses. It couldn't possibly be "Soft and Easy," but it was. Ernest grabbed his dog as he came by. It was like holding a giant, ringing alarm clock. No growling, no snapping just short, quick incessant panting and quivering muscle spasms and legs with bulging veins that would never cease moving. The dog never changed expression. It had a painted face with glazed, brown beady eyes and a slightly open mouth that looked like a mad grin. "What happened to you 'Soft and Easy'?"

"A few more hours and he'll be light enough to fly. Then you'll have a real bird dog."

"Panfilo Pantross, there's a mean streak in ya."

"Ernest Guntwyscheffter, you threw my ballot in the trash."

"Stop this and we'll discuss it."

The dog immediately relaxed and grew limp in Ernest arms. Ernest carried him to the porch and laid him down. "Is he okay?"

"Sure, in fact, I've added ten years to his life. I can add thirty to yours."

"Don't you dare." Ernest followed by Panfilo entered the house. "I'll get another absentee ballot tomorrow."

"I've changed my mind about voting absentee," Panfilo said. "I want to go to the polls and vote in person."

"You mean you're going to stick around here until Tuesday? No, no, that won't do, besides you can't go in person--looking the way you do."

"Only you see me. No one else does. I'll just go to the voting booth with you and I'll tell you how to mark the ballot."

"But then I won't be able to vote."

"You never vote."

"I do to."

"Name one election in which you voted."

"Well," Ernest hesitated a moment. He couldn't remember ever voting. "When I was in high school I voted for the track sweetheart."

"That doesn't count. You have never voted Ernest Guntwyscheflter."

"Well now I want to vote. I've studied the candidates and learned the issues and I want to vote."

After some heated discussions, Ernest and Panfilo finally agreed that they would vote as one person, but both had to agree on the choices. This seemed to be the reasonable compromise satisfying both Earnest's moral sense and Panfilo's civic mindedness.

On election day, Panfilo appeared dressed in a tuxedo.

"Why are you dressed like that?"

"You said I looked ridiculous in my yellow bow tie and red sports jacket."

"You said, only I can see you."

"True, but I wanted to add some dignity to this event." Then he smiled, but not just his normal, ear to ear, toothy grin, but one that went past the ears going completely around the head and crisscrossing in various angles until the whole head was a cluster of teeth in every which way direction. It was a cubistic painting made flesh, if the stuff ghosts are made off could be called flesh.

"Will you get serious!"

"Okay, okay -- just a bit of humor -- life is short and eternity is long."

Everything went smoothly until they got into the voting booth. There was one candidate in which they had not completely agreed on and they broke into a loud argument. Of course, the other people in the room could hear only half of the argument, however that was loud enough that the election judge opened the curtain to see if everything was okay.

"Isn't the secret ballot sacred anymore?" Ernest said, irritably.

"Well, huh..." The election judge was taken aback by the question. He wasn't sure what he had expected, but it wasn't this. "Sir," he somewhat recollected himself, "is everything okay?"

"Yes, we're just having a small disagreement that will be resolved soon because," Ernest turned toward the invisible Pantross and waving his hand in front of him, "I'm holding the pencil." He then turned toward the judge and with a scowl uttered an expectant, "Well."

"Sir, er," the judge said, hesitantly. "Get on with it. People are waiting."

And it did go on and on with the one sided argument growing louder and ever more animated. All activity in the hall ceased with all eyes focused on the voting booth with the vibrating curtain. This time the curtain wasn't opened by the election judge, but by two police officers.

"Sir, will you please come with us." The politeness of the statement did not match the violence with which Ernest was jerked out of the voting booth. "You have the right to remain silent...", said one of the officers as the other handcuffed Ernest.

"How about my right to vote?" Ernest turned to the election judge as he was being led out of the room. "Are you going to cast our vote? Will our vote count?"

The election judge picked up the unfinished ballot, but did not look at it. He didn't want the selections that had been made to influence his decision whether to cast or not cast the ballot. The man was obviously deranged, but does this disqualify him from voting? The judge thought it over for a moment and then, without looking at it, folded the ballot and tossed it in the trash basket.

"Have you seen your ghost friend lately?" the therapist asked in a somewhat condescending way.

"No," Ernest responded pensively. It had been four weeks and he hadn't seen hide or hair of Panfilo. Come to think of it, he wasn't sure if he had ever seen Panfilo's hide except for the ashen ghost stuff around the face and the hair, he just couldn't remember for sure. It seems that the stringy, unkempt mass changed colors with each appearance—red, blue, green, purple--however, the whole image was now fading away. Two weeks ago he had decided to change tack so he could get out of this insane

asylum. Of course, they didn't call it that, but that is what it was. He hated euphemisms. Now he no longer insisted on Panfilo's existence. At first Ernest thought Pantross was simply being ornery. He didn't rattle chains or bang pipes. He hadn't appeared to him or to the shrink even when he asked him to and he had stressed the hard k sound. The only physical evidence he had was a skinny Bassett hound and a trench around the perimeter of his fence and that, at best, was circumstantial. It could be more believably explained as simply a dog gone wacko.

"How do you feel about that?"

"I'm glad, since he doesn't exist."

"Once you get out of here, what will you do if he appears?"

"He won't because he doesn't exist. I just can't believe that I once thought he was real. It doesn't make sense. Of all the millions of people on earth, why would he appear only to me? The only logical explanation is that he was created by my mind." At first the tack was a ruse to get out, but now he was beginning to doubt that Panfilo really existed.

"That's right. But make sure you continue taking your medication."

Ernest picked up his dog at the kennel on the way home from the hospital. 'Soft & Easy' had gained some weight, but he was still skinny for a Bassett Hound. He was alert and seemed happy to see him.

Ernest quickly glanced at the rooms on the way to take the dog to the back. Everything seemed to be as he had left it four weeks ago. Was it only four weeks? It seemed like another lifetime. The trench was still there. It was definitely real; he hadn't

imagined it. If only 'Soft & Easy' could talk. Ernest re-entered the house and turned up the thermostat to take the chill out of the house. It was good to be back home. He didn't quite understand why he felt at home at this place when he hadn't owned it but a month and a half and had lived in it less than two weeks.

After a quiet evening, Ernest was relaxed and content. He was glad to retire to his own bed. It was not until past midnight that he was startled by the loud rattling of chains and banging of pipes.

"Okay, Panfilo Pantross, where in hell have you been?" The familiar face came into focus atop the spinning mass. He had bright green hair this time. "Don't you dare say I didn't ask ya." Ernest stressed the hard 'k' sound.

"If I had," Panfilo's body stopped spinning. "You'd still be in the nut house and I wouldn't be able to vote."

"I? It's 'we' would not be able to vote; besides it wasn't a nut house. It was a, huh," Ernest was about to say hospital, but that was too much of a euphemism. "an asylum and a rather nice one."

"Nut house."

"Well, you could've cleared the mess up if you had showed up when she asked you to."

"Then, if she admitted it, you'd both be in the nut house." Panfilo leaned toward Ernest and gave him his toothy smile that spread from ear to ear.

It was hard to remain mad at Panfilo Pantross--no, wrong word, not 'mad,' but 'angry.' It was mad to carry on a conversation with a ghost. Ernest made his way to the

bathroom with Panfilo following closely behind. “I’m going to the bathroom. Do you mind? Jeez, don’t show for weeks and now he follows me to the bathroom.”

“Sorry. I forgot.”

Ernest quickly entered the bathroom, turned the light on and closed the door on Panfilo’s face.

Panfilo stuck his head through the door. “I’ll wait for out here.” Panfilo didn’t pull his head back out; he just faded away.

When he turned he saw his glass of water on the counter and next to it, on a paper tray, his pills. He had forgotten to take his medication. He picked up the glass of water and the pills and started to take them, but then stopped. If he took this pills Panfilo would go away, but he wasn’t sure he wanted him to go away. No, he wouldn’t go away. Panfilo was real—he was talking to him and the trench is still there. So, in either case, he shouldn’t take the pills. Ernest dumped the pills and the contents of the bottle of pills into the commode. Panfilo was real; he would just have to be more discreet in public.

“And, we,” Panfilo continued as Ernest stepped out of the bathroom, stressing the ‘we,’ “wouldn’t be able to strike down that terrible law.”

“What law are you talking about?”

“Prohibition.”

“Prohibition? That’s dead issue.”

“Precisely.”