

Ave-boo of Communication

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FADE IN:

An ancient Victorian mani-mansion juts from a hilltop like a rotting tooth. Boards cover all its windows. Almost as if someone tried to keep something IN.

An owl HOOTS. Skeletal trees sway, backdropped by a dark sky. Little movement. Until -

CAR HEADLIGHTS pierce the sullen gloom. Driving along a zigzagging road, they park at the front door. Two men emerge.

INT. HOUSE - LIVING ROOM

A bizarre mix-match of furniture. Old timey antiques, along with seventies, eighties and last year's decor. Judging from the cobwebs, no-one's visited for awhile.

The door opens. CREEEEAAAK.

JUSTIN THOMPSON (30s) and RANDOLPH (50s) walk in. Based on his logged, gaudy ves, Randolph's a realtor. Justin holds one suitcase - he's moving in!

He looks around the abandoned living room.

JUSTIN

Home sweet home. Though not TOO sweet... yet!

Randolph stifles a nervous laugh. His eyes skip around, wary of danger. Any minute now.

RANDOLPH

Are you absolutely sure you want to stay the night?

JUSTIN

(scoffs)

You think my hand slipped when I wrote that check? If I didn't intend to live here, there are waaaay less high-maintenance places to rent!

RANDOLPH

Mr. Thompson, my firm offers quite affordable cleaning and redecorating services. I've been in the realty business twenty years.

JUSTIN

Twenty? I've been writing longer than that!

RANDOLPH

So... you can trust my expertise. Nothing about the contract requires you move in the same day you close!

Justin patrols the living room perimeter. Wipes dust off the staircase bannister with a finger as he goes.

JUSTIN

Wow. The home of the illustrious Victorian writer Daniel R. Gustoff the Third! Cleaning can chill a few weeks, Randolph. I wanna soak in all the vibes now!

RANDOLPH

Mr. Thompson, about those vibes -

Justin spots a SEVENTIES STYLE COUCH. Arching an eyebrow, he walks over. Turns on the snark.

JUSTIN

Somehow, I doubt Mr. Gustoff ever sat here.

He pats the couch. Dust puffs. Randolph turns red, coughs.

RANDOLPH

Well, as everyone in our office made a point to stress, this house HAS seen several... er... abrupt turnovers in ownership. With several "non-essentials" left behind.

JUSTIN

(grins)

Which is why I got it at a bargain price!

He fist-pumps to emphasize the win. Something RATTLES upstairs. Perhaps the wind? But Randolph's head shoots up. His eyes widen. Fishing a CRUCIFIX from his shirt, the realtor inches slowly towards the door.

RANDOLPH

The time has come for me to take my exit, Mr. Thompson. And to gently remind that you've signed a waiver of liability.

JUSTIN

Yeah, in that ginormous stack of legalese. Freaking paperwork took all day!

RANDOLPH

So anything that happens - to you, or otherwise - is not our responsibility....

JUSTIN

Yeah, yeah, I get the drift. Ghosts n' stuff. Ooooo, scareeeeeey!

Justin wiggles his fingers at Ralph. Another WEIRD SOUND upstairs. Raldolph jumps.

RANDOLPH

You've been duly warned, Mr. Thompson!

Randolph hightails it out the door. Pauses in the entrance to plaster on a plastic smile.

RANDOLPH (cont'd)

Thanks for choosing "Second Chance Realty". Enjoy your new home!

SLAM. Randolph's gone. Justin relaxes, picks up his suitcase.

JUSTIN

Whew. I though he'd never leave. Well, time to work!

MOMENTS LATER

Justin dusts a table. Unpacking the suitcase at his feet, he pulls ou:

CANDLESTICKS, a LAPTOP, a PAPER MANUSCRIPT (THUD!), and a OUIJA BOARD. Justin fusses with the exact positioning of each on the table. Lights the candles. Dials his cell.

The call picks up. Justin grins:

JUSTIN (cont'd)

Amy - the eagle's landed. I wish you could've come today. This place - it's a hoot!

He opens the laptop. While listening to "Amy", Justin logs into Amazon - surfs over to: Cleaning Supplies.

JUSTIN (cont'd)
Yeah, it's pretty rank. So not your style. But nothing a bit of bleach can't clean up. I'm buying in bulk on Amazon right now. No, of COURSE there's no internet. I'm using the hotspot on my phone.

CLICK. Bleach goes in the Amazon cart. Justin looks around the room, smiles.

JUSTIN (cont'd)
You should see it, Amy. It's like being teleported back in time! If Daniel Gustoff's butler came around the corner and asked me if I'd like some tea, I wouldn't be all that surprised!

On the laptop, Justin surfs over to... Board Games.

JUSTIN (cont'd)
Hey, stop worrying. I'm safe. This place is waaaaaay far from town. No-one's gonna wanna break in. The "haunted house rep" it has is sure to scare 'em off! I've got so much isolation here, the UN would probably view it as a war crime. So I'm thinking... I should probably order some games for mental stimulation. What do you think? Jenga? Or - remember that electronic Simon game?

He lowers his voice to a creepy tone.

JUSTIN (cont'd)
Did I ever tell you how Sir Gustoff died? Word is, he fell asleep drinking. Ash from his pipe hit his nightgown and POOF - the old guy went up like torch! One of his butlers tried to snuff the flames out with a blanket, got Farenheited too. No - I DON'T believe in ghosts. But it's the perfect environment to inspire me to finish up MY literary gem. Hey, you know I even brought a Ouija board? I'm gonna break it in at midnight, just to kick everything off on the right note!

Nearby, the stairs CREAK.

The cell connection dissolves in STATIC. Justin frowns, shakes his phone. Tilts it various angles to try to get a few bars. Nothing works.

JUSTIN (cont'd)
Amy? Hello?!?

Finally, he stops trying. Hangs up.

JUSTIN (cont'd)
So much for Verizon being
"everywhere". Overpriced BS.

Sighing, he toggles to software on his laptop. A MOVIE SCRIPT titled "Isolation" glows onscreen.

Justin picks up the first page of the paper manuscript, revealing: handwritten edits in red. And starts editing the digital version to match.

The candles flicker. Something MOANS.

Justin looks up. Sees nothing. Bends back over his work, chuckles.

JUSTIN (cont'd)
"It was a dark and stormy night."
Man - even I'm not that cliché!

He reads from the manuscript, seriously now.

JUSTIN (cont'd)
"Julia felt lonely. Even in a crowd,
she felt like a ghost. Participating
drained her essence away." Drained
her essence? Or is that too wordy?
How's about just "Drained her"? SMITE
that pesky orphan, and free up a
page!

Willing to "kill his darlings", Justin happily deletes the offending words onscreen.

TWO TRANSLUSCENT FIGURES watch from the stairs, unseen by Justin. DANIEL GUSTOFF and Man Servant EMMERICK - burn marks on their faces and clothes!

Gustoff and Emmerick glide down the stairs. Emmerick tiptoes. Gustoff notices, doubletakes.

GUSTOFF
Why are you doing that? Neither of us
even touch the floor!

EMMERICK

Well, I do. Look, see?

GUSTOFF

Emmerick, we're in limbo. He couldn't hear us if we stomped!

EMMERICK

Well, an occasional moan DOES slip through. Who does it kill to take precautions?

He snickers at his own joke. Gustaff shoots him a disgusted look.

Unaware, Justin continues to work. Reads the manuscript's paper pages. Changes digital lines.

Gustoff and Emmerick reach the first floor, glide towards the table. Gustoff reads over Justin's shoulder.

GUSTOFF

"A woman of willowy proportions"
Willowy? That description's been done to death?

Emmerick snorts. Gustoff glares.

GUSTOFF (cont'd)

What?

EMMERICK

"Done to Death". That's rich, coming from you.

GUSTOFF

You're implying my work's derivative?
Now? After all these years?

EMMERICK

No. I'm just saying... since we're ghosts, we're dead too.

Gustoff continues to glare. Emmerick shrugs. It's no use.

EMMERICK (cont'd)

No offense intended. I'm just pointing out the pun.

GUSTOFF

Only if you reach EXTREMELY far.

EMMERICK

Must you be so critical of this chap's endeavors? We haven't even formally met the gentleman yet!

GUSTOFF

You might just have a point. The others -

EMMERICK

Whom you so roughly scared off...

GUSTOFF

Weren't men of letters. This one is - albeit of the feeble kind. But perhaps we can get through to him, whereas previously we so tragically...

EMMERICK

Almost Shakespeareanly, you might add -

GUSTOFF

Failed!

Gustoff circles the table, eyes the Ouija board.

EMMERICK

Sir, that's a Ouij-

GUSTOFF

Don't Man-Servant Splain me, Emmerick! I know quite well what that is!

Gustoff looks over the board, Goggles.

GUSTOFF (cont'd)

This confounded child's apparatus has "Goodbye". But where did the simpletons who designed it place "Hello?"

EMMERICK

I guess that part's implied?

GUSTOFF

I have to do everything around here, don't I?

He grabs the PLANCHETTE. Spells out Greetings.

Justin sees - sits up. He's frozen in wonder. Horror, too.

Gustoff finishes, stares at Justin. Waits.

GUSTOFF (cont'd)
Well, Sir. I've introduced myself. It would be rude for you to not respond now.

JUSTIN
"Eetings"?

He looks around. Shivers.

JUSTIN (cont'd)
There IS a ghost after all? And he's hungry? For what - me?!?

GUSTOFF
Oh, Good Heavens!!

Emmerick snickers. Gustoff whirls on him, irate. The man servant cowers.

EMMERICK
Heavens. It seems you abound with puns tonight...

Gustoff growls, spells out "Hello" instead. Justin jumps to his feet, trembles.

JUSTIN
You're in Hell?!? I'm so, so, sorry...

Emmerick stifles an all-out laugh/.

EMMERICK
Gus, if you don't mind my saying so... it appears this attempt's not going well.

Gustoff rolls his eyes. Types out "Hi." This time, Justin gets it. He sits back down, yells at the top of his lungs...

JUSTIN
Are you Daniels Gustoff?!?

Gustoff clamps hands over his ears.

GUSTOFF
I'm a ghost, but I'm not deaf. Yokel, not so loud!

JUSTIN
I mean, Sir Daniels Gustoff - the
great scribe?

Gustoff melts at THAT compliment. Smiles. Emmerick nudges him.

EMMERICK
Over there on the board. Say "Yes"
now!

GUSTOFF
Ooooh, right. In all the excitement,
I nearly forgot!

Gustoff does. Justin's eyes light up. His jaw drops. But then suspicion sinks in...

Jumping up, Justin runs around the table. Waves his hand over the board. He checks under the table for wires, any conceivable trick.

GUSTOFF (cont'd)
Emmerick, why is that man running
around like a lunatic? Is that some
sort of twenty first century cultural
thing?

Emmerick shrugs. Satisfied it's not hoax, Justin finally sits down... and holds trembling hands towards the board. Then retracts them like it's on fire. Afraid to touch, he yells out:

JUSTIN
Wow. Sir, it's such an honor. My name
is Justin Thompson. I'm... I'm a
writer. Like you!

Emmerick and Gustoff exchange looks.

EMMERICK
Humor him, Sir.

GUSTOFF
If I must.

Justin squints through the candlelight: slightly sees what looks like Gustoff's face.

JUSTIN
In a million years, I... I never
thought you'd really BE here.
(MORE)

JUSTIN (cont'd)
But since you are, I hate to presume,
but - maybe you could help me with my
movie script?

Gustoff freezes.

GUSTOFF
Did I hear that right?

Justin sure didn't hear HIM.

JUSTIN
Hello? Please, please don't leave. I
don't mean to offend. Are you still
here?

Gustoff groans. Nudges the planchette to "Yes" again. Justin
relaxes - good news!

JUSTIN (cont'd)
Oh, thank you so very, very, very
much!

GUSTOFF
Very, very, very? And you call
yourself a writer?

JUSTIN
With your help, this could be MY
masterpiece!

Justin grabs a manuscript page, waves it towards where he
assumes Gustoff might be.

JUSTIN (cont'd)
The procedure would take awhile, but
I can show you the dialog. Then you
can say yes or no to each line.

He nods at the Ouija board.

JUSTIN (cont'd)
And spell out recommended changes,
too!

GUSTOFF
I just said I was present. I never
agreed to that!

Frustrated, he pounds the table. Though his fists slip a
little below the surface, items JUMP from the impact. Justin
scoots his chair back, in shock.

JUSTIN
Have I offended you?

GUSTOFF
To great lengths, Sir!

Justin didn't hear that either. But his lower lip trembles - hurt in his eyes.

JUSTIN
If so, why?

GUSTOFF
Because...

The ghost takes a deep breath, prepares to vent. Emmerick rolls his unseen eyes at Justin.

EMMERICK
A shame I couldn't warn you. Now you did it. Here we go.

GUSTOFF
You perambulating, sniveling putrid pile of a would be wordsmith, you! I - Daniels Gustoff- great playwright of the Ides of Zeus and Tale of Two Continents has spent my LIFE perfecting the skills required of great communicators. (Mimics a child's voice) "Julia was lonely." Bah! And you DARE ask me to waste even one iota of my precious time...

EMMERICK
Gus, we have eternity to waste now...

GUSTOFF
On prattling child's play like that? Never!

He grabs pages of the manuscript, throws them Poltergeist style into the air. Justin cringes.

GUSTOFF (cont'd)
Sir Justin, I know not what meager education you might have, but hopefully you can grasp the basic meaning of these words I say: in a million eternities, I will NEVER help you with your "movie" script. Whatever a movie is, the answer's NO!

Done blustering, Gustoff pants. His chest heaves as he catches his non-existent breath.

Then waits for Justin's response. Nothing.

Emmerick taps him on the shoulder.

EMMERICK

You know he heard none of that.

Gus blows a fuse.

GUSTOFF

Fine! Let me spell it out, then!

Gustoff yanks over the Ouija board. Seeing the board slide back violently, Justin starts. Gustoff grabs the planchette, spells at a feverish pace:

GUSTOFF (cont'd)

I.N.A.N.S.W.E.R.T.Y.O.U.R.R.E.Q.U.E.S
.T.I.

EMMERICK

Sir, you forgot an "O". See, right before "Y". TO.

GUSTOFF

Not my fault, it was a typo.

EMMERICK

What's a typo?

GUSTOFF

This is damnably slow. No more!

Gustoff FLIPS the board off the table. Justin screams.

JUSTIN

Please, don't hurt me. What do you want?!?

GUSTOFF

For once, I want one of you cringing mortals to hear...

Emmerick coughs politely, points towards the laptop.

EMMERICK

Gus, that object over there.. From what I saw, it creates words. Perhaps you can communicate through it instead?

Gus grows curious. He walks toward it - stares at keys.

GUSTOFF

A machine that writes? Perhaps...

He touches the keyboard. HUGE mistake.

As his fingers sink into the keys, electricity sparks. The laptop goes wild with static. And a bizarre, distorted image of Gus' face appears on screen. A charactature with hideous burns.

JUSTIN

Oh my god!

Justin turns to run, trips over his suitcase. Face plants. Rolling onto his back, he tries to scoot away.

Gus is on a ramage now. He trembles and points at the screen.

GUSTOFF

This magic machine mocks me! Is that what I look like now? Blasphemy! All because YOU (points at Emmerick) couldn't bat away a few measly flames with a blanket. A quilted heavy one, no less.

EMMERICK

To tell the truth, the spirits you were drinking that night didn't make it easy.

GUSTOFF

You had ONE job, Emmerick...

EMMERICK

ONE job?!? I was your manservant since you were a child! I cooked your meals, cleaned your chimney. Washed that stinky pipe, too...

GUSTOFF

One job at that crucial moment. And we both died!

A BABBLING noise rises from the floor. Hearing it, Gus stops - looks down. Sees Justin praying desperately.

JUSTIN

Our father who art in heaven. I never, ever believed you before this, but please rest assured I'm so sorry.

(MORE)

JUSTIN (cont'd)

If you're God, you can see in my heart and know it's true. In this moment, I'm a believer. Please, please banish this ghost before he hurts me!

GUSTOFF

Go away? You came to me!

Gustoff grabs a lit candlestick. From Justin's viewpoint, it levitates. Gustoff swipes it at Justin's face. Hair sizzles. A near miss. Justin scrabbles to his feet.

Gus chases after him, swiping with every word.

GUSTOFF (cont'd)

Yes - run, you coward! Like the dozens who did before! You're no writer. You're a child. And if you don't leave, I'll burn you worse than I experienced. So much that when they come to take your corpse away, not even bones will remain!

Yelping and screaming, Justin reaches the door. After a few fumbling tries, he tears it open and runs out into the night. Dropping his cell, which glows. Now far from the ghosts, it appears to have found a few bars.

JUSTIN

I'll never write again. Ghosts are reaaaallllllllll!

Then: silence. Gus and Emmerick exchange looks. Gus blows the candle out, sets it down.

They stroll back to the table, settle into chairs (not really sitting, they levitate instead.) And lock eyes.

EMMERICK

It's going to be like this for eternity, isn't it? People come, you get frustrated...

GUSTOFF

Correction: understandably peeved.

EMMERICK

And scare them silly. All because communicating across the ether isn't meant to be...

Gus looks over at the fallen Ouija Board.

GUSTOFF
If only that gadget were
sophisticated. Like me. And that -

He points towards the laptop, which is functioning again:
the Amazon "Game" browser onscreen.

GUSTOFF (cont'd)
Were not so tempermental.

EMMERICK
Like you, as well?

GUSTOFF
Clam it, Emmerick. Even dead, you
work for me.

EMMERICK
When that man was talking to his
invisible friend, he said he was
using it to purchase things. What
science has wrought in these past
centuries. Amazing!

GUSTOFF
Amazing indeed...

He's looking not at JUST the screen, but a game on it.
SCRABBLE.

Gustoff tries to touch the image. Static ripples. He pulls
back - but remains intrigued.

GUSTOFF (cont'd)
If only we could purchase THAT item.
Alas.

He looks sadly at his fingers. Emmerick grins.

EMMERICK
I have an idea!

Emmerick picks up the other candlestick. Uses it to poke
keys.

EMMERICK (cont'd)
"Order"? I wager that will do the
trick!

CLICK. Scrabble gets added to Justin's cart. The order
submits. BEEP!

The two ghosts lean in, read the screen - extra careful not
to touch.

GUSTOFF

A messenger shall deliver it
tomorrow? Wondrous news!

EMMERICK

Does this make up for any blanket
misgivings, Sir?

Gus reaches out - starts to shake Emmerick's hand... then
bearhugs him last minute.

GUSTOFF

Indeed. You've restored my ability to
communicate. For a writer, that's the
greatest gift of my lifetime... and
beyond!

Outside somewhere... an owl HOOTS.