

# WHOSE GHOSTS THESE ARE

by Charles L. Grant

Charles L. Grant was named grand master at the 2002 World Horror Convention in Chicago. It was a well-deserved accolade for a writer and editor with more than 100 books to his credit and a mantelpiece filled with awards, including the World Fantasy, British Fantasy and Nebula. His pseudonyms include “Geoffrey Marsh” (pulp adventure), “Lionel Fenn” (funny fantasy), “Simon Lake” (Young Adult horror) and “Felicia Andrews” and “Deborah Lewis” (both romantic fantasies).

His 1986 novel *The Pet* has been optioned by the movies, the story “Crowd of Shadows” was optioned by NBC as a TV film, while “Temperature Days on Hawthorne Street” was adapted for the syndicated series *Tales from the Darkside*. His short fiction has been collected in *Tales from the Nightside*, *A Glow of Candles*, *Nightmare Seasons*, *The Orchard*, *Dialing the Wind*, *The Black Carousel* and *A Quiet Way to Scream*, and recent books include *When the Cold Wind Blows*, the fifth volume in the *Black Oak* series, and *Redmoor: Strange Fruit*, a major historical horror novel from Tor, which takes place between 1786 and the 1890s.

“When I was asked to contribute to another themed anthology, I decided to try another serial-killer piece,” explains Grant, “except this time I made him a cop. The editor made a big deal about using the museum, so I did; as it turned out, though, hardly anyone else did. Go figure.”

The street does not change, morning to night. Shops open, shops close; pedestrians walk the crooked sidewalks, with or without burden, peering in the store windows, wishing, coveting, moving on; vans and trucks make their deliveries and leave, while automobiles avoid it because it curves so sharply, so often. To walk from one end to the other is like following the dry bed of a long-dead stream that snakes from no place to nowhere.

None of the buildings here are more than four storeys high, though they seem much taller because the street itself is so narrow. They are old, these buildings, but they are not frail. They are well-kept, mostly, almost equally divided between brick and granite facades with occasional wood trim of various colors.

Nothing special about them; nothing to draw a camera lens or a sketch pad, a commemorative plaque, a footnote in a tourist guide. Stores, a few offices, at ground level on both ends, apartments and offices above; in the middle, apartment buildings with stone stairs and stoops, aged white medallions of mythical creatures over each lintel. Gateless iron-spear fences, small plots of grass, flower boxes, trees at the curb.

Nothing changes, and Hank Cabot liked it that way.

He walked this tree-lined block and the surrounding neighborhood for close to fifteen years, his uniform so familiar that in his civilian clothes people he saw every day sometimes had to look at him twice just to be sure he was who they thought he was. An almost comical look as well, as if he had shaved off a mustache and they weren't quite able to make out what was different about him.

It was a partial anonymity and he had never been able to decide whether it was good or bad.

Retirement, on the other hand, was, in the beginning, good.

He had loved his blue tunic and the brass buttons and the polished belt with its gleaming attachments, refusing promotions once he had reached sergeant because he'd wanted nothing to do with the politics of being an officer, nothing to do with other parts of the city, nothing to do with anything but his job as he had eventually defined and refined it.

He was a beat cop, nothing more, nothing less.

He wrote parking tickets and scolded kids who taunted other kids and old folks; he investigated minor break-ins and petty theft; he had heart-to-hearts with shoplifters and angry spouses; he broke up fights and arrested drunks and gossiped and swapped jokes and had once spent an hour on a damp stoop with a little girl, trying to reattach the head of her doll.

He was a beat cop.

And now, at long last in his mid-fifties, he was something else, and he wasn't sure yet what that was.

That was the bad part.

In a way, it was kind of funny, that first day away from the Job. He had slept in, a sinful luxury whose guilt he had cheerfully grinned away; he had made a slow breakfast and read the paper and done a little cleaning of his second-floor apartment; and when at last habit grabbed him by the scruff, he had taken out a new denim jacket and had gone for a walk. The street first, of course, then several others north and south. Not too far afield, but far enough. Restraining himself from checking closed shop doors, the timing on parking meters, the alleys between buildings, the empty lots.

It had been an effort.

It had nearly worn him out.

It hadn't been until that evening, while he ate a sandwich in front of his living-room window and watched the street put itself to bed, that he'd realized no one had greeted him with anything more than a polite nod, complained to him, whined at him about the injustices the city had settled upon their shoulders and why the hell couldn't he do something about it.

The good part was, he didn't have to answer them anymore, didn't have to lie or be a confessor or a teacher or a parent who happened to have a gun on his hip.

The bad part was... nights when he couldn't sleep because he was supposed to be on shift, nights when he slept and didn't dream and woke up feeling as if he'd walked a hundred miles with a hundred-pound pack on his back, nights when nightmares of horribly distorted and twisted faces pressing close to his face made him sit up and scream—except the scream was only a hoarse croaking, and the nightmare itself eventually began to lose some of its terror when he figured they were the faces of the angry victims he couldn't help and the angry culprits he had apprehended over the course of thirty years.

Over a year later, he and the nightmares had become old friends. But his friends on the street still looked at him oddly.

“It'll take some getting used to, you know,” said Lana Hynes for at least the hundredth time, dropping into the chair opposite him at the Caulberg Luncheonette. She fanned an order pad at her neck as if it were muggy July instead of the cool middle of October. “For them too, I mean. All this time, they don't know what you look like.”

“Oh, yeah, sure. I've lived here forever, right? I didn't have the uniform on all the time.”

But he thought he knew what she meant. He was, in or out of the Blue, nothing special. Not tall, a slight paunch, a face faintly ruddy, red hair fading much too swiftly to grey. An ordinary voice. Cops hated people like him—no one ever knew what they really looked like.

She grinned then, more like a smirk, and he felt a blush work its way toward his cheeks. This time he knew exactly what she meant. They had been lovers once, before he jilted her for the Job, and now, for better or worse, they were friends. So much so, it seemed, that lately she had taken to ignoring him when he came in, just to tick him off so she could tease him about it later.

“Knock it off,” he muttered at that grin, grabbing his burger quickly, taking a bite.

“Why, Mr. Cabot, I am sure I do not know what you mean.” A laugh soft in her throat, and she leaned forward, crinkling the front of her red-and-white uniform blouse, the one that matched the checkered floor, the tablecloths, the pattern around the edge of the menu. It drove her crazy, and frankly, he was getting a little tired of hearing about it.

“The bill,” was all he said.

She scowled. “Screw you, Cabot.”

His turn to grin: “Been there, done that.”

A close thing, then: would she slap him or laugh?

It startled him to realize that he had, at some imprecise moment on some non-momentous day, stopped caring very much. Startled him, then saddened him, then angered him that she didn't realize it herself. Maybe it was time to start eating somewhere else.

All this in the space of a second, maybe two.

*Damn*, he thought; *what the hell's the matter with you, pal?*

She neither slapped nor laughed. She tapped a pencil against her pad and said, “So, you been to that museum yet?”

Curtly: “No.”

“Well, why not?” Her own red hair fell in carefully arranged curls over one eye. “I’d’ve thought you’d like something like that. All those bad-guy exhibits. You know, like that Ghost guy.”

“That Ghost guy,” he said, knowing he sounded stuffy, “is a killer, Lana. Nothing interesting about him, not at all. And I had enough of that on the Job, thank you.”

A hand reached out and slapped his arm lightly. “Oh, please, give me a break, okay? No offense, but it’s not like you were a detective. You didn’t work with dead bodies every day, you know?”

“Yeah, maybe, but still...”

An impatient call from the counter brought Lana to her feet. She dropped his bill on the table, leaned over to kiss his cheek. And whispered in his ear: “It’s been over a year, Hank. Do something different for a change, before you turn into an old woman.”

He nodded automatically, gave her an automatic “Yes, dear,” and laughed silently when she slapped him across the back of his head. Not so lightly. Another laugh, and he looked out at the street while he finished his lunch. The trees had turned, and sweaters and lined jackets had been rescued from storage. A puff of autumn cold surged against his ankles each time the door opened. A pleasant shiver, a comfortable reminder of how miserable the previous summer had been and how far away the next one was.

He spent the afternoon at a high-school football game. He didn’t know the teams, didn’t know the schools, just enjoyed the hot dogs and the soda and the cheerleaders who made him feel exceedingly old. A fair-to-middling dinner at a small Italian restaurant took him past nightfall, and he decided to walk off all the wine he had drunk.

With his collar snapped up and his hands deep in his pockets, he moved through the fleeting clouds of his breath, instinctively watching the dark that hid behind all the lights. The shadows he made as he passed under street lamps swung around him, fascinated him for a while. He wondered if, like fingerprints, everyone’s shadow was different. When the angle was right, the light just so, his shadow took to a low brick wall and paced him a few strides, and he decided they weren’t like fingerprints at all. They were like ghosts who gave you an idea what it would be like to be dead.

*Damn*, he thought, and cast his attention out to the city instead. Where he glowered at a young couple arguing under the canopy of a luxury apartment building, whistled softly at a cat watching him narrow-eyed from a garbage-can lid. A taxi nearly ran him down when it took a corner too tightly; his footsteps sounded too sharp, and for half a block he tried to walk on his toes.

Halloween decorations everywhere, here and there mixed in with cardboard turkeys and cartoon-like Pilgrims. One damn store even had its Christmas lights up.

He felt his temper, so long with him that it was like an old comfortable coat, begin, like that coat, to wear thin at the edges. A shift of his shoulders, a brief massage to the back of his neck, and he quickened his pace, anxious to get to the three rooms that were his. The secondhand furniture, the old-fashioned kitchen, the rust-ring around the tub’s drain that had been there when he’d moved in. It wasn’t the warmth or the comfort; he just wanted to be away from the streets, the people, the traffic... the city.

Breathing hard. Watching his shadow. Following his shadow until he blinked and found himself at the living-room window, staring down at the trees that smothered most of the night’s artificial light, leaving specks of it on the pavement, shimmering as an autumn wind rose while the moon set unseen.

A deep breath, a sigh for all the wine that had stolen some of his time, and he slept most of the day away.

It felt good. It made him smile. Another habit broken, and he treated himself to dinner and a movie, and walked home again. He liked it so much he did it again a few nights later, and again the night after that, and a few nights after that, taking a child-like pleasure in once in a while losing track of the hour. No schedules, no meetings; just him and the street that never changes, morning to night.

A week after Halloween he finally returned to Caulberg's for an early supper. His usual table was already occupied, so he took a stool at the counter, waiting patiently for Lana to acknowledge him. When at last she did, with a look he knew well—*It's about time, you son of a bitch*—he felt a momentary crush of guilt for ignoring her for so long. She was a good friend, after all; probably... no, *absolutely* his only friend. But his temper came instantly to attention when she slapped a cup and saucer in front of him, poured coffee and said, "Well, look who's here. The Lone Stranger."

"Sorry," he said flatly. "Been busy."

"Too busy to stick your head in, say hi or something?"

He shrugged a weak apology. "Been busy," he repeated.

"Yeah, right."

He tried a smile. "Hey, I'm retired, remember? Things to do, places to see. I'm going to the Riviera next weekend."

Her expression suggested his eyes had changed to a none-too-subtle brown, and she moved away to place his order, take care of the only other customer at the counter, slip into the kitchen without looking his way again. She didn't return until his hamburger was ready, and she delivered it as if she were slapping his face with a glove.

He leaned back and gave her a look; she stepped back and folded her arms across her chest and gave *him* a look.

They stared at each other for several seconds before her lips twitched, and he pulled his lips in between his teeth.

"Laugh and you die, Cabot," she said.

He nodded; the tension vanished.

She stepped back to the counter and leaned over it, forearms braced on the surface, her face only a few inches from his. "The thing is, Cabot," she said, keeping her voice down, checking to be sure no one could eavesdrop, "we don't like it when you disappear, okay? I know what you think, but we depend on having you here all the time, just in case."

"But I'm not a cop any—"

She shook her head. "It doesn't make any difference."

"And they barely—"

"It doesn't make any difference."

"But—"

She grabbed his chin and held it tightly. "Listen to me, you old creep, and none of your false modesty or any of that other crap, okay? We're worried about you." She nodded sharply, once. "You are, whether

you know it or not, kind of important to us. God knows why, but you are. When you go off like that without telling anybody, it makes us nervous. I mean, that damn Ghost freak did it again last week. What, the fifth? The sixth time? Since July? They still don't know who the body belongs to." Her hand slipped away as she straightened, lay flat against her stomach. "We thought it was you, you son of a bitch. We thought he'd gotten you."

He almost said, *We, or you?* but for a change he kept silent. Instead, he looked at his meal, tilted his head to one side in a brief shrug of not knowing what to say. All his complaining, and he had had no idea. None at all.

She pointed at his plate. "Eat," she ordered. "Then get a goddam hobby."

"Oh, right, like Dutch?"

Dutch Heinrich owned the butcher shop around the corner. This week, on top of his window display case, was a three-foot-tall cathedral fashioned entirely out of toothpicks, none of which were immediately visible because of the way the man had painted the model. It looked carved from stone.

Finally she smiled. "You could do worse. He sells those stupid things for a fortune." A wink, then; an eyebrow cocked; a gentle smile. "Just do it, Hank. Stop lying to yourself, you're bored as hell. Make us all happy, just do it."

A promise to think about it, a command from her that just thinking about it wasn't an option, and she left him alone to eat. As he did, he wondered; when he left, he headed for the small park a few blocks up, and it wasn't until he realized he had spent a full hour watching two very nearsighted old men playing a truly bad game of chess that he finally understood his year-long vacation was over. Fifty-something, with probably another thirty to go.

*Good God*, he thought; *I'll probably shoot myself next Christmas, and won't Lana be pissed.*

He laughed aloud, and the old men glared without really seeing him. He gave them a jaunty salute, and whistled himself back home, and to a vow that tomorrow he would either find himself a part-time job, or a time-gobbling hobby.

Which might be, he thought when he saw the next morning's newspaper, filing the necessary applications for an investigator's license. Job or hobby, it would give him an official-sounding excuse to be nosy. To poke around, uncover the true identity of the man they called the Ghost.

He had killed again.

The sixth time since the end of July, the second time in a week. There wasn't much in the article, aside from recycled quotes from psychologists and criminal experts about the mind of such a man, but the police vowed they were on it with promising leads in an intense investigation. He snorted. He had heard that story before—it meant the victims had no common ground, no links; the cops hadn't a clue and weren't about to get one. The worst kind of killer—completely random. He also knew there had to be more; something had been held back from the public so the nuts and habitual confessors could be weeded out. He leaned back in his chair, stared blindly at the kitchen ceiling. He could call in a favor or two, find out what the missing information was, and take it from there.

"Sure," he said to the ceiling light. "Take it where?"

He had a better question: "Why?"

Because it was interesting? Fascinating? A puzzle that wanted solving? A chance for a little action? An

opportunity to do something valuable with his time? A way to get himself involved with the public again?

A way to justify the block's belief in him? Concern for him?

He made a derisive noise deep in his throat, folded the paper to put the sports section on top—to read whenever he returned from wherever he would go to pass the daylight hours—and pushed his chair back. Flattened his palms on the small table and pushed himself to his feet.

*Why?*

Because Lana was right. He was goddammed bored out of his goddam mind, that was why.

Which wasn't the real reason, and he knew it, but it would do for now. It would have to.

He walked.

He window-shopped.

He spent some time in a showroom, pretending he was thinking about buying a car.

He had lunch in a place he had never been to before; he spent a couple of hours on a tourist bus, seeing things he had never seen before; he watched the sunset from a bench in a park he had never been to, and when the sun's reflection slid out of the windows and let in the dark, he flipped up his collar and made his way to a bus stop, where a trio of kids cut in front of him so they could get on first. When he said, "Hey, dammit," only one looked back, gave him a *sorry didn't see you* shrug; the others played push-and-shove until they found their seats.

Hank didn't get on.

He let the bus go, turned away from the exhaust wash, let his temper subside to a more manageable level. It wasn't easy. His jaw was so taut it trembled, and heat behind his eyes made him slightly dizzy until he closed them, tightly. It wasn't easy. If he had had the uniform, they wouldn't have done it. Maybe they would have been just as smart-ass, just as rude, but they wouldn't have done it.

Uniform or no, they never did it to him on the block.

A step back from the curb, head lowered, throat working to swallow, he stared at the tips of his shoes until the night's chill and the traffic's clamor forced him to move.

He found the museum a few minutes later.

There was nothing special about it that he could see—a single door in a narrow building that could have used renovation a decade or two ago. Lana hadn't been here herself; it was one of those heard-about-it-from-a-friend things, but she figured he would be interested, being a cop and all.

He hadn't been, and had been avoiding actively searching for it since she had first brought it up.

He was a beat cop, for God's sake. Didn't she understand that? An ordinary beat cop. He saw bodies, he saw blood, he saw the instruments that had drawn one from the other, but he wasn't the one who hunted the killers down. No, he was the one who found what was left of their prey.

On the other hand, he thought as he glanced up and down the avenue, feeling vaguely uneasy, as if he were about to walk into a porn shop or something, maybe this was a sign. *What the hell.* At the very

least, it would keep her off his back for a while.

He grunted, shook his head quickly, scolded himself for being unfair. She meant well. She cared.

The museum door opened, and he looked down in surprise at the hand, his hand, that had turned the dull brass knob.

Okay, it was a sign.

A half-smile took him over the threshold and out of the cold. A brief unsettling sensation of *déjà vu* before he noticed a tiny wood table on his left that held an untidy stack of pamphlets—*The Museum of Horror Presents*. He took one, opened it, and realized the light was so dim that he practically had to put his nose through the thin paper in order to read it. A simple diagram of the interior, a few words, not much else. The main premise seemed to be that he had to discover for himself the details of the exhibits. Which were sealed upright cases ranged along narrow aisles, glass cases touched with dust and annoying flared reflections of small caged bulbs hanging from the ceiling, cases whose contents startled him when he walked past, only glancing in until he finally understood what he had seen.

“You’re kidding me,” he said quietly.

The preserved bodies, or damn fine replicas, purportedly those of murderers of the first rank, criminals of the mind, villains of the body. Supposed personal items tucked around their feet and on small glass shelves. He recognized none of the names, none of the crimes, but it didn’t make any difference; it was bad enough looking at the corpses, real or not; it was worse reading what they were supposed to have done.

Soft voices and whispers from other parts of the large room.

Soft footsteps and whispering soles.

The impulse to giggle in such a solemn place became an urge, and he rubbed a hard hand across his lips. A second time, harder, for a shot of pain to kill the laugh. Sniffing, grabbing a handkerchief to blow his nose and wincing at the explosive sound of it; wandering the aisles, reading the legends now, thinking the curator or whatever he was called had one hell of an imagination. In spite of himself, stopping now and then to examine a body, the clothes, flicking dust away to peer more closely at a face.

Soft voice.

Soft footsteps.

A check over his shoulder now and then, but he saw no one else. Only heard them, felt them, had almost convinced himself he was in here with ghosts when, rounding a corner, he nearly collided with a woman, a teenager really, whose eyes widened as large as her mouth when it opened to scream.

“Jesus, where the hell did you come from?”

He grinned. “I’m haunting the place.”

Too much makeup, hair cropped unevenly, she sneered thick lips at him and huffed away. “Stupid creep,” she muttered.

He scowled at her back, half tempted to call after her and demand... what? What the hell was he getting so pissed about? They had startled each other, they were mad because they’d been scared, what’s the big deal, Hank?



He scratched the back of his neck, pulled at his nose, and looked at the case immediately to his left.

It was empty; a little hazy because of the light dust, but still, it was empty.

Yet there was a card, just like all the others, and this one claimed that what he saw, or didn't see, was the mortal remains of the recent serial killer known as the Ghost. It took him a few seconds of frowning before he caught the joke and smiled. Nodded his appreciation. Looked around, wishing there were someone nearby with whom he could share the curator's bizarre sense of humor.

No one.

He was alone.

And being alone, he checked again to be sure he was right, then reached out a finger and drew it gently along the case's seams, stretching to reach to the top, bending over to reach the bottom. The glass felt warm, but comfortably so, and there was a faint vibration—the traffic outside, footsteps in here. It would be cozy inside, he figured, and almost laughed again. Cozy. Snug. The Ghost making faces at those whose peered in, trying to make sense of what they weren't seeing.

This time he couldn't stop the laugh, and didn't want to.

"Boo!" he said to his reflection in the glass, and feigned stark terror, clamping a hand to his heart, staggering backward, nearly colliding with the exhibit behind him.

"Boo!" he said through a deep rippling laugh, and wiped a tear from one eye, pressed a hand to his side where a stitch had stabbed him.

He was coming apart, he knew it, and he didn't give a damn.

"Boo!" one last time, and he made his way to the exit, giggling, shaking his head and chuckling, on the street laughing so loudly he embarrassed himself even though he was alone.

He felt... great.

In front of Dutch's closed butcher shop he applauded when he saw that the cathedral was gone. Another sale. Bravo. Bravo.

He patrolled the neighborhood, just like the old days, and like the old days saved his street for last. He didn't mind the damp November cold that seeped up his sleeves and down his collar, the way the few remaining leaves hustled after him on the wind, the way his footsteps sounded flat, not October sharp.

He didn't mind at all.

He patrolled until near sunrise, then slept the sun to bed. No nightmares, no croaking screams.

Just before Thanksgiving, Lana commented on his attitude as she served him his steak-and-potatoes dinner. "Jesus, Cabot," she said, "it's like you're almost cheerful for a change."

And he repaid her by leaning over the counter, taking hold of her arm, and planting a big one on her lips. "Why, thank you, my dear," he said as he sat back on his stool, picked up his knife and fork, and gave his meal a smile.

Lana, startled into silence, could only swallow, and touch her lips with a finger as if to test them. A dreamy smile, a scowl at her reaction, and when he finished she said, "Hank, you all right? You're not... I mean, like, drugs or something?" A finger pointed. "And don't you dare say you're just high on life."

“My hobby,” he told her, dropping the price of his dinner on the counter.

“You’re joking, right?”

“Nope.” He struck a pose. “You want to hear one?”

“One what?”

“Poem.”

Her mouth opened, closed, and he said, “Whose ghosts these are I think I know/Their graves are in my dreams, you know.”

She waited.

He watched her.

She said, “Is that it?”

He shrugged as he zipped up his jacket. “I’m still working on it.”

“It... kind of sounds familiar.”

“Maybe,” he said as he walked toward the door, a wave over his shoulder. “Maybe not.”

*Maybe*, he thought as he caught the next bus uptown; *maybe not*.

He returned to the museum and gave himself five minutes before he made his way to the Ghost case, touched the seams and found them cold. His eyes closed briefly. His stomach lurched. He held one arm away from his body, for balance. He made his way carefully to the sidewalk where he looked up at a sky that the city’s lights robbed of stars and moon. He didn’t move until a gust of wind nudged him; he didn’t choose a direction until he reached a corner and turned it; he told himself he didn’t know what he was doing until he recognized his home, and saw a man in a topcoat and felt hat urinating against one of the iron-spear fences.

“Hey,” he said, his voice quiet but mildly angry. “Kids play there, you know.”

The man zippered himself and buttoned his coat. “You a cop?”

“Nope.”

“Then screw you, pal,” and he walked away.

Hank watched him go, looked at the windows above him, across the street, saw shades glow and dark curtains, and imagined he could hear the sounds of sleep and making love and television shows and stereos and children dreaming and old folks dying.

*I’m a beat cop, for God’s sake.*

Stop lying to yourself, Lana had told him.

So he did.

He followed the man in the expensive topcoat for several blocks, out of the neighborhood and into a street where there was more night than night-lights. He moved swiftly then without seeming to, and when the man turned around, glaring at the intrusion, Hank took him by the throat with one hand and held him,

knowing now, aware now, what the published reports did not say—that the bodies were somehow thinner. Older. Maybe drained, but not of blood or bone or muscle.

Hank held the topcoat man until he crumpled into the gutter, his hat rolling into the center of the street, stopping upside down. A sigh, but no regrets, and he took a bus uptown for the second time that night, did not marvel that the museum was still open. He went straight to the Ghost's case and ran his fingertips along the seams, feeling the cold eventually, slowly, become warm, watching the haze inside thicken... just a little. Placed a palm against the front and felt that faint vibration—not traffic or footsteps: it was the reverberation of faint screams.

If he looked closely enough, hard enough, he might even see his nightmare, not a nightmare any longer.

A quick smile, a ghost of a smile, and he left for home and slept the sun to bed.

Comforted in knowing that outside the street never changes from morning to night.

Comforted too in knowing that at night the street is haunted.