

Exit Ghost

By Philip Roth

## 1 The Present Moment

I hadn't been in New York in eleven years. Other than for surgery in Boston to remove a cancerous prostate, I'd hardly been off my rural mountain road in the Berkshires in those eleven years and, what's more, had rarely looked at a newspaper or listened to the news since 9/11, three years back; with no sense of loss—merely, at the outset, a kind of drought within me—I had ceased to inhabit not just the great world but the present moment. The impulse to be in it and of it I had long since killed.

But now I'd driven the hundred and thirty miles south to Manhattan to see a urologist at Mount Sinai Hospital who specialized in performing a procedure to help the thousands of men like me left incontinent by prostate surgery. By going in through a catheter inserted in the urethra to inject a gelatinous form of collagen where the neck of the bladder meets the urethra, he was getting significant improvement in about fifty percent of his patients. These weren't great odds, especially as "significant improvement" meant only a partial alleviation of the symptoms—reducing "severe incontinence" to "moderate incontinence" or "moderate" to "light." Still, because his results were better than those that other urologists had achieved using roughly the same technique (there was nothing to be done about the other hazard of radical prostatectomy that I, like tens of thousands of others, had not been lucky enough to escape—nerve damage resulting in impotence), I went to New York for a consultation, long after I imagined myself as having adapted to the practical inconveniences of the condition.

In the years since the surgery, I even thought I'd surmounted the shaming side of wetting oneself, overcome the disorienting shock that had been particularly trying in the first year and a half, during the months when the surgeon had given me reason to think that the incontinence would gradually disappear over time, as it does in a small number of fortunate patients. But despite the dailiness of the routine necessary to keep myself clean and odor-free, I must never truly have become accustomed to wearing the special undergarments and changing the pads and dealing with the "accidents," any more than I had mastered the underlying humiliation, because there I was, at the age of seventy-one, back on the Upper East Side

of Manhattan, not many blocks from where I'd once lived as a vigorous, healthy younger man—there I was in the reception area of the urology department of Mount Sinai Hospital, about to be assured that with the permanent adherence of the collagen to the neck of the bladder I had a chance of exerting somewhat more control over my urine flow than an infant. Waiting there envisioning the procedure, sitting and flipping through the piled-up copies of People and New York magazine, I thought, Entirely beside the point. Turn around and go home.

I'd been alone these past eleven years in a small house on a dirt road in the deep country, having decided to live apart like that some two years before the cancer was diagnosed. I see few people. Since the death, a year earlier, of my neighbor and friend Larry Hollis, two, three days can go by when I speak to no one but the housekeeper who comes to clean each week and her husband, who is my caretaker. I don't go to dinner parties, I don't go to movies, I don't watch television, I don't own a cell phone or a VCR or a DVD player or a computer. I continue to live in the Age of the Typewriter and have no idea what the World Wide Web is. I no longer bother to vote. I write for most of the day and often into the night. I read, mainly the books that I first discovered as a student, the masterpieces of fiction whose power over me is no less, and in some cases greater, than it was in my initial exciting encounters with them. Lately I've been rereading Joseph Conrad for the first time in fifty years, most recently *The Shadow-Line*, which I'd brought with me to New York to look through yet again, having read it all in one go only the other night. I listen to music, I hike in the woods, when it's warm I swim in my pond, whose temperature, even in summer, never gets much above seventy degrees. I swim there without a suit, out of sight of everyone, so that if in my wake I leave a thin, billowing cloud of urine that visibly discolors the surrounding pond waters, I'm largely unperturbed and feel nothing like the chagrin that would be sure to crush me should my bladder involuntarily begin emptying itself while I was swimming in a public pool. There are plastic underpants with strongly elasticized edges designed for incontinent swimmers that are advertised as watertight, but when, after much equivocation, I went ahead and ordered a pair from a pool-supply catalogue and tried them out in the pond, I found that though wearing these biggish white bloomers beneath a bathing suit diminished the problem, it was not sufficiently eradicated to subdue my self-consciousness. Rather than take the chance of embarrassing myself and offending others, I gave up on the

idea of swimming regularly down at the college pool for the bulk of the year (with bloomers under my suit) and continued to confine myself to sporadically yellowing the waters of my own pond during the Berkshires' few months of warm weather, when, rain or shine, I do my laps for half an hour every day.

A couple of times a week I go down the mountain into Athena, eight miles away, to shop for groceries, to get my clothes cleaned, occasionally to eat a meal or buy a pair of socks or pick up a bottle of wine or use the Athena College library. Tanglewood isn't far away, and I drive over to a concert there some ten times during the summer. I don't give readings or lectures or teach at a college or appear on TV. When my books are published, I keep to myself. I write every day of the week—otherwise I'm silent. I am tempted by the thought of not publishing at all—isn't the work all I need, the work and the working? What does it matter any longer if I'm incontinent and impotent?

Larry and Marylynne Hollis had moved up from West Hartford to the Berkshires after he'd retired from a lifelong position as an attorney with a Hartford insurance company. Larry was two years my junior, a meticulous, finicky man who seemed to believe that life was safe only if everything in it was punctiliously planned and whom, during the months when he first tried to draw me into his life, I did my best to avoid. I submitted eventually, not only because he was so dogged in his desire to alleviate my solitude but because I had never known anyone like him, an adult whose sad childhood biography had, by his own estimate, determined every choice he had made since his mother had died of cancer when he was ten, a mere four years after his father, who owned a Hartford linoleum store, had been bested no less miserably by the same disease. An only child, Larry was sent to live with relatives on the Naugatuck River southwest of Hartford, just outside bleak, industrial Waterbury, Connecticut, and there, in a boy's diary of "Things to Do," he laid out a future for himself that he followed to the letter for the rest of his life; from then on, everything undertaken was deliberately causal. He was content with no grade other than an A and even as an adolescent vigorously challenged any teacher who'd failed to accurately estimate his achievement. He attended summer sessions to accelerate his graduation from high school and get to college before he turned seventeen; he did the same during his summers at the University of Connecticut, where he had a full-tuition scholarship and worked in the library boiler room all year round to pay for his

room and board so he could get out of college and change his name from Irwin Golub to Larry Hollis (as he'd planned to do when he was only ten) and join the air force, to become a fighter pilot known to the world as Lieutenant Hollis and qualify for the GI Bill; on leaving the service, he enrolled at Fordham and, in return for his three years in the air force, the government paid for his three years of law school. As an air force pilot stationed in Seattle he vigorously courted a pretty girl just out of high school who was named Collins and who met exactly his specifications for a wife, one of which was that she be of Irish extraction, with curly dark hair and with ice-blue eyes like his own. "I did not want to marry a Jewish girl. I did not want my children to be raised in the Jewish religion or have anything to do with being Jews." "Why?" I asked him. "Because that's not what I wanted for them" was his answer. That he wanted what he wanted and didn't want what he didn't want was the answer he gave to virtually every question I asked him about the utterly conventional structure he'd made of his life after all those early years of rushing and planning to build it. When he first knocked on my door to introduce himself— only a few days after he and Marylynne had moved into the house nearest to mine, some half mile down our dirt road—he immediately decided that he didn't want me to eat alone every night and that I had to take dinner at his house with him and his wife at least once a week. He didn't want me to be alone on Sundays—he couldn't bear the thought of anyone's being as alone as he'd been as an orphaned child, fishing in the Naugatuck on Sundays with his uncle, a dairy inspector for the state—and so he insisted that every Sunday morning we had a hiking date or, if the weather was bad, Ping-Pong matches, Ping-Pong being a pastime that I could barely tolerate but that I obliged him by playing rather than have a conversation with him about the writing of books. He asked me deadly questions about writing and was not content until I had answered them to his satisfaction. "Where do you get your ideas?" "How do you know if an idea is a good idea or a bad idea?" "How do you know when to use dialogue and when to use straight storytelling without dialogue?" "How do you know when a book is finished?" "How do you select a first sentence? How do you select a title? How do you select a last sentence?" "Which is your best book?" "Which is your worst book?" "Do you like your characters?" "Have you ever killed a character?" "I heard a writer on television say that the characters take over the book and write it themselves. Is that true?" He had wanted to be the father of one boy and one girl, and only after the fourth girl was born did

Marylynne defy him and refuse to continue trying to produce the male heir that had been in his plans from the age of ten. He was a big, square-faced, sandy-haired man, and his eyes were crazy, ice-blue and crazy, unlike Marylynne's ice-blue eyes, which were beautiful, and the ice-blue eyes of the four pretty daughters, all of whom had gone to Wellesley because his closest friend in the air force had a sister at Wellesley and when Larry met her she exhibited just the sort of polish and decorum that he wanted to see in a daughter of his. When we would go to a restaurant (which we did every other Saturday night—that too he would have no other way) he could be counted on to be demanding with the waiter. Invariably there was a complaint about the bread. It wasn't fresh. It wasn't the kind he liked. There wasn't enough for everyone.

One evening after dinner he came by unexpectedly and gave me two orange kittens, one long-haired and one short-haired, just over eight weeks old. I had not asked for two kittens, nor had he apprised me of the gift beforehand. He said he'd been to his ophthalmologist for a checkup in the morning, seen a sign by the receptionist's desk saying she had kittens to give away. That afternoon he went to her house and picked out the two most beautiful of the six for me. His first thought on seeing the sign was of me.

He put the kittens down on the floor. "This isn't the life you should have," he said. "Whose is?" "Well, mine is, for one. I have everything I ever wanted. I won't have you experiencing the life of a person alone any longer. You do it to the goddamn utmost. It's too extreme, Nathan." "As are you." "The hell I am! I'm not the one who lives like this. All I'm pushing on you is a little normality. This is too separate an existence for any human being. At least you can have a couple of cats for company. I have all the stuff for them in the car."

He went back outside, and when he returned he emptied onto the floor a couple of large supermarket bags containing half a dozen little toys for them to bat around, a dozen cans of cat food, a large bag of cat litter and a plastic litter box, two plastic dishes for their food, and two plastic bowls for their water.

"There's all you'll need," he said. "They're beauties. Look at them. They'll give you a lot of pleasure."

He was exceedingly stern about all this, and there was nothing I could say except, "It's very thoughtful of you, Larry."

"What will you call them?"

“A and B.”

“No. They need names. You live all day with the alphabet.

You can call the short-haired one Shorty and the long-haired one Longy.”

“That’s what I’ll do then.”

In my one strong relationship I had fallen into the role that Larry prescribed. I was basically obedient to Larry’s discipline, as was everyone in his life. Imagine, four daughters and not a single one of them saying, “But I’d rather go to Barnard, I’d rather go to Oberlin.” Though I never had a sense of his being a frightening paternal tyrant when I was with him and the family, how strange it was, I thought, that as far as I knew not one of them had ever objected to her father’s saying it’s Wellesley for you and that’s it. But their willingness to be will-less as Larry’s obedient children was not quite as remarkable for me to contemplate as was my own. Larry’s path to power was to have complete acquiescence from the beloved in his life—mine was to have no one in my life.

He’d brought the cats on a Thursday. I kept them through Sunday. During that time I did virtually no work on my book. Instead I spent my time throwing the cats their toys or stroking them, together or in turn in my lap, or just sitting and looking at them eating, or playing, or grooming themselves, or sleeping. I kept their litter box in a corner of the kitchen and at night put them in the living room and shut my bedroom door behind me. When I awoke in the morning the first thing I did was rush to the door to see them. There they would be, just beside the door, waiting for me to open it.

On Monday morning I phoned Larry and said, “Please come and take the cats.”

“You hate them.”

“To the contrary. If they stay, I’ll never write another word. I can’t have these cats in the house with me.”

“Why not? What the hell is wrong with you?”

“They’re too delightful.”

“Good. Great. That’s the idea.”

“Come and take them, Larry. If you like, I’ll return them to the ophthalmologist’s receptionist myself. But I can’t have them here any longer.”

“What is this? An act of defiance? A display of bravado? I’m a disciplined man myself, but you put me to shame. I didn’t bring two people to live with you, God forbid. I brought two cats. Tiny kittens.”

"I accepted them graciously, did I not? I've given them a try, have I not? Please take them away."

"I won't."

"I never asked for them, you know."

"That doesn't prove anything to me. You ask for nothing."

"Give me the phone number of the ophthalmologist's receptionist."

"No."

"All right. I'll take care of it myself."

"You're crazy," he said.

"Larry, I can't be made into a new being by two kittens."

"But that's exactly what is happening. Exactly what you won't allow to happen. I cannot understand it—a man of your intelligence turning himself into this kind of person. It's beyond me."

"There are many inexplicable things in life. You shouldn't trouble yourself over my tiny opacity."

"All right. You win. I'll come, I'll get the cats. But I'm not finished with you, Zuckerman."

"I have no reason to believe that you are finished or that you can be finished. You're a little crazy too, you know."

"The hell I am!"

"Hollis, please, I'm too old to work myself over anymore.

Come get the cats."

Just before the fourth daughter was to be married in New York City—to a young Irish-American attorney who, like Larry, had attended Fordham Law School—he was diagnosed with cancer. The same day the family went down to New York to assemble for the wedding, Larry's oncologist put him into the university hospital in Farmington, Connecticut. His first night in the hospital, after the nurse had taken his vital signs and given him a sleeping pill, he removed another hundred or so sleeping pills secreted in his shaving kit and, using the water in the glass by his bedside, swallowed them in the privacy of his darkened room. Early the next morning, Marylynne received the phone call from the hospital informing her that her husband had committed suicide. A few hours later, at her insistence— she hadn't been his wife all those years for nothing— the family went ahead with the wedding, and the wedding luncheon, and only then returned to the Berkshires to plan his funeral.

Later I learned that Larry had arranged with the doctor beforehand

to be hospitalized that day rather than the Monday of the following week, which he could easily have done. In that way the family would be together in one place when they got the news that he was dead; moreover, by killing himself in the hospital, where there were professionals on hand to attend to his corpse, he had spared Marylynne and the children all that he could of the grotesqueries attendant upon suicide.

He was sixty-eight years old when he died and, with the exception of the plan recorded in his “Things to Do” diary to one day have a son named Larry Hollis Jr., he had, amazingly, achieved every last goal that he had imagined for himself when he was orphaned at ten. He had managed to wait long enough to see his youngest daughter married and into a new life and still wind up able to avoid what he most dreaded—his children witnessing the excruciating agonies of a dying parent that he had witnessed when his father and his mother each slowly succumbed to cancer. He had even left a message for me. He had even thought to look after me. In the mail the Monday after the Sunday when we all learned of his death, I received this letter: “Nathan, my boy, I don’t like leaving you like this. In this whole wide world, you cannot be alone. You cannot be without contact with anything. You must promise me that you will not go on living as you were when I found you. Your loyal friend, Larry.”

So was that why I remained in the urologist’s waiting room —because one year earlier, almost to the day, Larry had sent me that note and then killed himself? I don’t know, and it wouldn’t have mattered if I did. I sat there because I sat there, flipping through magazines of the kind I hadn’t seen for years—looking at photos of famous actors, famous models, famous dress designers, famous chefs and business tycoons, learning about where I could go to buy the most expensive, the cheapest, the hippest, the tightest, the softest, the funniest, the tastiest, the tackiest of just about anything produced for America’s consumption, and waiting for my doctor’s appointment.

I’d arrived the afternoon before. I’d reserved a room at the Hilton, and after unpacking my bag, I went out to Sixth Avenue to take in the city. But where was I to begin? Revisiting the streets where I’d once lived? The neighborhood places where I used to eat my lunch? The newsstand where I bought my paper and the bookstores where I used to browse? Should I retrace the long walks I used to take at the end of my workday? Or since I no

longer see that many of them, should I seek out other members of my species? During the years I'd been gone there'd been phone calls and letters, but my house in the Berkshires is small and I hadn't encouraged visitors, and so, in time, personal contact became infrequent. Editors I'd worked with over the years had left their publishing houses or retired. Many of the writers I'd known had, like me, left town. Women I'd known had changed jobs or married or moved away. The first two people I thought to drop in on had died. I knew that they had died, that their distinctive faces and familiar voices were no more—and yet, out in front of the hotel, deciding how and where to reenter for an hour or two the life left behind, contemplating the simplest ways of putting a foot back in, I had a moment not unlike Rip Van Winkle's when, after having slept for twenty years, he came out of the mountains and walked back to his village believing he'd merely been gone overnight. Only when he unexpectedly felt the long grizzled beard that grew from his chin did he grasp how much time had passed and in turn learned that he was no longer a colonial subject of the British Crown but a citizen of the newly established United States. I couldn't have felt any more out of it myself had I turned up on the corner of Sixth Avenue and West 54th with Rip's rusty gun in my hand and his ancient clothes on my back and an army of the curious crowding around to look me over, this eviscerated stranger walking in their midst, a relic of bygone days amid the noises and buildings and workers and traffic.

I started toward the subway to take a train downtown to Ground Zero. Begin there, where the biggest thing of all occurred; but because I've withdrawn as witness and participant both, I never made it to the subway. That would have been wholly out of character for the character I'd become. Instead, after crossing the park, I found myself in the familiar rooms of the Metropolitan Museum, wiling away the afternoon like someone who had no catching up to do.

The next day when I left the doctor's office, I had an appointment to return the following morning for the collagen injection. There'd been a cancellation, and he could fit me in. The doctor would prefer it, his nurse told me, if, after the hospital procedure, I stayed overnight in my hotel rather than return immediately to the Berkshires— complications rarely occurred in the aftermath of the procedure, but remaining nearby till the next morning was a worthwhile precaution. Barring any mishap, by then I could leave for home and resume my usual activities. The doctor himself expected a considerable

improvement, not excluding the possibility of the injection's restoring close to complete bladder control. On occasion the collagen "traveled," he explained, and he'd have to go in a second or third time before getting it to adhere permanently to the neck of the bladder; then again, one injection could suffice.

Fine, I said, and instead of reaching a decision only after I'd had a chance to think everything over back home, I surprised myself by seizing at the opening in his schedule, and not even when I was out of the encouraging environment of his office and in the elevator to the main floor was I able to summon up an ounce of wariness to restrain my sense of rejuvenation. I closed my eyes in the elevator and saw myself swimming in the college pool at the end of the day, carefree and without fear of embarrassment.

It was ludicrous to feel so triumphant, and perhaps a measure less of the transformation promised than of the toll taken by the discipline of seclusion and by the decision to excise from life everything that stood between me and my task—the toll of which till then I'd remained oblivious (willed obliviousness being a primary component of the discipline). In the country there was nothing tempting my hope. I had made peace with my hope. But when I came to New York, in only hours New York did what it does to people—awakened the possibilities. Hope breaks out.

One floor below the urology department, the elevator stopped and a frail, elderly woman got on. The cane she carried, along with a faded red rainhat pulled low over her skull, gave her an eccentric, yokelish look, but when I heard her speaking quietly with the doctor who'd boarded the elevator with her—a man in his mid-forties who was lightly guiding her by the arm—when I heard the foreign tinge to her English, I took a second look, wondering whether she was someone I'd once known. The voice was as distinctive as the accent, especially as it wasn't a voice one would associate with her wraithlike looks but a young person's voice, incongruously girlish and innocent of hardship. I know that voice, I thought. I know the accent. I know the woman. On the main floor, I was crossing the hospital lobby just behind them, heading for the street, when I happened to overhear the elderly woman's name spoken by the doctor. That was why I followed her out the hospital door and to a luncheonette a few blocks south on Madison. I did indeed know her.

It was ten-thirty, and only four or five customers were still eating breakfast. She took a seat in a booth. I found an empty table for myself. She

didn't seem to be aware of my having followed her or even of my presence a few feet away. Her name was Amy Bellette. I'd met her only once. I'd never forgotten her.

Amy Bellette was wearing no coat, just the red rainhat and a pale cardigan sweater and what registered as a thin cotton summer dress until I realized that it was in fact a pale blue hospital gown whose clips had been replaced at the back with buttons and around whose waist she wore a ropelike belt. Either she's impoverished or she's crazy, I thought.

A waiter took her order, and after he walked away she opened her purse and took out a book and while reading it casually reached up and removed the hat and set it down beside her. The side of her head facing me was shaved bald, or had been not too long ago—fuzz was growing there—and a sinuous surgical scar cut a serpentine line across her skull, a raw, well-defined scar that curved from behind her ear up to the edge of her brow. All her hair of any length was on the other side of her head, graying hair knotted loosely in a braid and along which the fingers of her right hand were absent-mindedly moving—freely playing with the hair as the hand of any child reading a book might do. Her age? Seventy-five. She was twenty-seven when we met in 1956.

I ordered coffee, sipped it, lingered over it, finished it, and without looking her way, got up and left the luncheonette and the astonishing reappearance and pathetic reconstitution of Amy Bellette, one whose existence—so rich with promise and expectation when I first encountered her—had obviously gone very wrong.

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