

The Evidence of Things Unseen

By Joseph Kenyon

The snowstorm felt like time bending. Or the fragments of years.

Two hours ago, I was on a plane. Two days ago, I got the letter just after being released from a private hospital in Brisbane. Two years ago, I was watching a Greek film with a scene showing three teenage girls in a bedroom and music playing in the background: “The Start of Something” by Christine Ang.

The cab driver wore a turban and a face full of bored intensity. One hand steered the car south along Brooklyn’s Nostrand Avenue; the other toyed with the torn padding of the arm rest. Each time I asked a question, he turned a corner, so I tapped him on the shoulder and pointed to an isolated spot in the middle of a block. He pocketed my money without eye contact.

The taillights of the taxi slipped away softly over the crunching snow, leaving me alone under a haloed streetlight that cut stark lines between shadow and light. I didn’t have to ask myself once during the entire flight why I was coming back after 25 years. Some battles don’t end as much as devolve, usually into poor theater. Age makes spectators of us all.

Two young men coming toward me slowed and looked me over: my gray-black crew cut, my fleshy face, my knee-length oilskin riding coat, my hand-tooled leather boots. I couldn’t belong here but here I was anyway, watching them watching me, so completely unafraid of who they were, what they carried, what they could do to some old hick they found skulking on their turf. That I could kill them probably never crossed their minds. That they could kill me did.

One of the boys spit a wad of mucus that hit the ground four inches from my left boot. I tracked the phlegm with my peripheral vision, keeping my focus steady on the pair. The spitter mumbled something and they moved past me, fading into the snow.

I made my way up one block, down another, looking at houses like a dog sniffs the air, until I crossed the right street and came to the right row of brownstones. Christine's place stood in the middle flanked by one house that looked abandoned and another that featured two people who were either dancing or fighting behind thin curtains. From the middle house, weak light came through the downstairs window. One upper window winked, as if a fireplace were going. Everything else was dark.

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When I broke into Alsynt Hall sometime in mid-December, 1972, all I was after was a mimeographed copy of Dr. Thorsson's final in European History. Broke in is a bit dramatic. One of the night janitors was our pot connection, and he always left a door unlocked for the convenience of his clients. His name was Grisetti, and he had the largest head I ever saw on top of narrow, feminine shoulders. When he hurried, he shuffled along with his arms flapping at his sides. Although I could easily outrun him, Grisetti concerned me. If he caught me, he'd recognize me since I was the guy who usually got elected to go on the dope run. He would also report me, despite our business dealings. Grisetti was one of those criminals who felt that every other crime but the one he was committing was a blight on society.

I almost had the lock to the History office jimmied when Grisetti wheeled his cart around a corner. He started whistling and hollering at me. Even when he wasn't excited, hearing Grisetti talk was an adventure in listening: the words tumbled out of his brain in no particular order in their mad dash to his mouth. That night, I didn't wait to figure them out. I took off, pounding

down the nearest stairwell, which brought me to a chained and padlocked door. I kept going, down into the black hinterlands of what lay beneath the first floor. Just before reaching the safety of the unknown, I risked a look up the zigzagging railings, and I saw Grisetti on the third floor, his arms and tongue splintering his words so that they fell on me in shards. The only thing I understood clearly was “ghost” but the word didn’t register without context. The expression on Grisetti’s face didn’t click with me either until I crossed into the darkness of the boiler room. It was the look of pure fear.

Ghost. Fear.

Everyone above the rank of first-week freshman knew about the “Ghost of the Halls”—that uncatchable spirit that moved from basement to basement through most of the classroom buildings. The ghost was said to be accompanied by strange music, but whether the ghost played that music or whether the music simply followed the ghost was a matter of great debate. The legend stretched back into the 1950s, but it ended for me the moment my foot caught a pipe and sent me hurtling into a particularly dark corner. My right hand came down on jagged metal, slashing it from pinkie pad to lifeline, but my head banged against denim and bone, stopping at an angle that had me staring into the side of a sneaker and a feminine ankle. I looked up at the outline of a person, the neck of a guitar, and, oddly clear, a Montreal Expos’ baseball cap.

“Michael Cotley,” I said offering my left hand, “criminal, currently in flight.”