

*The Case of the Dead Detective: A Dead Detective Story*

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By Ben Levy

Private Investigator Barney Gilbert opened his eyes, and immediately regretted it. The room was spinning. He decided to pass out for a bit, and only after he came to again a few hours later did he try to reopen them. More success. There was still spinning, but felt marginally better about it, since it was being done by the office ceiling fan.

He tried to sit up. The fan stopped rotating, and the room tilted sickeningly around it. Barney began to wonder if his office didn't have it in for him. He noticed an empty bottle of whiskey on the floor near his desk. Ah ha! A clue. Clues were very important to Private Investigators, which PI Gilbert happened to be. He pondered the whiskey for a moment. Sniffed it. Then came to the obvious conclusion about what it was doing there and why he felt like he'd been hit by a taxi. He decided to look for further clues in the wastebasket, since it was closer than the toilet.

It was only after this protracted period of self-investigation that he noticed the man sitting on his couch. He immediately attempted to look suave. Barney always did this when there was someone in his office. In part because he felt people wanted to hire PIs who appeared self-assured and confident. Also, he wanted very badly to be suave, and he felt if he practiced hard enough one day he might be.

Barney Gilbert looked suave primarily by leaning back and placing his feet up on his desk. He did so now. As he was still lying on the floor, this resulted in him flat on his back, staring at his guest upside-down. He arched one eyebrow in what he hoped was a self-assured manner. In his present state, it made him more closely resemble a Picasso.

"I'm sorry" he said airily "I didn't hear you come in".

"Yes." his guest responded "You were asleep at the time."

"Merely waiting, my good man, merely waiting" protested Barney. He was determined to give a good impression.

"Do you often snore when you wait?"

It was slowly registering on Barney that there was something odd about his guest. It wasn't that he was upside down, although that didn't help matters. No, it was more that the man seemed to be rather pale. Extremely pale, now that Barney thought about it. Why, the fellow was practically translucent! He could see the chair right through him. And he couldn't be quite sure his guest was sitting in the chair at all. It could very well be that he was floating several inches above it.

Barney narrowed his eyes. "Say, are you a ghost?"

His guest sighed, as though someone had pointed out an embarrassing fact in the midst of a fancy dinner party and now there was nothing to do but own up and make the most of it. "Yes."

"Ah" responded Barney "that's alright then". He immediately took his feet off the desk and, after some experimentation, gathered them underneath himself. Vertical for the first time since he'd opened his eyes, he smiled and began to hum tunelessly. On the whole, he felt much better now. A clearing of the throat made him turn.

"Yes?"

"I couldn't help but notice" put in the specter "that you seem unconcerned about me being a ghost."

"I'm sorry, should I be?"

"Well, it's been rather bothering me. I suspect it means I'm dead."

Barney chuckled to himself, "Oh, no, no. Certainly not."

"Are you quite sure?" asked the ghost, somewhat doubtfully "I am, after all, a ghost."

"Ah" responded Barney "but that's just it you see. You are not a ghost."

A somewhat shocked expression passed over the transparent features, shortly followed by disgust. "You're still drunk."

"Exactly!" crowed the PI from the bathroom, where he was washing his face. "And therefore you are not a ghost, but simply a hallucination."

He came out of the bathroom toweling his face, and paying careful attention to avoid stumbling over the debris on the office floor. His gait still wavered like a politician's foreign policy, but on the whole he was feeling much better. He felt he had a real handle on things now. Clearly he'd been out drinking last night. Clearly he was still drunk. He felt, due to the throbbing temples and unsettled stomach, that his hangover might have gotten a bit of an early start. But on the whole things were taking on a far more familiar scene than they were earlier. He tossed his towel through the ghost, who seemed incised.

"I'm still here you know" he said, floating a few feet to the left so as to escape the towel that had settled beneath him.

"Hmm, yes. Well, you can go whenever." Said Barney. "The novelty's worn off, and you haven't yet said much very interesting."

"I wish to hire you." Said the ghost.

Barney had just been turning his office chair upright, which was fortuitous, as he could now fall into it with a decent degree of shock. "What?"

"I said I'd like to hire you." Repeated the ghost patiently "to find out if I'm dead."

"No, no. I've already solved that." Said the detective. "You're not dead. You're a hallucination, though a rather persistent one, and I won't waste any more time on you. Besides" he said suddenly, "I've got my own mystery to solve."

"What?" sputtered the spook, "I refuse to believe you've got any outstanding clientele. From the look of this place" he sniffed airily "I'd say you've just been using the place as an apartment."

"What?" said Barney with a guilty start, "What makes you say that?"

"Well," said the specter, "there's a pile of unopened mail near the door, and a week's worth of shirts hanging from the standing lamp. The couch contains a pillow and three different sheets with distinctly clashing patterns on them. You've left several half-eaten meals strewn about. Not to mention," he sniffed "it has the general bouquet of a college dorm room, whose subtle undertones cannot be achieved overnight, but only through persistent and unhygienic habitation."

Barney blinked for a moment, taking in the room as a whole. "You know" he said, "that's really rather remarkable. Have you ever considered becoming a PI?"

"So tell me" asked the ghost "what this other mystery is."

"Ah" said the PI somewhat guiltily, "I... thought I'd see if I could figure out what I did last night"

"Interesting" said the ghost

"Yes, I thought so." said the PI, brightening considerably at the notion that his hallucination approved of his plan of action.

"It's interesting," snarled the specter "that being dead does not prevent one from getting idiot-induced headaches."

"Oh."

Coincidentally, a woman across town was, just at that moment, similarly surprised by her ability to get "idiot-induced headaches." She rather felt, after the first four marriages, she should have built up some kind of tolerance to them.

Miranda Seacord had spent much of her adult life seeking the perfect marriage. To all appearances, she was doing so through the process of elimination.

It was her current husband's fault she had a headache. They had fought the day before. She couldn't remember what it was about, but she recalled storming out of the house in a fit of pique, vowing not to return until she'd made enough bad decisions to feel better.

She'd woken up at home this morning, which was more than could be said for her husband. She was rather quickly convincing herself that men were the problem in her search for a perfect lifestyle. Currently she felt they were good for only one thing. Giving idiot-

induced headaches.

She needed Ted. Ted always made her feel better. For starters, he wasn't much of a man. And he'd also helped her deal with husbands one through four. She resolved to pick up Ted, and then find her (technically still current) husband. She grabbed her keys and walked out the door, trying to decide where to look first.

"Tell me" said the ghost "where you feel the big mystery is in last night."

"Dunno where I went."

The ghost gave an exasperated gesture. "Oh come on. You're a broke, lazy, slovenly excuse for a man. You must have gone to cheapest, nearest bar. We can walk to one now. Why, we can probably follow the stains from your office right to it! Or barring that, we can check your wallet for receipts, your pockets for matchbooks, and your cellphone for messages. We can figure out where you were in five minutes."

The PI looked up. "You're a very methodical hallucination. Of course, you're from my head, so I guess that's really a compliment to me!" He said the last with no small amount of pride.

The ghost delivered a glare that seemed intent on bringing the PI over to his side of the Veil. Barney quickly wilted.

"I don't understand why you're still here" He muttered sourly.

"I'm not sure why either." confessed the ghost. "I don't even know how I'm here, although I have a theory."

"Does it involve little pills slipped into my alcohol?"

"No" said the ghost "But the most logical explanation I can think of is that there is a strong connection between us. That's why I came back as a ghost, why I was drawn to your office, and why only you can see or hear me. I admit it sounds a bit Hollywood" he shrugged his non-existent shoulders "but it's the best idea I've had."

"Drugs" the PI nodded to himself. "It's more important than ever for me to figure out what I was doing last night. So I can be sure to never do it again."

It turned out that, hallucination or not, the apparition was quite

the sleuth. Within five minutes of checking Barney Gilbert's wallet for receipts, they were able to ascertain that he had left his office yesterday afternoon and walked exactly one and a half blocks to the nearest dive bar. Whereupon, according to those same receipts, he began drinking. About six hours later, according to still more receipts, he either attempted to break the world record for alcohol consumption or- more probably- he bought several rounds for his bar full of new best friends. At 3:30AM, he closed his tab.

"The question becomes" declared the spook, "what did you do after?"

"If you are a ghost-" said Barney "and I'm not saying you are- then shouldn't you know everything? Isn't the meaning of life or something revealed after you die?"

"That would be a fine irony." commented the ghost "Discovering the meaning of life just as soon as you lose it. The whole question becomes moot. Like finding out the winning Lotto numbers the day after it's been picked."

The PI pondered this.

"Give the bar a call, and check your closet to see if there's anything else from last night in a coat pocket." ordered the ghost.

Barney shrugged to himself and opened the closet. He took a step backward as a large weight tumbled out of it. He considered asking the specter to stop making that horrible moaning noise. He realized it was coming from him. His eyes met the ghosts'.

On the ground, covered in dried blood and several difficult-to-ignore bullet holes, was a dead man who looked exactly like the dead man.

Several hours later, Miranda's headache was, if anything, worse. She had been all over town. It wasn't absolutely necessary for her to get together with her husband before leaving him, but her planned "I'm-too-good-for-you" and "I-bet-you're-sorry-now-aren't-you" speeches would be significantly less satisfying without a body to rail at. Nothing like this had happened with her last husbands. She simply didn't see how she was supposed to move on with her life without knowing where he was. It was a matter of closure. Unlike her husband, she had a life to get back to.

Miranda held onto Ted with one hand as she climbed up the flight of stairs to the Investigator's office. She felt comforted by his presence. Perhaps she should have chosen a PI with more care, but this one had been closest at the time. She reached the top step,

gripped Ted firmly, and set her face in an expression of determination. Then she turned the knob on the office door, raised one heeled foot, and kicked it open so it banged off the opposite wall. Then she stepped into the office and pointed Ted at Barney.

For the first few moments, Miranda said nothing.

Barney also said nothing, although he was paying very close attention to the woman in his office. Mostly because she was pointing a magnum pistol at him. The name "Ted" was engraved on it's barrel.

Ted said nothing. But like most loaded firearms, he said it eloquently.

The ghost said: "Investigator Gilbert, I'd like you to meet my wife."

Currently in Private Investigator Barney Gilbert's office there were three bodies. Of these, only two were alive, and one was in significant danger of becoming less so. That one happened to be his. This was not a situation Barney was familiar with. However, human beings are great adaptors, and Barney was already latching onto the one thing that made any sense right now: a woman was angry and/or disappointed in him. He felt he was on marginally familiar ground here. And so he said with carefully measured sincerity: "I'm sorry."

Miranda shut the door behind her without lowering the gun, and her gaze fastened on the lifeless body on the floor. "I cannot believe" she said slowly "that you are so utterly stupid. As to hide the body-" her voice rose in a shriek "-IN YOUR OWN CLOSET!"

Metaphorically speaking, Barney took another look at the ground and decided that in fact it was not the least bit familiar. "I hid?"

Miranda's eyes lowered into slits, and her voice dropped to a sinister whisper. "I thought a detective would know how to hide a body. Don't you know the location of every abandoned quarry, peat bog, and trash fire in the county? You couldn't think of anything to do besides shut him in your closet?" Miranda redoubled her grip on Ted "You said you would take care of everything. You said you had a plan. Unbelievable."

"That is," offered the ghost "the first thing she's ever said that I agree with. Unbelievable. I would go so far as to say that if you looked up "believable" in the dictionary, you would find a picture that was the exact opposite of the scene before us."

Barney stared at the ghost with his mouth open a moment. "Help...me?"

"Help you?" snapped the spirit, "Help you? Whatever for? It

appears to me that you and my- i think it's safe to say- ex-wife conspired to murder me. At the very least she murdered and you appear to have agreed to dispose of my body- a task that you don't even have the decency to complete! Drug-selling, child-trafficking, jaywalking mobsters get dumped into a river with some sort of ceremony. Cement blocks, a parting remark, some nod to tradition! But you! You not only fail to do the deed properly, you get so blasted out of your damned skull on cheap liquor that you wake up the next morning AND COMPLETELY FAIL TO RECALL THAT YOU STUFFED A DEAD MAN INTO YOUR COAT CLOSET!"

Barney visibly shrank under the verbal barrage. "I- I'm sorry I didn't dump it in a river?"

The staggering idiocy of that remark struck the ghost momentarily mute.

"Puh- puh-lease...I'm scared."

The spirit attempted to make Barney explode through force of will. When that failed to work, he tried a different approach. "You wish to feel better?" The ghost asked casually, inspecting the translucent fingernails of one hand.

"Yes"

"Very well then. Let her shoot you."

"What?"

"It seems to me," said the ghost, with studied calm, "that your concern is- and correct me if I'm wrong here- that she is about to shoot you."

"Yes!" Barney gasped hoarsely.

"Well then," continued the specter, "it stands to reason that- once you are already shot- you will no longer be concerned with whether or not you are about to be shot."

These were the sort utterly illogical and terribly persuasive arguments that normally perplexed the PI to no end. However, there is something about a loaded gun being pointed at you that has an incredibly clarifying effect on the mind. "But I don't want to be shot!"

The ghost shrugged in a non-committal way. "If you say so. I should point out however, that I've been shot. Numerous times, it appears. And since that happened I have not once been concerned about being shot again."

Again, Barney found this oddly logical. And the spook did seem particularly calm, given the situation. Still, few things have the argumentative weight of a magnum pistol. In fact, if you ever have the occasion to have a magnum pointed at you, you'll discover that anyone acting "calm" in that situation will really just come across as an annoying jerk who hasn't the decency to act properly panicked. And so Barney decided quite firmly he would prefer not to be shot, and

offered the following counter-argument:

"Yeah? Well you're fat."

It should be mentioned at this point that the ghost's theory that only people with some relationship to him could see or hear him was a complete crock. Miranda could not see the ghost. She could not hear the ghost. She could of course, see and hear the PI. And so Miranda was having a completely different conversation with Barney from the one the ghost was having. The trouble was, she was the only one paying attention to it.

As far as she was concerned, it went like this.

"I- I'm sorry I didn't dump it in a river?" pleaded the PI to a crooked lampshade.

Miranda scowled.

The PI still wouldn't look at her. "Puh- puh-lease...I'm scared."

"You should be. Because if you don't tell me how you've going to fix this in the next 3 seconds, I'm going to kill you."

"Yes"

"What do you mean 'yes'? What the hell kind of answer is that?"

"What?"

Was he even paying attention? Was he too much of a coward to even look at her? "I asked you what the hell you're going to do about this?"

"Yes!" The PI gasped hoarsely.

"That's it!" she screamed, "If the next words out of your mouth don't make sense, I'm going to shoot you!"

"But I don't want to be shot!"

Finally! At least she had his attention. "Then find me a damn solution! Either you think of a way to dump the body like you said you would, or I'll shoot you right now and take care of this whole mess myself!"

"Yeah? Well you're fat."

Private Investigator Barney Gilbert opened his eyes and

immediately regretted it. The room was standing still. He was spinning. He also seemed to be several feet above the floor. As he rotated, the ghost occasionally came into view, like an apathetic mother watching her child on a merry-go-round.

"Ah...hello?"

"Hello indeed." said the ghost shortly.

Then, on the next pass: "You've got..."

and the next: "your spirit caught..."

and the third: "...in the ceiling fan."

Barney considered this for a few revolutions. He pointed at the floor of his office. "What are all those people doing?"

"Cleaning up." replied the ghost. He gripped the spinning PI by the shoulder and pulled him free. "If you're wondering, your body is in the bag on the left."

Barney had difficulty deciding how to feel about this. He moved on to his next question. "Did they catch her?"

"My ex-wife? Afraid not. After she shot you, she arranged it to appear as if you and I had killed each other. From what I've heard, I'm not sure they've bought it. I wonder how it will play out."

A thought occurred to Barney then. The sort of thought a person immediately knows two things about. First, that they should not say it aloud. And second, that they just did.

The ghost was so shocked he seemed to disappear for a moment. "No." he growled, "I don't believe she mentioned anything about sleeping with you."

Barney felt now was a good time to become momentarily distracted by a desperate search for something to distract himself with. After what he felt was an acceptable length of time, he offered: "On the bright side, at least we know that you are actually dead."

The ghost snorted.

Barney pressed on. "And we found out what I was doing last night."

"Oh yes. And only one man died in the process of solving that great mystery."

"Right!" gushed Barney, "And I bet even less people will die next time! What would you say to becoming my partner? I think you've got a real knack for this investigating work. We could be a team."

The ghost was horrified. "If I could kill you to prevent that from happening I would. In fact, I'm willing to track down a shaman, gypsy, or mad scientist just to reincarnate you so that I can kill you again!"

The PI nodded, missing the point with all the skill of a fencer on the defensive. "That's settled then. Figuring out how to raise the dead can be our first case."

All four members of the crime scene clean-up crew swore they heard a soul-wrenching scream of frustration coming from the ceiling fan that day. They also swore not to mention it in their report.

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