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# Introduction

A specter is haunting Europe. (And not only Europe!)

This specter stalks the land and invades our hearts. It shapes our fears and whispers from our darkest corners. For we are – every single one of us – haunted by the ghost of ghosting.

At a certain age, we have all been ghosted at some point in our lives. Indeed, we've all likely ghosted somebody in turn.<sup>1</sup> Depending on our sensibility, we may wince and grieve over such abrupt partings. Or we may simply shrug, rationalizing such behavior – whether perpetrator or victim – as an inevitable by-product of an overly social world. Indeed, given the number of personal connections we are obliged to maintain in modern times, in contrast to the classic tribe or village of yore, it is no surprise that some of these relationships will become burdensome. And the easiest option is to simply let some of them fall by the wayside. Like spinning plates, some will inevitably crash to the ground.

The sociologist Robin Dunbar famously suggested a specific number corresponding to the maximum amount

of people that the average person can interact with in any meaningful, reciprocal sense. That number is 150. Beyond this figure, we ostensibly cannot maintain friendships or collegial ties with any true traction, and things dissolve into empty para-social gestures. Indeed, as I myself move past the milestone of fifty summers, I sometimes find it challenging to nurture any more than fifteen relationships at any given time. The older we get, the more we cherish and value those who have helped us along the way. And yet, the older we get, the more we may feel the weight of those we have helped carry us through life.

Such is the premise for the 2022 film, *The Banshees of Inisherin*, which asks what happens when we tire of friendships even in a small community of a few dozen souls. (In this case, in rural Ireland of the 1920s, which for all intents and purposes resembles the rural Ireland of the early 1800s.) The protagonist of the film, an amiable and simple fellow by the name of Pádraic Súilleabháin (played by Colin Farrell), finds himself suddenly ignored by his life-long friend, the grizzled fiddle-player, Colm Doherty (played by Brendan Gleeson). The latter has reached a point in life where he wants to spend his remaining time composing music that people will remember, rather than frittering away the day with a man who, while perfectly pleasant, is not exactly inspiring company. Colm becomes so exasperated by his former friend's attempts to restore the relationship that he threatens to cut off his own fingers, one for every time Pádraic approaches him with a view to conversation. The offended party presumes this threat is hyperbole. He quickly learns, however, that the determined would-be ghoster is as good as his word. By the

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time the scandal reaches its peak – with Pádraic setting fire to Colm's house in exasperation – the latter has lost all the fingers on one hand. (Clearly a disaster for someone whose sole purpose seems to be playing the fiddle.)

This scenario – equally masochistic and sadistic – seemed to resonate with audiences, still reeling from the social upheaval of the Covid lockdowns, and *The Banshees of Inisherin* became a controversial litmus test for various understandings of friendship, and its limits. The film, moreover, struck a chord with a populace still dealing with the ongoing fallout from Covid's intense impact on so many relationships: some fused into a deeper intimacy by the pressures of claustrophobic living arrangements, and others fractured beyond repair by these very same pressures. Something about seeing this rather heartless drama unfold on such an intimate scale, without the complications of social media and smartphones, felt like a sobering x-ray for a population already bruised by an especially intense period of reassessment, especially when it came to interpersonal relationships vis-à-vis personal priorities.

In the circumscribed community depicted in *The Banshees of Inisherin*, no one remains unaffected by Colm's decision to ghost Pádraic, since both would still be – awkwardly – present in the same handful of public places. (Especially the lone pub that serves the village.) In this case, we have a ghoster and ghostee haunted by an ongoing fleshy presence, even as one of these presences sacrifices at least a few ounces of flesh in order to force the deed to completion. Such completion is elusive, however, when the ghost remains and when the haunted person clings. (First clinging to the former friend, and then to his own resentment at being rejected.) The film



stirred such feelings because it's difficult to blame either man for their motivations and reactions. (Though the violence of self-mutilation certainly tests our sympathies for the tortured artist.) Depending on our own experience – and depending on the direction we look, in terms of ongoing social obligation – it's possible to identify with the man hoping to focus on what really matters to him, just as we can also easily share in the pain of the man who discovers his best friend no longer has a single minute to spare for him. Such are the complex motivations and conflicting experiences of ghosting.

Remarkably, a very different Irish film, *The Quiet Girl*, also made a global cultural impression in the same year of 2022, and explored the psychic and emotional violence of a sudden refusal of presence: an unexpected tearing up of the social contract. This film – as quiet as its title suggests – follows the fate of a nine-year-old girl, Cáit, neglected by her parents, and then handed off to distant relatives in the summer of 1981. Here, Cáit is doubly abandoned: first by her parents' life-long chilly demeanor toward her, and second by their apparent attempt to foster her out to another family. Cáit has clearly grown up in an environment that taught her never to take love or attention for granted. And while her new home has its own sadness and hesitations, she begins to finally get an inkling of what it is like to feel a warm kind of familial company and care. ("Many's the person missed the opportunity to say nothing, and lost much because of it.") Being an Irish art film, however, the story cannot simply end on this happier note, as the messiness of life leaks into the frame.

Both these scenarios pose fundamental questions about social ties: especially the extent to which these

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bind too tightly, or, conversely, the extent to which they can be loosened altogether. Parents today are expected to "be there" for their child, although this is in some ways a relatively recent cultural imperative. Family, in any case, is supposed to represent a life-long bond. There is no shortage, however, of exceptions: children running away from home and, in some cases, parents doing the same. (As happens for comic effect in an episode of *Ripping Yarns*, when mother and father are driven to abscond from the family home to avoid their son, Eric, deemed "the most boring man in England.") Marriage – in contrast to blood kinship – is underwritten by a legal contract, supposedly guaranteeing life-long commitment, "through sickness and in health." The statistics, however, tell a different story. Friendships are more ambiguous, in the sense that any contract is unwritten, and usually unspoken. We cherish friends for "sticking with us," even when there is no legal pressure to do so. This does not mean, however, that the hurt of a friend suddenly breaking all contact is any less than the pain of a divorce or family icing. The murky moral of *The Banshees of Inisherin* is that no-one *owes* anyone else their presence, painful as that truth is to hear. Nonetheless, ghosting is a cruel act. In a world of atomized, liquified, symptomatic, and transactional relations, it can also – perversely – be a merciful one. Of which more in later chapters.

Sigmund Freud famously claimed that the first trauma an infant experiences is the withdrawal of the breast. When something so nourishing and comforting is taken away from us, we learn to scream in full fury. In the midst of the pure howl of this shriek, we also begin to

learn something crucial about the world: the fact that what we want, and what we need, is not going to be provided on demand (or on tap, as it were). Presently, when the infant has figured out the harsh truth that the breast is not just a magic soothing machine, but a part of the mother's body, we learn to cherish the mother's holistic presence. By the same token, we begin to fear her absence. Freud calls this the *fort/da* experience, which can be summarized as a dawning recognition that anything and everything we value may be "here one moment, gone the next." Henceforth, and for the rest of our lives, we are obliged to devise coping strategies for not being a blessed solar center around which heavenly bodies constantly and dutifully orbit. Instead, we each have our own Copernican awakening; we each learn that we aren't the center of the universe. Consequently, we must learn to reconcile ourselves with the fact that people we are profoundly bonded with, or attached to, have their own lives and movements.<sup>2</sup>

In his patients, Freud certainly encountered cases of maternal neglect, and of what today we would call "emotional withdrawal." Yet a child of even the most doting mother tends to be haunted by the possibility of her sudden, definitive absence. The *fort/da* game – played with a spool of thread, to mimic the mysterious movements of the mother – can be as benign as acknowledging a parent moving from the nursery to the kitchen. It also anticipates, however, the most decisive incarnation – or rather *out*-carnation – of *da* possible: death. Even as we reach the phase of maturity described by Jean Piaget as "object permanence" – in which we begin to trust and understand that things and people persist, even if we can't see or intuit them directly – we



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continue to be subconsciously troubled by the wider cosmic principle of impermanence. (To the degree, I would argue, that we only ever reach a tentative and pragmatic understanding of object permanence, even as adults, and cannot really build any kind of full faith upon it.) Indeed, we need not be practicing psychoanalysts to understand how the first experience of family dynamics is where the “ghost of ghosting,” as we might call it, first rears its spectral head.

The word itself – “ghosting” – rendered as a verb, has a longer history than we might think, although the meaning has evolved over time. One of the earliest records of the term is from 1637, and describes “the action of becoming, or making someone into, a ghost.” Here, ghosting is merely a synonym for murder, or haunting. A similar usage can be found in Shakespeare’s celebrated 1616 play, *Antony and Cleopatra*: “Julius Caesar, Who at Phillippi the good Brutus ghosted.” Throughout the seventeenth century, “ghosted” could simply mean “to die.” In a medical treatise of 1689 entitled *Art of Curing Diseases by Expectation*, we find the melancholy sentence: “A day or two after . . . the Lad having been miserably tortured, Ghosted.” (Hopefully not due to the author’s own ministrations.) Interestingly, during the Victorian era, we find a reference to a “ghosting system,” in E. S. Barrett’s novel, *Heroine*, suggesting a more formalized strategy for scaring people into various schemes. Since at least the turn of the twentieth century, “ghosting” has been used to refer to the practice of writing a book in secret, or on behalf of the named author (“ghost-writing”). Other applications include the second, spectral image on old television sets – ones



with less-than-perfect, ghostly reception – as well as the practice of moving inmates from one prison to another, without word or warning.

Closer to our own time – first recorded in the 1983 novel, *Gardens of Stone*, by N. Proffitt – ghosting was now being used to describe a person’s sudden departure. (“Where’s Wildman? If that sad sack is ghosting again, I’ll have his butt on a biscuit for breakfast.”) Prior to this, guests who left a party, or friends who leave a gathering, without saying goodbye were said to have “left the English way.” The first mention of ghosting – in the sense we think of it today – was on Twitter, April 3, 2007. The esteemed user @Vonster posted, “Just now realized I ghosted Gedeon on our interview? Doh!” In this case, the first contemporary use of the term is used in relation to the world of work (Gedeon being either a reference to a media company, or a pharmaceutical concern), rather than the world of friendships or romance. Primarily, however, we associate this word with the latter – with love. Indeed, these days, the threat of ghosting haunts would-be relationships before they even begin, as noted by *The Baltimore Sun*, in 2020, during the first wave of Covid lockdowns. Here an expert in etiquette cautioned those perhaps getting cold feet concerning an upcoming virtual rendezvous: “you need to communicate that you won’t be making yourself available for your scheduled date. Be polite yet straightforward – and most importantly, no ghosting.”<sup>3</sup>

For the sake of a shared point of reference, then, we can note that the Oxford English Dictionary definition of ghosting, enshrined in 2012, is as follows: “*The action of ignoring or pretending not to know a person, esp. that of suddenly ceasing to respond to someone on*

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*social media, by text message, etc.; the action of ending a relationship or association with someone by ceasing all communication.*" Two things are worth noting about this definition from the outset. The first is the centrality of communication technologies. Ghosting is thus the ghost in the machine, as it were, haunting the wires of the internet, and emerging from the silicon infrastructure of our online world more generally. This *specific codification* of relations – this informational infrastructure – distinguishes this latest iteration from the ghosting of previous epochs. It gives it a new haunting ground, so to speak: the virtual, digital realm. (And this in turn produces a new set of effects, and indeed affects.) The second thing to note about this official definition is the insistence that ghosting happens only to people, or persons. The sad fate of many pets suggests otherwise. And on a less pathos-infused register – but equally tragic – we can also consider the ghosting of ideas, traditions, institutions, commitments, and other abstract, non-human entities and concerns. For the purposes of this short book, however, we shall stick with our own narcissistic species.<sup>4</sup>

We all understand, on an intuitive level, that there is something uncanny about modern media: the way it can effect changes at a distance, the way it can summon up phantoms on to our screen, the way it can connect us across vast distances, and the way it can capture "reasonable facsimiles" of ourselves for its own obscure purposes. As the media theorist, Friedrich Kittler, has shown, new media – especially electronic technologies – have rearranged our sensoria, and our relationship to time, memory, and mortality.<sup>5</sup> Since the first voice was

captured on wax, or the first likeness captured on silver plate – even our first words captured on papyrus – our secular “spirit” has been captured by those devices and held hostage for an enigmatic ransom.<sup>6</sup> Suddenly, we have access to a new type of memory – one Bernard Stiegler calls “tertiary retention” – an outsourced form of recall, embedded in objects, bits, and bytes. No other form of life has achieved this feat, at least not at the human scale. (Though given the alternative world it has created, there may be good reason for this.) Nevertheless, we have normalized the ubiquitous, ongoing half-lives of voices long gone, faces long vanished, and thoughts long ceased. And yet these recorded absent-presences – in the sense of lifelike “indexical” traces – have only been a part of our lives for a half-dozen generations. Today, we can replay the voice message of a loved one, even if they themselves are no longer willing or able to leave any subsequent ones. Likewise, we can gaze upon a precious person’s face, albeit one displaying an expression caught in a frozen moment, isolated from the flowing river of time in which we all swim.

For someone like the novelist, Marcel Proust, the telephone was almost a diabolical machine, since it could summon up his beloved grandmother as if she were compelled by a *séance*; both *there*, in his ear, but decisively *not there*, in the room with him. Our smartphone technology has only increased this existential paradox, as we text with people who seem closer than the person next to us on the bus, but who are nowhere to be seen (or heard, or felt). Not long ago, someone walking along the street, talking loudly into the air, was in danger of being locked up for mental hallucinations. Today we barely notice those who are completely absorbed in a



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conversation with some kind of invisible companion. We are, in other words, surrounded by ghosts already, and we've invented new types of mediated haunting that are, oddly, more comforting than unnerving. We have introduced a new immaterial, spectral dimension into our affairs. (Even as these virtualities are embedded in all-too-material machines and industrial systems.) So, it's no wonder that people slip in and out of our lives more easily – the grooves of departure lubricated by ectoplasmic technologies. A new, updated version of the *fort/da* game.

Friends, family, colleagues . . . they are all a click or a tap away. Dating apps promise to rapture up a new paramour with a single swipe, and social media offer a universe of pseudo-social relationships and interactions. This situation – in which the virtual and the actual are completely entangled – makes any distinction between absence and presence more complicated than ever before. Prior to the electronic age, “out of sight” most likely meant “out of mind” – or at least “out of life.” The last hundred years or so has complicated any neat equation between bodies and proximity. People can now sustain long-distance relationships for years – thanks to smartphones and laptops – while a flesh-and-blood roommate can appear as pale and remote as a ghost. Conversely, relationships that should by rights have ended years ago continue long past their use-by date, thanks in large part to the same technologies of impulse, habit, and convenience. There are, so to say, just as many lamentable zombie relationships, thanks to our haunted mediascape, as there are heartening stories of fidelity and longevity, despite the tyranny of distance.



Given this unprecedented and rapidly mutating context, it is no surprise that our neo-Victorian obsession with ghosts – itself inspired in large part by new technologies – is being resurrected, or reanimated, in a new key and with new trappings.

As already noted, disappearing without word or warning is no doubt as old as the human race. The popularity of this new term for such a phenomenon tells us something, however, about how it is understood in a new way by the current culture. “Ghosting” is abandonment with a contemporary garnish, and thus dovetails more neatly with the specific “structure of feeling” of the present. Abandonment has, in other words, different resonances depending on the age in which it is experienced. In previous epochs, being blindsided by someone in this way could lead to permanent stigma, as when left at the altar. Today, it increasingly becomes a universal, even banal, experience: an inevitable part of the capricious and promiscuous libidinal landscape. (Which doesn’t mean it doesn’t sting in the same way, just with different social implications.) The plethora of new modes of communication has also invited an unprecedented menu of options for ignoring messages from others. And just as we inevitably invented the car crash when we invented automobiles, we also created ghosting when we created the internet. So to say, when we came up with texting, we also came up with *not* texting.

Notably, cultural criticism and the social sciences have lagged behind “the discourse,” when it comes to recognizing and studying the significance of ghosting. Thousands of headlines in news sites and magazines, however, decry this phenomenon every

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day, giving voice to those who feel the victim, while also trying to help explain the motivation for the act itself. Headlines such as “People Are Opening Up About How Ghosting Affected Them” (Buzzfeed) and “Ghosting is an Inevitable Part of Dating. Is It Ever Ok?” (*The New York Times*) speak to the increasing fear of being deserted without word or warning, as well as the psychic cost in the aftermath, while self-help books, like Dr. Marni Feuerman’s *Ghosted andBreadcrumbed: Stop Falling for Unavailable Men*, are only recently starting to process this most jolting experience. (“Breadcrumbing” being a less definitive version of ghosting, in which the more secure partner only provides the bare minimum of emotional morsels to keep a relationship going.)<sup>7</sup>

One question running through these tentative explorations in the popular press is the extent to which ghosting is a symptom of our increasingly isolated lives – of what the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman called “liquid modernity” – and to what extent it is in fact the root disease itself, leading to further sets of symptoms. To what degree, in other words, is the spectral removal of precious people in our lives a representation of the zeitgeist itself? (“Zeitgeist” being a hauntological term in its own right, referring to “the spirit of the age.”)<sup>8</sup> We live in a time when former support structures and safety nets are swiftly dissolving or being deliberately dismantled. Even the ground beneath our feet is no longer to be simply taken for granted, in a time of ecological crisis and change. The Australian environmentalist Glenn Albrecht has coined the term “solastalgia” to describe the new kind of grief created by a new kind of homesickness: one in which *home*

*itself* mutates beyond recognition, and thus loses its function as an existential base or orientation place. (Whether through drought, mining, fire, or rapid de- or re-industrialization.) Given the universal experience of aggravated precarity, it is no surprise that we become increasingly white-knuckled when it comes to clinging on to the things that give us some semblance of security, whether that be a job, an ideology, a friend, a lover, a pension plan, or a companion animal. The ambient insecurity of contemporary life – enabled and encouraged by nearly half a century of neoliberal economic policies – means that a sudden absence or withdrawal from our fragile “support system” hits harder than ever.

Margaret Thatcher infamously stated, “There is no such thing as society” – a performative statement that essentially inaugurated an age in which “the people” would be ghosted by something so obvious and taken-for-granted that its persistence was never even considered: society itself. And yet that surreal situation is what we are living through: the swift withdrawal of social relations into atomic bunkers and temporary transactional contracts. The rapid “transformation of intimacy” that followed the arc of the twentieth century meant that increasingly small-scale relationships – especially in the form of the heterosexual couple – were suddenly tasked with taking on all those modes of support that we would normally associate with a small town.<sup>9</sup> One’s partner was essentially retrained to be lover, friend, counsellor, colleague, cook, housekeeper, personal assistant, chauffeur, cheerleader, patron, nurse, shrink, and everything else besides. Those aspects of life that were once considered to “take a village” now



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take an absurdly burdened individual. No wonder one's "life-partner" so rarely lasts for life, the resulting wrinkle being that people become more and more dependent on fewer and fewer souls, leading to more and more pressure, which in turn creates the ideal conditions for seeking to break free. It's a shrinking, vicious cycle.

In short: since Thatcher and Reagan, we have been ghosted by society. Going back a bit further, since Nietzsche, we have been ghosted by God (the Holy Ghost[er]). Since Darwin, we have been ghosted by our own angelic natures. No wonder one of the founding texts of modernity – *Hamlet* – is so involved with spectral introspection! And no wonder one of the key thinkers of the postmodern condition – namely, Jean Baudrillard – argues that at some point, not long after World War II, *reality itself* left us in the lurch, leaving a perfect simulation of itself in its wake: hyperreality. To outlive reality is an unprecedented situation for humans to process, let alone adapt to. And our digital traces all speak directly to this profound confusion and abandonment, even if they don't seem to have anything to say. People today are obliged to participate in a vast game of Jenga, the support beams of our world being removed one by one, in a radically irresponsible experiment to see just how few resources people need to stay upright, while still being able to wobble through another trying day. (And another day trying.)

Most people, if forced to choose, would rather a roasting than a ghosting, since the former at least contains a conversational relationship. (And I mean here "roasting" in the American sense of making fun of someone, usually in a harsh – but loving – way.) In



a roast, there is back and forth, and the potential for resolution – even for a change of heart. With ghosting, however, everything is reduced to a monologue. And no matter how narcissistic most of us are, we fear being forced into taking that extra step, into outright solipsism. This is because we all know we need “an other” to give us ballast and heft. (The self, after all, is an intimate collaboration with others.) We need that Hegelian or Sartrean “recognition” in order to be ourselves at all. Ghosting is so painful because it robs us of any sense of “closure.” The wound is always open.

The following chapters tease out what remains the same about this phenomenon, when it occurs in different places or modes. By the same token, it also identifies some distinctions that helpfully nuance an act that on the face of it seems so brutally simple. This book aims to open a space to really think through the significance of ghosting, especially for a world – as noted above – that has been comprehensively ghosted by the highest authority, and by the most fundamental foundations. We shall begin with “romantic ghosting,” since that is the most common association and experience. We shall then work our way through “familial ghosting,” “platonic ghosting,” “professional ghosting,” and finish with “social ghosting.” This whistle-stop tour is by no means designed to be comprehensive. Rather, it seeks to sketch out an initial map of the general terrain. The hope is that others will fill in this map with more detail, according to their expertise and experience. Indeed, they may find it’s more expedient to redraw the map entirely, due to new discoveries, priorities, and designs.

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For now, however, I hope the reader finds something of use in some of the case studies that follow, as we engage in a paradoxical task: staying, dwelling, lingering, and tarrying at the many melancholic sites of absence and abandonment.