

We are teased by misty souls

Bill Hall/Lewiston Tribune

The grieving woman on the radio said the ghosts are everywhere in her small town of Newtown, Conn. The town has 26,000 people. That means almost everyone in Newtown knows several of the families who lost someone to an addled gunman a year ago.

We almost all see familiar ghosts from time to time, whether that involves the tragic loss of a wee one or the exit of someone who gently expires of old age after a long, happy life.

While I am not superstitious enough to believe in classic, actual Hollywood ghosts, from time to time I do see missing friends and family members. Most of us, lost in thought at the grocery store or the shopping mall, come back in focus from our daydreams and there she is. Or there he is.

The most frequent such "ghost" in my life has been my mother, especially in the first year or two after she hit the road to higher places. It was always somebody else that I saw, of course. She was a type - a friendly old lady wearing polyester clothing, sporting a kinky head of thinning hair with pink scalp peeking through. Millions of women look and dress like my mother to this day.

And, of course, when I see those geriatric doppelgangers, I tend to see my mother pop back into life simply because I want to see her again. I am easily, happily fooled. I let her living understudies trick me into bringing her back for a few moments.

It is easier to delude someone like me who has lived a thousand miles away from most of the members of my family. I have become used to not seeing them for a year or more and then finally seeing them in the flesh. So it is easy to believe a relative isn't gone for good but is just down there somewhere in California and will pop back into my life again.

Or not. That woman, that man or that child over there aren't actually my mother, my brother and my nephew. It's just a familiar type of person across a crowded mall.

But some of my ghosts are people I saw almost daily over the years, people who lived here and died too soon. Our friend Dave, for instance, kind of a latter-day hippy. To this day, whenever I see a grown man riding a bicycle, wearing braids and shorts, I forget Dave is gone and think for a moment that that is him.

How much worse it must be for a small town like Newtown to see the ghosts of 6-year-old children who played in the park so recently. The cruel fact is that, for a moment, they come back. You suddenly see a child you know from the playground. You see the brave teachers and the principal who died trying to save them.

And then you snap out of it. You know those are look-alikes. You know you are dealing with lost souls who are gone, gone, gone.

That's so much harder to take. Old mothers aren't supposed to live forever. Mine made it to 80. And now, if you're a realist, that kind of ghost eventually becomes a pleasant reminder of someone who lived long and happily and loved you like a mom.

But no, I don't believe in actual ghosts. Nonetheless, it's sort of fun to see a representation of your mother still shuffling and shopping along at the mall, giving you a periodic glimpse of what that looked like.

But unfairly early deaths of children are a different matter. Something like that never heals entirely, never becomes the least bit fun.

On the other hand, I have to admit, it startled me a bit one recent day when, just for a moment, I thought I saw Mom with my old friend Dave talking about something that made them both smile. When such things happen, when the best ghosts of all appear, I have learned not to get too close. They may be shape shifters. If you get too close they turn into other people.

But if that's just a trick and they really are happy, mischievous, very friendly ghosts, I don't mind at all.

That would mean that one of these years, when I am no more than puffs of ashes and billows of dust, I may become a familiar spook for those who are kind enough to remember me.

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