

M A D E L E I N E ' S
G H O S T

A NOVEL

ROBERT GIRARDI

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PART GHOST STORY, ALWAYS ABSORBING."**

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MADELEINE'S
GHOST

BY
ROBERT GIRARDI



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This book is for my father—

SAM H. GIRARDI

1917–1992

—WHO TOLD ME STORIES.

It is history that teaches us to hope.

—ROBERT E. LEE

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Epilogue

Part One:
A SAINT FOR BROOKLYN

Stones are falling from the ceiling of my apartment. First one, then two, then dozens. I take refuge beneath the kitchen table as they bounce and dance across every surface, denting the toaster, gouging into the old linoleum of the floor. The falling stones are like a rain of hail, but so absurd in this setting that I want to laugh.

The first stone hit five minutes ago with a solid thump on the arm of the orange Naugahyde easy chair in the living room, then rolled into my lap. It was egg-shaped and smooth and wet, as if it had just been dredged up from the bottom of the river. A second hit the television and fell behind the gas heater in the fireplace. I counted five more like warning drumbeats; then I ran for the table. Now they bounce and roll all over, making quite a racket. They don't seem to come from anywhere. There are no holes in the ceiling. The stones flash into air just below the tin egg-and-anchor molding and fall as if they are falling from a great height.

The whole manifestation lasts about ten minutes. I wait fifteen minutes more before emerging carefully into the daylight from beneath the table. The smooth stones lie in piles in the kitchen, in the living room across the rug, on the couch, and on the television set, which appears undamaged. There are no stones in the bathroom or in my bedroom, but I find the largest pile heaped up on the bare floor in Molesworth's old room when I push open the door.

I take about an hour and a half to remove all the stones to the garden. The job requires five trips with a full suitcase, which I empty in the corner of the yard under the dry-rotted grape trellis. There is quite a little mound out here now, enough to pave a short walkway. I kick at it in frustration before I go back upstairs to collapse on the couch.

This is the second time in the last three weeks.

IT IS about two in the afternoon, Tuesday, mid-June, with the sun hot on my back and the sky seared and brown-looking above the island. The collar of my shirt is soaked with sweat. Just a block away the Manhattan Bridge creaks ominously in the heat, its abutments age blackened and massive as the pyramids. I am wearing an unseasonable tweed jacket, swamp green corduroy pants, a heavy powder blue oxford cloth button-down, and a regimental stripe tie—the only presentable outfit in my closet. I am shaved and sober and calling on Father Rose in the rectory of St. Basil’s Cathedral on Jay Street in Brooklyn.

A flat-faced woman in thick spectacles answers the door cautiously, pressing her nose against the barred peephole like a deep-sea diver in an old-fashioned brass helmet peering out at the ocean floor.

“I’m here to see the priest,” I say.

“Father isn’t seeing anyone right now. He’s busy,” she says, and goes to shut the peephole.

“Wait, I have an appointment.”

“Step back,” she says.

I step back, and a moment of silence follows in which the woman scowls and looks me up and down. I get the feeling she doesn’t care for the striped tie. It’s hardly the welcome one expects at the front door of a church, but I don’t blame her. This neighborhood is bad, loomed over by the same projects to the east that threaten my derelict neighborhood just to the south.

At last she nods, slides the bolts, and opens the door. A dismal smell pervades such places, rectories and army barracks, places reserved exclusively for the use of men: ammonia and boiled cabbage dinners and long, terrible Sunday evenings without the sound of a woman’s voice.

We go into a narrow hallway and up some stairs lined with dark paneling and hung with faded nineteenth-century prints of saints and Jesus praying in the Garden at Gethsemane, apostles sleeping the sleep of the craven behind Him in the weeds, and enter a small waiting room set with two rows of old pews and a few rump-sprung easy chairs. On an end table there are yellow copies of *Catholic Digest* and *Highlights for Children* magazine. I settle down to wait with the adventures of Goofus and Gallant in the latter as the woman goes to warn the priest.

Father Rose is lining up a putt when I am ushered into his chambers a few minutes later. He is hunched over the putter at one end of a mock putting green of AstroTurf, the hole opposing him an odd contraption that resembles a large aluminum daisy.

“Father Rose?” I say. “I’m Ned Conti, I called yesterday ...”

This is not the moment to speak. The priest, hardly aware of my presence,

follows through with the putt. The ball goes awry, hooks to the left, and rolls under a chair. He gives a small strangled sound, and his shoulders slump. Waiting for him to recover, I glance around the room. It is bright and cheery, free from the religious gloom that pervades the rest of the rectory. Golf trophies stand dustless in glass-fronted shelves to one side. Autographed photos of Jack Nicklaus and Arnold Palmer flank the abstract sixties-era crucifix hanging beside a window overlooking the handball courts in the asphalt park across the street.

“Putting is a gift from God,” the priest says wearily, wiping the head of his putter with a handkerchief. He is a lean fellow, with a long face, and resembles a sort of amiable Charlton Heston. “It’s like grace. The one thing in golf you can’t really practice. You’ve got to have the knack, that’s all.”

He points the putter to a floral-print love seat against the wall. I sit, and he sinks back against the edge of his desk with the easy grace of a man who has spent his life on the links. His face is tanned; his wrists are specked with freckles. He crosses his legs, and I can see he’s wearing expensive two-tone golf shoes, cleats unscrewed, though his black cassock is threadbare and traditional, pulled in with a simple square-buckled brown belt after the manner of the Jesuit Brothers at Loyola, who enjoyed the austerity of their priestly robes to the point of vanity. After all, there is nothing classier than basic black.

“Now, what can I do for you, Mr. Conti?” Father Rose says when we are settled.

“I came about your advertisement in the *U.S. Catholic Historian*,” I say. “Historical research. That’s my field. I’m a research historian. Have you gotten many responses?”

Father Rose frowns at his putter. “Are you a golfing man?”

I confess that I am not.

“I’m crazy about the game.” He gestures at the trophy cases. “Maybe too crazy.”

He pushes off the desk suddenly and strides back and forth across the room, putter held behind his back in one hand in a posture that I recognize immediately as characteristic.

“Last year,” he says, “with the permission of the bishop, I took a few months off to join the PGA tour. I was quite the golf star in college, you know, but in our family it was traditional for the youngest son to join the priesthood. First time back in competition in something like twenty-five years, and I made the cuts. All in all, for an old guy, I didn’t do too badly, perhaps because I was careful to dedicate each ball to a different saint. After expenses, I came out of it with a net profit of five thousand seven hundred dollars. I have set aside these winnings for a special research project.”

“Oh, yes,” I say, trying to sound like I really don’t need the money. “What sort of project?”

“It is of grave spiritual significance to the future of Brooklyn. This is all I will say for now.”

WE GO down into the churchyard to walk in the heat among the graves. Father Rose examines my credentials for a few minutes in silence, pucker under his arm, lips pursed in concentration, a posture that befits a man with weighty matters to consider.

“B.A., Loyola University of the South,” he reads aloud from my curriculum vitae to the mortuary heat of the afternoon. “New Orleans is a little wild, they say. I hear the Jesuits have a pretty good time down there.”

I shrug, noncommittal.

“Do you know that city well?” He looks over at me, shielding his eyes against the sun.

“It’s been a long time,” I say. “But I think I could still get around.”

“I don’t mind telling you that certain aspects of my project touch on New Orleans. A knowledge of the place might be useful.”

“Then I’m your man,” I say. “It’s fate.”

He ignores this and goes back to my résumé. “Catholic grammar school, Catholic high school ... and now Ph.D. candidate in French history, Georgetown University. Well, an excellent Catholic education, Mr. Conti.” He folds my CV into a pouch in his cassock. “You must be a man of sound convictions.”

“I try, Father,” I say, and give him the toothy smile of a used-car dealer. Actually my education is more a testament to my parents’ faith than my own. I hated Catholic school. The nuns pulled on my hair and beat me with rulers. My mom forced me to go through the twelfth grade; Catholic scholarships paid for the rest.

“And how’s your doctoral thesis coming along?”

“It’s almost finished,” I lie. “Another month, and I send it off to the committee.”

The truth is, I started out right but got lost somewhere along the way. I haven’t touched my thesis in nine months: *Shakos and Epaulets—Military Fashions and Ideas in the First Empire*. The grand title conceals a scratched over ream of half-baked theories and poor scholarship concerning the effect of fancy uniforms on the development of imperialist attitudes in Napoleon’s France. It is strewn in a messy heap of footnotes, coffee stains, crumbs, and roaches across the kitchen table in my apartment. Each night I keep meaning to begin again, and each night I find some reason not to.

First it was the disruptive presence of my ex-roommate, Molesworth, a loud, obnoxious bayou-trash Louisianan with filthy habits and a beer gut the size of Lake Pontchartrain. Now I blame the series of strange disturbances which have manifested themselves in the apartment in his absence and which I can only ascribe to the actions of a poltergeist. I am a rational man, but how

else to explain stones from the ceiling and other weirdnesses? It is impossible to concentrate on my work in the middle of a haunting. This is the only word I have for the horrible, oppressive feeling that has invaded my rooms. I was allowed six years to complete my thesis and defend it before the advisory committee at Georgetown. Time is running out; barely six months remain. Perhaps if the ghost would go away?

I consider mentioning the haunting to Father Rose. He might be able to do something, arrange an exorcism, if they still perform exorcisms. But I reject the idea. Undoubtedly it is bad form to discuss ghosts at a job interview.

We follow an uneven flagstone path between the graves and dead end at an elaborate monument topped with an obelisk of black marble that seems out of keeping with the humbler headstones surrounding it. I notice a worn inscription in French cut on the base before we turn back again. At last we sit on a flat grave marker by the gate, and Father Rose swats at the weeds growing up between the stones with his putter. The wall bordering Tillary is topped with broken glass and tangled razor wire. A plane booms overhead in the hot sky, lowering toward Kennedy.

“Every night from the windows of the rectory I hear gunshots,” he says at last, weariness in his voice. “Last year two young black boys no older than twelve years old shot it out on the steps of the church with machine guns, just like in a gangster movie. One of them died in my arms. You can still see the bloodstains on the white marble. Then the young girls come over from the Decateur Projects bringing babies for baptism who have no fathers and no names. ‘Are you Catholic?’ I ask. They are not Catholic; they do not know a single prayer and have only vaguely heard of God. I baptize their babies on the sly, what can it hurt? But the situation is tragic. All around us ignorance and vice and poverty. There seems no solution except for the one God has in store for us all in the end.”

He pauses, leaning on his putter like an old soldier. In the distance, the ceaseless rush of traffic on the BQE.

“Can I ask you a personal question, Mr. Conti?”

“Go ahead, Father,” I say.

“After all those years of Catholic school, do you believe in God?” He seems to stop breathing as he waits for my answer. A dull light flickers in his eyes.

He has caught me by surprise. It is hard to lie about this one. I don’t know what to say.

“Sometimes,” I manage at last.

The priest wants more. I shake my head. In fact, until recently, like everyone else, I maintained a cynical skepticism regarding spiritual matters. I didn’t believe in anything I couldn’t see. The ghost in my apartment has started to change all that. It’s still hard to extrapolate the existence of the deity from the presence of a single phantom, but one ghost, I suppose, could presage a whole unseen universe of ghosts, demons, saints, and miracles. The idea is frightening to me. I prefer the faceless charged particles of science, the big bang, the gaseous clouds of electrons and protons, the primeval soups of

amino acids and so forth.

At last Father Rose puts a hand on my sleeve. “I think I understand your hesitation,” he says gently. “God is too big an idea for most of us. How can you pray to a being that you can’t imagine who is everywhere and nowhere? Even Christ in His faultlessness can be daunting. But think of the intercession of the saints! A saint is a human being who sinned, had problems, and overcame them to become one of God’s people. What Brooklyn needs now is a saint. A saint who will hear our prayers and put in a good word for us with God.”

I nod and try to look sincere, but I’m not exactly sure what he’s getting at. Brooklyn needs a saint. I need the stipend mentioned in the advertisement in the *Catholic Historian*. I’ve been out of work for five months now, am flat broke, and rely on the odd day or two of temporary office work through an agency in Manhattan—filing, answering the phone, typing the occasional piece of correspondence into the word processor. Humiliating for a man of my dignity, a man who has completed all the course work necessary for a Ph.D. Though I have come to believe that dignity and a Ph.D. are liabilities in the world.

A moment later Father Rose rises with a sigh and brushes off the skirt of his cassock. He has an appointment to hear the confessions of two older members of the congregation. Everyone who comes to confession now is sixty if a day, he tells me. The young, it seems, no longer believe in sin.

We walk together to the heavy wrought-iron gate at the foot of the churchyard. He pushes back an iron bar as thick as my wrist and swings the gate open onto Jay Street. A bus goes chugging by, and we are overwhelmed with diesel fumes. He shakes my hand.

“You’ve got my phone number,” I say, coughing.

I step through and am halfway down the sidewalk when he calls me back.

TONIGHT THE ghost is an atmospheric disturbance, a storm on the horizon. The hand of the ghost is everywhere apparent as I walk around, a visitor in my own rooms: Clothes are pulled off hangers in the closet; coins atop my dresser are arranged in an oddly familiar crescent-shaped pattern; the furniture has been moved at right angles to the wall. The refrigerator door is hanging ajar, milk spoiled, cheese gone green at the edges.

I change into khaki shorts and T-shirt quickly and check the answering machine. I do not intend to stay long. These days I do little more than sleep and bathe here. The ghost brings a sick clamminess to the palms, knocks the gumption out of me. I need an antidote: One message from Antoinette would make all the difference, just the sound of her voice across the miles from New Orleans. Antoinette, I say out loud, Antoinette. It is a vain incantation. There are no messages on the machine. We are just friends now. She never calls.

In the last twenty minutes before dark I run out and take the F train into Manhattan and get drunk at the usual round of Lower East Side dives and then for a change stumble over to SoHo, where, at the wine bar of the SoHo Kitchen, I meet a blond businesswoman who believes in ghosts. She is an account executive at Carstairs and White and not too bad-looking if you squint your eyes. After a dozen or so glasses of a mildly piquant Pouilly-Fuissé, she is drunk enough to take me home with her, and I am drunk enough to go.

“It’s the ghost,” I explain. “I can’t possibly sleep in my apartment tonight.”

She nods as if she understands, and we get in a cab and go up to her condo in a high-rise building at Ninety-third and Third. It is a well-appointed apartment on the forty-second floor, with a view of the lights of the city out a picture window that takes up one whole wall of the living room. After a little informal nuzzling on the couch, we resort to some sloppy and forgettable sex and then adjourn to the bed for more of the same. I fall asleep at last around dawn, happy to be away from the creaking of the old tenement and the ghost for one night.

But then I dream I am back in Brooklyn, and invisible hands are carrying me up the stairs into the darkness of my apartment. I am carried into the kitchen and set back at the table and forced to look around, and there, before the window, is a shapeless cloud full of despair in the same way that a thunderhead is full of hard rain and heat lightning. Then I see something white moving in the cloud and a pair of hands emerge, the white hands of a woman with rings on each finger, and my heart is filled with dread.

I wake up in a sweat to find that it is just past eleven in the morning and I am alone in the account executive’s apartment. I get up, dress, and find a note and a business card set beneath a glass of orange juice and a cold buttered

muffin on the glass table in the living room.

“Had fun last night,” the note says. “Call me. Didn’t want to wake you. Let yourself out.”

As instructed, I let myself out and travel down forty-two floors in the elevator. The streets up here are neat and blinding. I wander this unfamiliar landscape for a few hours, feeling terrible and hungover and reflecting that the ghost has followed me into a woman’s bed across the river and up ninety-three blocks through streets flooded with a blaze of brightness as dark and unforgiving as the tomb itself.

LOOKING BACK, I should have realized there was something wrong with the apartment from the beginning. My friend Chase Zingari found it for me five years ago, and she is an odd, tormented young woman who believes in ghosts, second sight, and demonic possession. She is half Romanian Gypsy and half blueblood WASP, with a bone deformity that has left her face a mess, something out of a cheap horror movie.

I had just moved to the city and was going through the hell of looking for an apartment to share out of the *Voice* when Chase heard about a rent-controlled two-bedroom in an obscure industrial neighborhood in Brooklyn called Molasses Hill. I still don't know how she found out about the place—an acquaintance, a stranger in a bar—but we got the key from the main office of a mob-run garbage concern on the Lower East Side and went under the river on the F train to take a look.

I remember walking the empty streets in the first red light of dusk. After the clamor of Manhattan it seemed eerily quiet. Dark barges passed silently on the East River just a block down. Crickets chirped from weeds growing through the cobbles. The blood-colored sunset tinted shards of broken glass in the windows of abandoned warehouses. Along the three or four blocks of decrepit tenements across from the power plant, dying fig trees sagged against gravity, propped up with two-by-fours and wire stays. I saw a hummingbird dart off from the rotting fruit toward the light in the west. I was charmed. Fresh from Graduate Student Housing at Georgetown, I knew nothing of the violence and crime of South Brooklyn. And the rent was extremely low, almost a miracle in itself.

“So what’s the catch?” I said to Chase.

We had inspected the apartment and stood in the empty living room, boards creaking beneath our feet. The smokestacks of the power plant out the window looked like the fingers of a giant hand.

“Does there always have to be something wrong?” Chase said. “For once in your life, believe.” Then she did a sort of dance with the dust through the four vacant rooms and came back to stand beside me. “It’s a fucking amazing bargain,” she said, out of breath. “Three seventy-five for two bedrooms, one big, one teensy, a reasonable living room, a separate kitchen and bathroom sporting a full-length tub. And look out here....” We stepped over to the bedroom window. The last light caught the ridges and scars of her *Phantom of the Opera* face as we peered through the dirty pane. “A backyard!”

Sure enough, there was a weedy fenced-in lot out back, with an overgrown garden patch, a square of grass, a broken-down grape trellis, and a crumbling brick barbecue pit. Beyond the fence and the nearest row of tenements, eight or nine massive residential towers stood black against the darkening sky.